

Finest 501

Chapter 501 Hidden Secrets

"Thank you, Master Gu, for your enlightening words," the Emperor nodded, putting an end to Xu Wei's continued argument. He spoke firmly, "We are all connected by blood. If others can be heartless, how could I be unjust? My ministers, say no more. My decision is final, and it shall not change! Gao Ping, draft the imperial decree immediately and announce it to the entire realm."

Once the Emperor had made up his mind, who else would dare to speak further? Chen Biqing stood up and shouted, "Your Majesty is broad-minded, full of loyalty, compassion, and virtue. Your love for the people is evident for all under Heaven to witness. This act will surely win the admiration of the realm and the allegiance of all nations. Long live the Emperor, long live, long live!"

"All nations will admire and pledge allegiance; long live the Emperor, long live, long live," the assembled ministers intoned in unison as they bowed deeply.

The Emperor sighed, his expression tinged with fatigue, "Then let the discussion end here. I shall visit my royal brother later. I hope he doesn't hold any grudges against me."

Treating Prince Cheng so generously—if the prince still bore any complaints—it would indeed defy all reason. The ministers sighed in awe and reverence, bowing as they watched the Emperor's silhouette gradually disappear behind the curtain.

So such a monumental issue was decided just like that? Lin Wanrong and Xu Wei exchanged glances. There were no beheadings, no rivers of blood; not even a word of blame had been uttered. Was the old man treating Prince Cheng this kindly?

As they stepped out of the hall, Xu Wei looked around to make sure no one was in the vicinity, then lowered his voice and said, "Little brother, what do you think has come over His Majesty? Why is he so indecisive at such a critical moment? Even without his legs, Prince Cheng is still a fearsome tiger, and his enmity runs even deeper. If we let him roam free in the north of the river, isn't that like letting a tiger return to the mountain?"

Lin Wanrong spread his hands in a wry smile, "What good does it do for you and me to discuss this? The old man has already made up his mind, and he hasn't given anyone else a chance to get a word in. In Sichuan, where the imperial influence is weak, the local women are all extremely

beautiful. Prince Cheng would find life there quite comfortable. This is what's called turning a misfortune into a blessing. Ah, why don't I have such luck?"

This equivocal lament only made Xu Wei more anxious. He paused, ensured they were alone, then suddenly grabbed Lin Wanrong's sleeve and whispered, "Little brother Lin, do you remember Tong Cheng, the man who bombarded you during the suppression of the White Lotus Cult?"

'Of course, I remember. If it weren't for him, how could I have met Sister An?' Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled, "Mr. Xu, why do you suddenly bring him up?"

"What do I care about him?" Xu Wei shook his head, a cold smile on his face, "I'm talking about his fate—can't we enforce the same here?"

"Mr. Xu, are you suggesting that we take action on the way?" Lin Wanrong was a bit shocked; when it came to struggles, Old Xu was really no pushover.

Xu Wei nodded slightly, "Brother Lin, we've already offended Prince Cheng deeply. Every day he stays is a potential disaster. Since the Emperor is unwilling to act, it falls on us, his subjects, to take action. What do you think?"

Before Lin Wanrong could reply, Gao Ping hurriedly approached, "Lord Lin, His Majesty summons you!"

'The Emperor wants to see me?' Lin Wanrong was slightly taken aback. At this point, everything had already been decided; what could he possibly want to talk to him about?

"Since His Majesty has summoned you, you should go quickly. Also, please consider carefully what this old man has told you," Xu Wei signaled to him, before hurriedly turning away.

'I've never been involved in behind-the-scenes killings,' Lin Wanrong thought, feeling somewhat conflicted. He wasn't sure if he should heed Old Xu's advice.

As he entered the Hall of Extended Years, the elderly Emperor sat with his eyes slightly closed, his face as calm as still water. He appeared to be meditating, seemingly oblivious to Lin Wanrong's arrival. Gao Ping wheeled Lin Wanrong into place and then silently withdrew, leaving the spacious Hall of Extended Years empty except for the two of them.

The Emperor continued to meditate, his face pale but with a hint of flush, revealing an indisguisable sign of illness. Seeing that the old master remained silent, Lin Wanrong decided to close his eyes as well. He had been exceedingly tired these past few days, and even the presence of the Emperor, the revered ruler of the realm, couldn't fend off his drowsiness.

"You certainly have the gall—" the Emperor hummed disdainfully, "—daring to doze off in my Hall of Extended Years! If it were anyone else, they would lose their heads, all ten of them."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and replied at a leisurely pace, "Your Majesty's kindness and love are well noted, and I keep them in my heart. But why has Your Majesty summoned me so late at night? What guidance do you have for me?"

The Emperor's eyes narrowed sharply, fixing on him. "Are you mocking me?"

"Not at all," Lin Wanrong responded calmly. "Your Majesty's reach extends everywhere, like rain and sunshine, who would dare to mock you? I'm not eager to meet with gunpowder—I'd like to live a few more years!"

"You already know?!" The Emperor's expression remained unchanged as he turned and burst into laughter. "Lin San, when did you become such a fool? A smart man should do smart things. Some words are better left unsaid."

Lin Wanrong shook his head slightly, his face suddenly turning gloomy. "I'm not the one who's become a fool. There are certain things that I would never say to anyone else. I only wish that, in the eyes of Xian'er and Qingxuan, their father remains forever kind and amiable, without a shadow of darkness—"

"How dare you!" The Emperor erupted in anger, abruptly rising from his seat and pointing at Lin Wanrong. "Lin San, are you lecturing me?"

"Lecturing?" Lin Wanrong chuckled and gestured to his crippled leg. "Could someone with a nearly severed leg like me possibly lecture the current Emperor? Your Majesty, you're overestimating me."

The Emperor glanced at Lin Wanrong's injured leg and, recalling all that he had done, his expression gradually eased. He suddenly broke into laughter. "Let's just say I'm overestimating you then. I understand, you're afraid that the methods I used on my brother might be applied to you one day. You're a bit apprehensive, aren't you?"

Lin Wanrong merely chuckled, neither admitting nor denying the accusation.

The Emperor slowly stepped in front of him, lightly patting Lin Wanrong's shoulder and sighing with resignation, "You're not me, how could you understand my feelings? As a ruler of a nation, if you don't have strict measures, how can you establish authority and command the respect of the people? True, Zhao Wu was my planted spy beside Prince Cheng, and even the explosives tied to him were carefully crafted by my order. Unfortunately, their potency was less than I had hoped. Still, being able to make him a cripple and taste some suffering pleases me greatly. Lin San, you've done well. In these twenty years, I have never been so satisfied." The old Emperor laughed heartily, his face flushed. Amid his laughter, a bout of severe coughing broke out, causing tears to appear at the corners of his eyes.

Lin Wanrong was still shocked, despite having had his suspicions. If Prince Cheng was indeed guilty of treason, why not just kill him swiftly? Why did the old man take pleasure in tormenting his own brother?

"You may condemn me as ruthless, cold-hearted, and unfeeling," the Emperor's face was pale as he waved his hand dismissively, "But what's cause without effect? Compared to the immense pain he brought me, what does breaking his legs count for?" He paused, "After Xian'er, I have no more descendants. Lin San, do you know why?"

A light flashed in Lin Wanrong's mind, "Could it be because of Prince Cheng—"

"Who else could it be?" The Emperor howled, his voice hoarse and piercing. "Twenty years ago, on the eve of my father's death, he incited a rebellion, stormed into the Great Prime Minister Temple, and killed my young son. During the chaos, I was hit by a stray arrow, leaving me incapable of producing heirs. The royal lineage ends with me! And now, when Miss Guo reappears by my side, I am left broken, both in body and spirit, without the vigor of my youth. Have you ever experienced this kind of humiliation? Do you understand what I've been through for the past twenty years? Lin San, tell me, who's the ruthless one, him or me?"

The Emperor's eyes were bloodshot, his teeth clenched tightly against his lips, appearing almost insane. Lin Wanrong was also stunned. He hadn't expected this plot against the throne to be rooted in such deep-seated grudges and vendettas. The old man had been rendered impotent in his prime, incapable of leaving an heir—what could be more devastating than that? No wonder he resorted to such measures.

Lin Wanrong shook his head, speechless. The grievances between these brothers were truly complicated and difficult to untangle.

The atmosphere inside the Hall of Extended Years grew eerily silent, neither of them speaking. The only sound was the flickering candlelight, its soft noise echoing in their ears.

"What do you think?" The Emperor, always an Emperor, was unsurpassable in his cunning and guile. After his burst of rage, he had returned to calm in a mere moment, his face as impassive as if nothing had occurred, "Did I wrong him by breaking his legs?"

"Perhaps not," Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed softly, feeling weary inside. The power struggles within the royal family had always been ruthless, with intricate schemes and relentless plotting, even among true brothers and fathers and sons. The case between Prince Cheng and the Emperor was just one glaring example, and it was no wonder the old man had developed such a suspicious and ruthless character.

"Rest assured," the Emperor patted Lin Wanrong on the shoulder, his voice filled with gravitas. "I will never use that method against you, not only because you are the husband of Qingxuan and Xian'er, but there's a more important reason: you are a man without ambition. Even the things that everyone in the world dreams of, you can easily let go of! This is the very reason that particularly irritates me. You have intelligence, cunning, a grasp of human nature, and your talent for scheming is no less than mine. Why, then, do you lack ambition? You should know that the Empire I've built through painstaking efforts will eventually have to rely on you—"

"Hold on, hold on!" Hearing the Emperor going around in circles, bringing the topic back to the familiar road, Lin Wanrong felt his head swell and hurriedly interrupted. "Your Majesty, did you summon me here just to say these things?"

"Is that what I want to say?" The Emperor's eyes narrowed. "In my heart, Qingxuan and Xian'er are as important to me as my Empire. If you dare to threaten me with them again, I will surely behead you. Have you got that?"

"Understood, understood!" Lin Wanrong nodded hastily.

The Emperor snorted coldly. "I called you here tonight to entrust you with something. As for the matter concerning Prince Cheng, I have made up my mind. Don't play any tricks behind my back."

Could this old man predict the future? How did he find out about the matter that he had just discussed with Old Xu? Cold sweat trickled down Lin Wanrong's back. Lowering his voice, he said, "Your Majesty, since this is a matter you've decided, how would I dare to play tricks? I am someone who values my reputation!"

"Good that you value your reputation!" The Emperor sighed, once again emphasizing his words. "Though you've earned some merit, your foundation is still shallow. Don't be greedy for credit in this matter and know when to pull out. Be aware that the eyes of both the civil and military officials are on you. Present yourself in a lofty manner so that everyone knows that the credit is yours, but you are not a treacherous villain who would kick someone when they are down. Then public opinion will naturally be on your side. Once you return from the north, holding military power, then you can—"

"Your Majesty, let's talk about something else!" Lin Wanrong felt a chill run down his spine and quickly interrupted him. Lowering his voice, he added, "Aren't you afraid that Prince Cheng will rebel again if you exile him to the north?"

The Emperor's expression remained indifferent. "I've already told you, my mind is made up. This is none of your concern. Just focus on your tasks; no one will hold you back."

For a moment, both were silent. Seeing that it was getting late, Lin Wanrong was about to bow and take his leave when the Emperor grunted, "So, you're leaving?"

Seeing that the old man looked displeased, Lin Wanrong felt a tightening in his heart. "Your Majesty, do you have more instructions?"

The old Emperor spoke unhurriedly, "The confidential matters I just discussed with you are known to only three people in the world, including myself. Do you think anyone can hear them?"

"Really? Your Majesty, are you planning to kill the messenger?" Lin Wanrong cautiously inquired.

"I'd actually like to," the Emperor smiled, seeing his wary look. "But I'm afraid my two princesses wouldn't forgive me. Well then, you may be spared the death penalty, but you can't escape a lesser punishment!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly, "What's this about death penalties and lesser punishments, Your Majesty? I don't quite understand!"

The old Emperor sighed, his voice suddenly growing solemn. "In one more day, the hundreds of thousands strong army of my Great Hua will march northward. You should remember that, right?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Of course I remember. Even a cripple like me is going with the army!"

"Very well!" The Emperor abruptly stood up. "Lin San, I will pardon your death penalty as a cripple, but you must promise me one thing!"

"What is it?"

The Emperor's thick brows furrowed, an aura of killing intent subtly emanating from him. "— Capture the Khan of the Turks!"

Chapter 502 The Emperor's Tutor

Capture the Khan of the Turks? Lin Wanrong was troubled. "Old man, isn't this a bit too difficult? General Li Tai has fought on the battlefield his entire life and killed countless nomads, yet even he has never laid eyes on the Khan of the Turks. This will be my first expedition there! Forget about capturing their Khan, if I can manage not to be captured myself, I'll be reciting prayers of gratitude!"

He looked pitiable, wearing a woeful expression. The Emperor shook his head and chuckled, "You haven't even left for battle yet, and already you speak such disheartening words. Catching the Turkic Khan may be difficult for you, but isn't it equally difficult for them to catch you? What I hope for is that you show the valor and prestige of our great nation, ensuring the safety of our borders and a decade free from war. Do you have the confidence to accomplish this?"

A decade without war? That was a high bar! If it were that easy, General Li Tai wouldn't have grown old yearning for it. Lin Wanrong forced a smile, "I do have confidence, but whether I can truly achieve this, I can't say for sure. After all, the Turks are not the White Lotus Sect."

"No matter," the Emperor graciously waved his hand. "I have faith that you will be able to do it. You have never let me down before."

Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly, thinking to himself, 'You've simply grown accustomed to my excellence, so you've never tasted the bitterness of disappointment.'

The Emperor, seemingly ignoring Lin Wanrong's troubled expression, continued, "I have already generously rewarded Hu Bugui, Du Xiuyuan, Li Sheng, and Xu Zhen under your command. You can use them with full confidence."

Lin Wanrong sensed something else in the Emperor's words and frowned, "Your Majesty, are you suggesting that there are others I should not trust?"

"I did not say that. That is your own interpretation," the Emperor responded calmly. "I just hope that you will always remain cautious, do not easily trust others. Don't wait for calamity to strike before you regret it."

What did that mean? Lin Wanrong wanted to ask further, but it appeared the Emperor wasn't willing to elaborate, so he felt helpless.

Upon leaving the palace, the moon was high in the sky. Gao Qiu was still waiting for him at the gate. Lin Wanrong stretched lazily and smiled, "Brother Gao, let's go home quickly. My family must be getting anxious waiting for me. I'll treat you to tea and cakes later!"

"Yes," Gao Qiu acknowledged, before hesitating, "Brother Lin, there's an elderly gentleman who wishes to meet you."

Lin Wanrong was eager to get home and shook his head impatiently, "What elderly gentleman?! I don't want to meet anyone right now, just want to go home. Brother Gao, you tell him that I'm busy and we can schedule another time."

Before his words fell, a hearty laughter rang out from nearby, "Master Lin, you're young but quite haughty!"

Next to the palace gate, a small palanquin was parked against the wall. As the curtains lifted, Gu Shunzhang slowly stepped out, elegant and composed, nodding and smiling at Lin Wanrong.

"Ah, it's Mr. Gu! My apologies, my apologies!" Lin Wanrong hurriedly cupped his fists in greeting, then winked at Gao Qiu, "Brother Gao, why didn't you say so earlier?! If I had known the Emperor's tutor wanted to see me, even if I had to crawl, I would have come rushing. Making you wait, I am truly ashamed, truly ashamed!"

Gu Shunzhang smiled faintly, "Master Lin, you speak politely, but I fear that in your heart you're annoyed that this old man doesn't know better and has interrupted your reunion with your family. If anyone should apologize, it should be me."

"It's nothing like that; you're being too polite, Master Gu." Lin Wanrong hurriedly chuckled, adopting an exceedingly humble demeanor. "May I ask why you've summoned me, and what guidance you wish to offer? Please, feel free to speak."

Gu Shunzhang slowly took a few steps forward, coming close to Lin Wanrong. He stared at him intently but said nothing.

Feeling uncomfortable under the old man's inscrutable gaze, Lin Wanrong pulled Gao Qiu in front of him, "Brother Gao, the moon tonight is too intense. Would you mind blocking it for me?"

The imperial tutor nodded slightly and suddenly burst into laughter, "Master Lin, I have a question, though I don't know whether it's appropriate to ask."

"Why so formal, Master Gu?" Irritated by the old man's scrutinizing gaze, Lin Wanrong let out a few forced laughs, "You are a famous tutor revered by even the Emperor. If you have a question, how could I dare not to answer?"

Shaking his head with a smile, Gu Shunzhang said, "Master Lin, although I've traveled extensively over the past year, your story has been told far and wide. I've heard a lot about you in teahouses and taverns. I'm very curious—on this vast land of ours, who could have taught such an exceptional talent as you? May I ask where you are from?"

"I am originally from Jingchu, though my family has fallen on hard times and I'm the only one left. I set off to travel at a young age and haven't returned to my hometown for many years. I'm ashamed to admit that I've even forgotten its name and appearance." Lin Wanrong sighed theatrically. He had long memorized this script; he had told the same story to his wife when he first entered the Xiao family. *R*

"I see, so you're from Jingchu," Gu Shunzhang nodded, "I initially thought you were from the foot of Mount Tai—"

"What, what did you say?" Lin Wanrong paled in shock, "Master Gu, what do you mean by the foot of Mount Tai? Be clear!"

Seeing his tense expression, Gu Shunzhang apologized with a smile, "I've merely heard it said in passing; it shouldn't be taken as truth. Don't take it to heart."

Lin Wanrong's face turned as white as a sheet, and his palms were sweaty. Struggling to regain his composure, he said, "Master Gu, what do you mean by 'heard in passing'? Could you elaborate? I've never heard of this before."

Nodding, Gu Shunzhang elaborated, "While traveling in Goryeo, I heard of your achievements, which had just reached that land. The political strategy you proposed caused quite an uproar there. As for your background, there were many speculations—some said you're a prodigy secretly nurtured by our great empire, some claimed you are a wanderer returning from the West, and some even said you're a water monster from Jinling's Xuanwu Lake transformed into human form. How could I believe such stories? Later, I spoke with an intriguing person from Goryeo about this. That person calculated a bit and claimed you were born at the foot of Mount Tai!"

‘Could it be a fortune-teller? Are such coincidences even possible?’ Lin Wanrong had never believed in such things, but he cautiously asked, "Master Gu, this intriguing person from Goryeo you're talking about, is he a Goryeo person?"

"I never asked about that," Gu Shunzhang shook his head.

"Was the mysterious person male or female? How old? What's their name?" Lin Wanrong pressed.

Gu Shunzhang pondered for a moment. "I didn't notice that either—" Seeing Lin Wanrong's eyes widen, he hurriedly added, "Don't get me wrong. When I spoke with this mysterious person, it was through a curtain, messages conveyed by others. I haven't even seen their face!"

‘Really? What sort of enigmatic figure commands such grandeur?’ Lin Wanrong seemed a bit disappointed. "Master Gu, if you haven't even seen their face, how can you be sure they are a Goryeo people enigma?"

"This individual is said to have divine knowledge, aware of five hundred years into the past and future. Such rumors have long circulated in Goryeo, and I went there out of admiration," Master Gu nodded. "I consider myself well-read, but in the face of this mysterious individual, I am at no advantage; in fact, I often find myself stumped by their questions. At that time, your reputation was

at its peak in Goryeo, so I inquired about your background. Initially, they were reluctant but later, upon learning I was from the Great Hua Empire, they consulted the I Ching and told me you were born at the foot of Mount Tai. Yet, they refused to elaborate further."

"A divine person, perhaps?" Lin Wanrong let out a sigh. "Once I return from the North, I plan to visit Goryeo to meet this enigmatic figure, to see if their divinations hold any weight."

"I doubt you'd be disappointed," Gu Shunzhang nodded and smiled. "However, you should hurry, lest you find Goryeo conquered by Dongyin and it's too late."

"I understand, I understand," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "As the commander of Great Hua's Loyal and Brave Army, if Goryeo were to fall, I'd be even more anxious than you."

"Anxious?" Gu Shunzhang laughed enigmatically. "Master Lin, you are too modest! The Goryeo people are anxious, the Dongyin people are anxious, but you? You'd be the one benefiting from it all! Where else could you find such a windfall?"

True to his reputation as the Imperial Tutor, Gu Shunzhang's insights were penetrating. Lin Wanrong chuckled and looked slightly smug.

The smile gradually faded from Gu Shunzhang's face, replaced by a serious demeanor. "Master Lin, there's something I would like you to answer honestly."

The old man's quick change in temperament was almost as rapid as that of the old man Emperor. Lin Wanrong nodded, "Please go ahead, Master Gu."

Gu Shunzhang let out a sigh, his gaze distant. "In this upcoming battle with the Turks, what are the chances of victory?"

Who could answer such a question? Lin Wanrong shrugged. "Master Gu, are you setting me up for failure? You should be asking General Li Tai about this!"

Gu Shunzhang shook his head silently, a bitter smile on his face. "I've been asking him this question for over thirty years, and you've seen the results. However, your participation in this military campaign has given me renewed hope. Given your talents, even if we don't secure a resounding victory, the Turks will have no easy path either. I just want you to tell me: how confident are you in this battle?"

"You want an honest answer?" Lin Wanrong spread his hands helplessly. "Master Gu, to tell you the truth, I have zero confidence. This is my first time confronting the nomads—give me ten years, and perhaps there'll be some hope!"

Gu Shunzhang shook his head in disappointment. "Ten years is not possible; you only have five months! This military expedition is unlike any other; the rise and fall of our Great Hua hinges on it. If we win, our nation's glory will be sung for generations. If we lose, our country will fragment and cease to exist."

"Is it really that dire?" Lin Wanrong hummed skeptically. Over the past few decades, battles between Great Hua and the Turks had often ended in defeat. Why would this time be any different?

"Do you know why His Majesty was in such a hurry to take action against Prince Cheng?" Gu Shunzhang sighed softly, stopping himself midsentence with a sense of lament.

"Mr. Gu, I think you have it backwards. Prince Cheng was clearly the one rebelling. Everyone in the palace saw it. How can you say His Majesty took action against him?" Lin Wanrong retorted.

"Is that so?" Gu Shunzhang remained impassive. "Aren't you aware of who Zhao Wu really is?"

His question carried layers of implications. Lin Wanrong clenched his fists; sweat beads forming in his palms. Only the Emperor knew Zhao Wu's true identity, and possibly the belatedly enlightened Prince Cheng and himself—no more than three people. How could Gu Shunzhang know? Just who was this imperial tutor?

"Don't be surprised," Gu Shunzhang sighed. "Zhao Wu was recommended to His Majesty by me."

"You recommended him?" Lin Wanrong was speechless.

"To be precise, the previous Emperor chose him, and I was the one to recommend him to His Majesty," Gu Shunzhang corrected with a bitter smile.

"The previous Emperor?" Lin Wanrong inhaled sharply. The previous Emperor had plotted against his own son? This world had gone mad!

Gu Shunzhang sighed deeply, his graying beard fluttering in the wind, his eyes shining with intensity. "In reality, years ago, I was just like you, unable to understand the actions of the previous Emperor."

"It is difficult to understand," Lin Wanrong agreed involuntarily.

"When the previous Emperor was alive, he seemed to favor Prince Cheng, guiding him at every turn. Everyone thought that Prince Cheng would be the heir. The truth was different. The Emperor equally favored both princes, only in different ways. Prince Cheng was intelligent and ambitious, so the previous Emperor elevated him, observing his behavior. The other prince, who is now our Emperor, was circumspect and loyal. The previous Emperor arranged for him to quietly gain real power. His aim was to select the best from the two. And these princes, each with his unique characteristics, competed openly and covertly, leaving the Emperor unable to decide."

So that was how it was. Prince Cheng's past glory had merely been a façade created by the previous Emperor. The old Emperor's schemes were apparently all connected to him, Lin Wanrong mused.

"So, what does selecting the best prince have to do with sending spies?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"Don't worry; let me continue," Gu Shunzhang shook his head and sighed lightly. "In those days, as the imperial tutor, I had a voice beside the previous Emperor. Because of this, both princes sought my favor. In this context, the previous Emperor secretly selected a few spies and had me recommend them to both princes. After scrutinizing these individuals, both princes were satisfied and subsequently placed these spies in each other's camps."

Lin Wanrong listened, breaking into a cold sweat, and cautiously said, "So, Zhao Wu, who seems to be obeying the Emperor on the surface, is actually a spy planted by the previous Emperor?"

"Exactly," Gu Shunzhang lightly confirmed. "By the same token, there are covert agents sent by Prince Cheng around the second prince as well. In truth, these agents are all the eyes of the previous Emperor! Every move of the two princes, noble or despicable, falls under the watchful eye of the current Emperor."

Father and son? Brothers? Even mortal enemies couldn't be this ruthless! Lin Wanrong shook his head in disbelief.

"In such circumstances, it becomes immediately obvious who is superior. Prince Cheng is impulsive and lacks steadiness. It won't be long before he makes a move against the second prince. Meanwhile, the current Emperor has been biding his time, having placed Zhao Wu beside Prince Cheng for decades, without ever issuing him any directives. All of this naturally came to the attention of the previous Emperor," Gu Shunzhang let out a long sigh. "The Emperor's strategic depth is hundreds of times stronger than the previous Emperor had imagined."

"Ten years without issuing orders?" Lin Wanrong was lost in amazement. "The Emperor truly is extraordinary. He probably saw through Zhao Wu's true identity long ago!"

"That's your conclusion; I never said that," Gu Shunzhang said, his eyes flickering mysteriously.

"I'll take responsibility for what I said! When it comes to cunning, Prince Cheng is definitely far behind the Emperor." Faced with the ultimate treachery among these fathers and brothers, Lin Wanrong could only sigh deeply. "The previous Emperor was kind enough. In the past, Prince Cheng conspired to rebel and planned to put the previous Emperor and his brother to death. On his deathbed, the previous Emperor passed the throne to the current Emperor but forbade him from making a move against Prince Cheng."

Gu Shunzhang suddenly burst into laughter. "Lin San, you're adorably naive!"

When a man calls another man adorable, it's borderline creepy. Lin Wanrong fumed, "Master Gu, what do you mean by that?"

Patting him on the shoulder, Gu Shunzhang nodded with a smile. "You're not an Emperor; you'll never understand an Emperor's thoughts. Do you think you understand what it means to rebel? Was Prince Cheng truly forgiven by the previous Emperor? Does the current Emperor really intend to pardon Prince Cheng? What is Zhao Wu doing then? You'll soon come to understand the true bearing of an Emperor!"

"An Emperor's bearing? Master Gu, are you saying that the Emperor will—" Lin Wanrong's face turned ashen as the dreadful implications struck him, overshadowing any joy he might have felt.

"Shh—" Gu Shunzhang slowly shook his head, his expression serene. "Master Lin, I didn't say anything."

Unable to help himself, Lin Wanrong nodded and bowed deeply, sincerely praising, "Master Gu, you truly are the tutor of emperors. I have learned much."

Chapter 503 A Child Within

"Lord Lin is too polite," Gu Shunzhang chuckled, "To be honest, I have a vested interest in discussing these matters with you. I heard that my son, Bingyan, is now in your hands—"

Lin Wanrong let out a sound of acknowledgment and smiled, nodding, "I understand, Master Gu. You're here specifically for this matter, aren't you? Rest assured, I believe that Brother Bingyan was merely confused for a moment. He hasn't committed any grave offenses; the Emperor won't hold it against him. However, since you already know so many secrets, why didn't you directly advise your son, instead of letting him get so close to Prince Cheng?"

Gu Shunzhang let out a long sigh, full of lamentation, "Bingyan grew up alongside the two princes. The late Emperor was quite favorable towards him, yet, for some reason, he became close friends with Prince Cheng. Perhaps it's fate. As an imperial tutor, if I were to advise him to stay away from Prince Cheng, wouldn't that give people something to talk about and make Prince Cheng suspicious?"

Lin Wanrong listened, filled with admiration. "Master Gu, your integrity is admirable."

"What integrity are you speaking of," the imperial tutor shook his head with a bitter smile, "It's my failure in his upbringing that has ultimately led to me having to clean up his messes. Lord Lin, the siege against your mansion was incited by my son. I'm truly ashamed."

Lin Wanrong had already been aware of this, but he hadn't expected the imperial tutor to admit it to his face.

Master Gu sighed repeatedly, "Ever since the current Emperor ascended the throne, I have paid little attention to court affairs. I've been preoccupied with traveling around, neglecting matters concerning Bingyan, unaware that he's still entangled with Prince Cheng. I used to think that 'children and grandchildren have their own blessings,' and whatever he does is his own responsibility. However, I am, after all, a mortal and can't escape the worldly attachments. I'm deeply ashamed."

Gu Shunzhang made repeated bows toward Lin Wanrong, his face clearly showing his guilt. For an imperial tutor with such fame and integrity, this humility was incomparable to the pretentiousness of so-called scholars. Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly, "So what if you've shown favoritism? We are all mortals, not saints. Speaking up for your own family is nothing wrong. Your son should be fine."

During yesterday's court meeting, the Emperor didn't bring up the matter, clearly intending to downplay it. Please rest assured."

"It's the Emperor's grace then," the imperial tutor made a fist salute towards the palace, his expression somewhat helpless. Despite his esteemed reputation, he had birthed a rebellious son, naturally adding to his emotional burden.

Educating one's children indeed presents a significant challenge. Even an esteemed scholar like the imperial tutor could not easily decipher the cause and effect. Lin Wanrong suddenly heightened his alertness, 'I'm also going to be a father soon; I can't let my child turn out worse than me. That would be disastrous!'

By the time Lin Wanrong returned to his mansion, it was already deep into the night. Seeing the flickering lights in the embroidered building, although dim, they felt exceptionally warm.

"Why did you return so late?" Xiao Qingxuan gracefully descended the stairs, grabbed his hand, and asked with a smile.

"The Emperor has arranged a multitude of affairs. I've been so busy that I can't get away. Son, ah, let your father listen to your heartbeat—" He pulled Miss Xiao to his side, embraced her waist, and pressed his ear tightly against her abdomen, listening to the pulse of his own bloodline.

Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed, and she gently touched his hair. The warmth of his cheek seemed to merge with her own skin, filling her with an indescribable sweetness.

"Qingxuan, I think I hear two heartbeats," Master Lin exclaimed joyously, his ear still against his wife's belly. "Could you be carrying twins? My God, I am so capable!"

"What nonsense are you talking about," Xiao Qingxuan playfully tapped his head. "The child isn't even born yet; how could you know it's twins? If both are as mischievous as you, I can't even handle one, let alone two."

True, this era had no ultrasounds; the pinnacle of medical skill was pulse diagnosis. Before the child was born, no one could know whether it was one or two.

Master Lin straightened his face, caressing Miss Xiao's smooth belly, and confidently said, "Judging from the shape and size of your abdomen, it must be twins. I'm very sure of it!"

Xiao Qingxuan gave him a sidelong glance, bashfully saying, "Even the physicians couldn't tell, but you did? You wish—hey, what are you doing? Everyone is watching! How annoying!"

"Yeah, big brother, we're all watching." Luo Ning giggled and poked her head out from behind Miss Xiao, revealing a beautiful cheek flushed as if with rouge.

"Oh, um, so everyone is here!" Master Lin awkwardly withdrew his hand from inside Miss Xiao's clothes and chuckled, "I've been reading too much lately, and my eyes have become a bit nearsighted. My apologies, my apologies."

Several people entered the hall. Qiaoqiao handed him a bowl of steaming Eight Treasure Lotus Seed Soup. "Big brother, weren't you hungry? Try this."

"My obedient little darling takes the best care of me," Master Lin sighed, pulling Qiaoqiao to sit beside him. He scooped up the fragrant lotus seed soup and brought it to her rosy lips, "Darling, you eat too—put on some weight, so you can bear more children for your husband!"

"Big brother—" Qiaoqiao's face turned crimson, almost choking on the soup. She giggled shyly, "Then you should offer this soup to Sister Ning; her desires align perfectly with yours!"

"Oh, really—" Master Lin widened his eyes and looked at Luo Ning. "Ning'er, how many do you plan to have? Let it be known, any number less than ten is not open for discussion!"

"Young lady, what nonsense are you talking about? You're the one who needs to bear children!" Luo Ning's face flushed, and she and Qiaoqiao began to playfully bicker. Miss Xiao watched her two younger sisters frolic, glancing at Master Lin, a tender emotion flickering in her eyes.

A chamber of beauties, a tomb of heroes—indeed, life was good. With these wives by his side, who would want to go to war? Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly, feeling a warm little hand grasp his own.

"My Dear, what are you thinking about?" Xiao Qingxuan's voice resounded softly beside his ear, as delicate and gentle as flowing water.

"It's nothing," Lin Wanrong patted her hand, concealing the melancholy in his heart. "I was just thinking about the matters I've been handling these past couple of days."

Miss Xiao sighed softly and laid her cheek against his shoulder. "Don't worry. Though the northern territories are far away, what does distance mean to us as husband and wife? My sisters and I will wait for you to return, steadfast through life and death."

Lin Wanrong's nose tingled at her words, and he gripped her soft hand tightly. "Qingxuan, you treat me so well."

Miss Xiao Qingxuan smiled gracefully. "Stop trying to charm me. Tell me, during today's court session, do you have anything to inform us about?"

"Anything to inform?" Lin Wanrong frowned slightly, pondering. "Today's session was mainly about Prince Cheng. The Emperor said he would be stripped of his title and sent into exile in the northern regions. Qingxuan, since when have you been interested in political affairs?"

"You're evading the topic!" Xiao Qingxuan lightly poked his forehead with her small finger, glaring at him. "What does the Emperor's punishment of Prince Cheng have to do with me? Is that all that happened today?"

"Other than that, it doesn't seem like there was much else," Lin Wanrong spread his hands. "I've been at war in the south of the city, and then I visited the underground palace where Prince Cheng was plotting his rebellion. Ah, Qingxuan, you wouldn't believe it! Your uncle had stored countless treasures of gold and silver. It was as luxurious as a real palace, really—"

He rambled on and on, but the expressions on the faces of his wives were ambiguous, half-smiling, half not. It made him feel uncomfortable.

"Ahem, ahem," he cleared his throat, feeling awkward under the scrutiny of the three women.

"Qingxuan, what exactly are you trying to ask? Can you give me a hint? I've been busy with many things these days and might have overlooked something."

He was cunning, preemptively making excuses. Xiao Qingxuan chuckled. "Selective memory, eh? Let me ask you, who did you meet at the court today?"

"Gao Qiu, Xu Wei, Chen Biqing, Yu Wenzheng, Gao Ping, ah, and the Emperor," Lin Wanrong said earnestly, counting off on his fingers.

"That's it?" Miss Xiao looked at him with a half-smile.

Luo Ning stepped beside him, massaging his shoulders with a tender touch. "Big Brother, think carefully! If you withhold any reportable encounters from us sisters, the consequences could be severe."

"Ah, thank you, Ning'er!" Lin Wanrong hummed in comfort. "Wife, can you give me another hint? As you know, I don't keep anything in mind other than you all."

Hearing his sweet talk, Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed. "You always know how to tease. Let me ask you, did you encounter the Emperor's tutor today?"

"Ah, you mean Mr. Gu," Lin Wanrong suddenly realized, nodding vigorously. "Yes, I met him. We even had a good talk and became sworn friends. Ah, my poor memory, how could I forget such an important person?"

"You're conveniently forgetting," Xiao Qingxuan shook her head in exasperation. "When you met with Mr. Gu, did he give you any important instructions?"

Important instructions? Lin Wanrong's eyes darted around, and he spoke nonchalantly, "Ah, he just reminded me to be cautious and diligent on the battlefield, so that the Turkic people wouldn't look down on us—these should be quite important, right?"

"Big Brother, just confess!" Ning'er twisted his neck gently with a giggle. "I heard you received a letter today, all the way from Goryeo!"

"Ah, so that's what you're talking about!" Lin Wanrong's face turned serious. "Ning'er, you'll surely be moved when you hear this. In today's court session, Master Gu, on behalf of the Goryeo Kingdom princess, proposed marriage to your husband here. I flatly rejected him on the spot! Ning'er, aren't you moved? And you, Qiaoqiao—"

He was dodging the issue, focusing only on the noble aspects of his own character. While these words were ostensibly addressed to Ning'er, they were meant for Xiao Qingxuan to hear. However, Xiao Qingxuan's expression remained unresponsive.

"Big Brother," Qiaoqiao glanced at him nervously, cautiously saying, "What sister is asking about is the letter from Goryeo!"

"The letter?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, his mind racing. "Qiaoqiao, where did you hear about the letter?"

"It was from the Emperor—" Just as Qiaoqiao, ever submissive to him, was about to spill the beans, Ning'er quickly covered her mouth, giggling, "Qiaoqiao, did you forget what I told you earlier?"

Qiaoqiao's face flushed with embarrassment, her eyes filled with apology as she looked at her big brother. Ning'er, that little fox, had Lin Wanrong grumbling internally. How dare she make things difficult for him when he doted on her so much?

"The letter, ah, I remember now," Lin Wanrong slapped his hand, "Mr. Gu also brought me a letter from a friend in Goryeo! My excitement upon seeing you made me forget all about it!"

"Who is this Goryeo friend? What's their name? Bring out the letter to have a look!" Ning'er hummed and stretched out her hand, posing a challenging question.

Was this girl daring to defy him, backed by Qingxuan? Lin Wanrong glared at her, causing Ning'er to recoil in fear. She quickly withdrew her hands, clutching her chest, pleading, "Big Brother, don't hit me!"

Her voice was soft and charming, her face tinged with an indescribable sense of allure, and her eyes held an ineffable excitement. Lin Wanrong felt his anger dissipate, replaced by another form of fire.

Ah, heroes have a weakness for the allure of a beauty. Lin Wanrong sighed, finally recognizing that his wives were here to interrogate him, armed with information.

"As for the letter, I indeed received one," Lin Wanrong took Qingxuan's hand and sighed. "But it's not like I intentionally hid it from you. The letter was written in such a cryptic manner that I couldn't understand what it was saying, so I didn't think much of it and forgot to mention it to you."

Miss Xiao covered her lips and chuckled lightly, "You're good at talking nonsense. How could you not understand a letter? They are written with words, after all."

"If it were written in words, I would naturally understand," Lin Wanrong sighed. "The problem is, the letter wasn't written in words at all."

"Words are futile," Ning'er chuckled as she extended her small hand, humming from her nose. "Big Brother, bring out that letter so we can see what young lady has managed to write a letter that even you can't understand."

Surrounded and grilled by his wives, Lin Wanrong had little room for protest. He took the letter from his bosom and handed it to the talented Lady Luo.

With a light laugh, Ning'er accepted the envelope, casting a seductive glance at him. Unnoticed, her delicate fingertip lightly scratched across his palm—soft, tingling touches that set his heart racing. This bewitching vixen was fatal, Lin Wanrong felt his heart pound uncontrollably.

"Sister, you go ahead and read it," Luo Ning passed the envelope to Xiao Qingxuan. Miss Xiao was rather polite, frowning, "This is a private letter for My Dear; it doesn't seem proper for me to read it."

Hearing the playful banter between the young women, Lin Wanrong understood. Xiao Qingxuan wanted him to make a decision—her reading the letter would be both "reasonable and legitimate."

"It's fine!" Gazing at the beautiful face of Miss Xiao, Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, beating his chest resoundingly, "We are husband and wife; what's mine is yours! Besides, I couldn't understand the letter anyway. You read it and then tell me."

"My Dear, then I will read it," Xiao Qingxuan lightly laughed, her face a mix of joy and shyness. "You can't blame me later!"

Her smile seemed like the most beautiful flower in the world, blossoming in Lin Wanrong's heart. With both his soul and senses captivated, he quickly nodded, "As you wish. If after reading the letter you want to see me disrobe or anything, just let me know. I will fulfill your request."

Miss Xiao lightly scoffed, her cheeks flushed like fire, paying him no mind as she hastily opened the envelope. A faint, pleasant fragrance wafted through the air, penetrating the senses, revealing a white sheet of paper. As Lin Wanrong had said, there wasn't a single word written on it. She examined it for a moment, then sighed lightly and passed it back to Ning'er.

Seeing Xiao Qingxuan's worried expression, Lin Wanrong was uncertain about her thoughts and casually commented, "Ah, the paper is quite nice. I wonder where they bought it; I should get some when I have time."

Qiaoqiao curiously said, "Isn't this just ordinary rice paper? If you want it, Big Brother, I can go buy a dozen sheets for you to write letters on tomorrow."

This girl was truly adorable, Lin Wanrong thought, grasping her little hand in his own, but saying nothing.

"Huh, what is this?" Luo Ning's eyes fell upon the letter. What first caught her sight was a flower petal with a lingering fragrance, somehow sticking to the rice paper and refusing to fall. The petal's luster was faded, having wilted long ago, with only a few remaining traces of its once-vibrant crimson hue.

Upon closer inspection, Qiaoqiao said softly, "This looks like an azalea flower, also called rhododendron. They bloom in the mountains in spring, painting the landscape with brilliant reds. It's extremely beautiful."

Azalea? Luo Ning acknowledged with a sound, then continued examining the paper. The page was completely blank, except for a small sketch of a fruit in fine lines. The fruit was round, dotted with a few seeds in red ink. The strokes were simple and clear. The paper was otherwise empty, save for faint water stains scattered across it—perhaps the tear marks of the person who had written the letter.

"What is this? I can't understand it either!" Miss Luo's elegant eyebrows furrowed as she sighed.

Qiaoqiao scrutinized the drawing intently for a moment, then giggled, "Sister Ning, you must be joking. You're so clever, how can you not understand the meaning of this painting? Big Brother is also deceiving us. Don't you see? The round fruit is a pomegranate, and the red in the middle are the seeds. The painting symbolizes having seeds in the belly—having a child, ah—"

She stopped abruptly, her expression changing suddenly as if she had thought of something, and hurriedly closed her mouth.

"Is that so?" the talented Lady Luo, sighed softly, "I didn't pay attention earlier; I really didn't see it. This painting is profound. Big Brother, surely you didn't understand its meaning either, did you?"

"Yes, yes," Master Lin, breaking out into a cold sweat, responded, "Ning'er, you know I've never been good at solving riddles or anything of the sort. This painting is too profound; had Qiaoqiao not pointed it out, I would really not have understood it."

No wonder Big Brother was stammering, reluctant to reveal the truth. Qiaoqiao sighed softly, understanding that Big Brother wasn't confused; he understood all too well!

"My Dear, do you intend to keep this a secret from us?" Miss Xiao's eyes reddened, glistening teardrops shimmering, "Do you consider us outsiders?"

"No, no," seeing Qingxuan on the verge of tears, Master Lin instantly softened, "Qingxuan, it's not like that. I was worried about you, afraid that seeing this letter would upset you. Look, hasn't my concern been justified?"

Luo Ning hurriedly supported Miss Xiao and whispered, "Yes, Sister, Big Brother hid the letter because he didn't want to upset you. Though his actions were wrong, his intentions were good. Otherwise, why would he be so hesitant to let you know?"

'My dear Ning'er, finally someone understands me.' Master Lin felt a rush of emotion, his eyes brimming with tears.

"I know he cares about me," Xiao Qingxuan looked at Lin Wanrong, her tears falling freely, "but I don't want him to deceive me like this—"

Seeing that her sister was genuinely angry, Luo Ning quickly shot Lin Wanrong a meaningful glance. Lin Wanrong, feeling the deep emotional bond with Qingxuan, hurriedly took Miss Xiao's hand and softly said, "Qingxuan, I shouldn't have kept this from you. But as you know, everyone has some small secrets in their hearts, secrets they can't share with anyone—"

Small secrets? Miss Xiao snorted; what secrets did he have that she didn't know? He was just deceiving himself.

"This was purely accidental, and I hadn't told you yet. I've been considering how to minimize the impact of this on you—you know you're always the most important to me—"

He pulled Qingxuan into his arms, gently patting her shoulder, then secretly mouthed to Ning and Qiaoqiao, "And both of you—"

Both Qiaoqiao and Ning'er blushed, feeling a mixture of irritation and affection toward their shameless Big Brother.

"What are you doing, consoling me like this?" Miss Xiao's cheek rested against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. Silently, her tears fell. "Even the secrets you keep from me seem to be for my sake. My Dear, you have bewitched me. My life is entirely yours."

Qingxuan spoke with sincere emotion. Master Lin felt uneasy and hastily reassured her, "The enchantment is mutual. Ah, the situation arose so suddenly that I had no time to prepare mentally. How could I tell you? You are the treasure I hold in the palm of my hand, so precious that I'd hesitate to even kiss you."

He'd struck her with his sugar-coated words; Miss Xiao felt her body soften and a mix of shyness and delight flood her heart. She, who had slain enemies with her sword and fearlessly roamed the world, was vulnerable only to the sweet words of her beloved.

"Even if you can't bring yourself to say it, you can't just keep it from me," sighed Xiao Qingxuan. "Having a child is not a trivial matter. It concerns a woman's honor and life. Moreover, it's the bloodline of the Lin family. Can you really bear to ignore this?"

"I have no choice," Master Lin exhaled deeply. "You are the most important to me. A thousand cities wouldn't be worth trading for a wife as good as you. Speaking of which, what shall we name our child?"

Miss Luo and Qiaoqiao listened, confused. What was he doing, bringing up naming the baby out of nowhere? They were unaware that this was Lin Wanrong's trusted tactic of changing the topic.

Sure enough, Miss Xiao spoke, "We're discussing a serious matter here, don't muddy the waters. What are we going to do about this?"

"Who knows? We'll take it one step at a time. It's not as if I wanted this to happen; I'm quite wronged too," he squinted, gauging her expression, but his face was nonchalant.

"That won't do!" Miss Xiao suddenly stood, her expression tinged with anger. "The bloodline of the Lin family cannot be allowed to drift to foreign lands, especially among foreigners. This is absolutely unacceptable!"

Master Lin lamented, "Maybe we should just let it be. Having you all is enough for me in this lifetime. I don't want to deal with any more complications."

"No!" Miss Xiao was firm, her hand gripping his tightly. "Men deal with the outside world, women manage the household; this matter is too serious to neglect. I will personally write a letter to Goryeo."

"It's better if you don't. This is hard to explain, and people are sure to doubt my innocence," Lin Wanrong frowned, intending to reject Qingxuan's kind gesture.

"At this point, who cares about innocence!" Frustrated with her husband's hesitance, Miss Xiao was getting impatient. "It's settled then. My Dear, when you return from the north, you will go to Goryeo."

"How can I?" Master Lin shook his head like a rattle drum. "I don't want to go to Goryeo. The journey is long, the alcohol weak, and the kimchi unpalatable."

"You won't go?" Tears welled up in Miss Xiao's eyes. "Very well, I'll go in your stead—then, let the child in my belly see how his heartless father torments his mother!"

The threat was indeed potent, and Mr. Lin was immediately alarmed. "Qingxuan, don't scare me. Fine, fine, I'll go, I'll definitely go! It's just a trip to Goryeo. I'll come back the same way I go."

"You said it yourself!" Miss Xiao huffed, "I didn't use our child to pressure you."

"Yes, yes, I said it myself," Mr. Lin sighed regretfully. "Qingxuan, are you not making it difficult for me?"

Qiaoqiao and Ning'er exchanged puzzled glances. Something seemed off. Now it appeared that their sister was anxious while their brother was not.

"Sister Ning," Qiaoqiao quietly tugged at Ning'er's sleeve, "from the looks of Big Brother, it doesn't seem like he's having a hard time. It looks more like he's pleased!"

"Hush," Ning'er winked mysteriously, "Don't speak, don't speak. Have you not seen Big Brother's tactics before?"

Having settled the matter and seeing him still frowning, Miss Xiao was both annoyed and amused. "My Dear, what is it? Are you not satisfied with my arrangements?"

"No, not at all," Lin Wanrong hurriedly sighed, "Ah, Qingxuan, you have a heart full of kindness. Marrying you is indeed a fortune I've accumulated over several lifetimes."

Xiao Qingxuan gave him a sidelong glance, "Do you think I don't know what you're thinking? Taking advantage and still pretending to be aggrieved. How annoying!"

"What are you talking about?" Lin Wanrong wrapped his arms around her waist and whispered, "Qingxuan, you treat me too well. From now on, I will certainly heed your advice. If you tell me to go east, I will not head west!"

"Who's the winner and who's the loser is still hard to say." Seeing the flash of humor in Miss Xiao's eyes, Qiaoqiao silently sighed. Intuitively, she felt that her big brother and sister were truly an inexplicable pair.

After conversing for a while, Xiao Qingxuan carefully examined his wound. The medicine given by Qin Xian'er was truly remarkable. Not only had the flesh wound scabbed over and new tissue grown, but the broken bone had also healed nicely. Miss Xiao carefully pressed down a few times before nodding, "In another two or three days, you can try to stand."

"Really?!" Lin Wanrong was overjoyed. Good medicine truly made a difference; just a few days had passed and he was already able to move.

"Don't be too pleased," Miss Xiao cautioned, "After you stand, you can only engage in some light activities. Don't use too much force. After another six or seven days, then you can walk slowly—remember, gradual progress!"

"Yes, yes," With Qingxuan's assurance, Lin Wanrong was beyond happy. Dragging around a broken leg was inconvenient anywhere, let alone going to the north for battle; that could be fatal. The sooner he recovered, the more confident he felt.

Xiao Qingxuan's eyes were tinged with red as she softly said, "It's just that, your injury can only recover gradually during the march. The army is full of men, and they're all rough. Who can take good care of you?"

Lin Wanrong hurriedly wiped away her tears and laughed, "What's there to be afraid of? I've always been rough and rugged. I recover fast. Besides, the army will be marching all the way to the border. There's so much time in between. Even a pig's leg would heal nicely by then."

Miss Xiao couldn't help but laugh. "What nonsense about a pig leg! You're wounded. You're not like the common soldiers; someone needs to properly take care of you."

"Sister, if you're worried about someone looking after our husband in the army, there is someone suitable," Luo Ning cautiously chimed in, blinking her eyes.

Xiao Qingxuan's eyes brightened, and she grasped Luo Ning's hand. "Ning'er, are you talking about Xu Zhiqing?"

Luo Ning nodded gently. "Given Sister Xu's meticulous nature, if she's willing, she'll undoubtedly take good care of Big Brother."

"Excellent," Xiao Qingxuan nodded, "Ning'er, tomorrow I'll personally go to Li Tai's camp and visit Miss Xu!"

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively, "No need. Qingxuan, don't go. Given your status, it's not appropriate to seek favors from others—"

Miss Xiao shook her head, "My Dear, as long as you are safe and sound, I'd willingly die, let alone set aside my princess status."

"You're mistaken," Lin Wanrong said, gently touching her cheek, "You're no longer a princess; you're the lady of the Lin family. I, Lin Wanrong, may laugh or cry, but I'll never bow and scrape. In my family, everyone must hold their heads high; that's my style."

His words were filled with a vigorous spirit. It was rare for the ladies to see him in such a mood, and they looked at him with a mix of awe and love. Luo Ning still looked worried, "But Big Brother, Sister Xu is not an outsider—"

Lin Wanrong interrupted her, "Miss Xu is an army strategist, overwhelmed with tasks. How can we burden her with my well-being? Besides, I'm going to war, not to enjoy myself. Life and death are at stake; I can't have someone else look after me. I have Gao Qiu, Xu Zhen, Brother Hu, and Brother Du, my sworn brothers. They're more than enough!"

"My Dear—" Xiao Qingxuan tried to interject, but Lin Wanrong waved her off, "I'm the man; listen to me on this. If anyone goes behind my back to seek help, I won't forgive them!"

The words were spoken with great gravity, unlike his usual jovial self. Even Miss Xiao didn't dare to contravene him, leaving the ladies speechless. Luo Ning whispered in his ear, "Big Brother, if Sister Zhiqing hears what you've said, she might be devastated."

"It's just one more heartbreak; it doesn't matter," Lin Wanrong replied softly, "Ning'er, you mustn't betray me—"

"Big brother, what are you saying?" Miss Luo's voice trembled, "How would I dare to betray you to Sister Xu? I'm afraid you'll beat me—"

Luo Ning's charming face flushed like rouge, making Lin Wanrong's heart race. 'This little vixen is trying to tempt me into making a mistake again,' he thought, sighing. As a small act of revenge, he planted a kiss on Luo Ning's cheek.

Initially, he had planned to visit Yuruo and the others, but hearing that they had gone to the old Xiao residence with Xian'er to plan its reconstruction, he spared himself the visit.

Wounded and exhausted from capturing people and waging battle these past few days, Lin Wanrong retired to bed early, attended by his wives. Yet, his sleep was restless, clouded by a nagging sensation that something had been left undone.

The next morning, he woke up in a daze. The red candles in the room had burned down to stubs, and the sky outside the window was still dark. Xiao Qingxuan, who had slept beside him last night, had vanished at some point, and even Ning'er and Qiaoqiao were nowhere to be seen.

"Damn it!" Lin Wanrong slapped his forehead. "How could I have forgotten about this?!"

Chapter 504 Farewell

"Someone, come quickly!" He hurriedly put on his clothes, fumbling about. Light footsteps echoed from downstairs. A young maidservant lifted the curtain and stepped in. "Brother San, did you call for me—Ah! You... why aren't you dressed?"

The maid let out a shriek, her pretty face flushing crimson. Quickly covering her cheeks, she retreated with a whine.

"What are you screaming for? Can't you see I'm still wearing shorts and socks?!" He was both annoyed and amused. "Huan'er, what are you doing here?"

Huan'er hid her face behind the curtain, lowering her head, not daring to look at him. "Brother San, could you please put on your clothes first?"

At those words, Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes. 'If I could dress myself, why would I have called you?'

Huan'er also realized her mistake. Brother San was seriously injured; asking him to dress himself was indeed unreasonable.

"Brother San, how about I... I close my eyes and help you dress?" Huan'er whispered, her cheeks already red as cherries. It was improper for her, a maid serving the young misses and the lady of the house, to attend to a man.

'Fine, I'll do it myself then!' In complete despair, Lin Wanrong grumbled for a while and finally managed to put on his shirt. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead. Huan'er couldn't bear to watch and said softly, "Brother San, I'll help you dress. Just don't take advantage of me."

Lin Wanrong sighed. It seemed his reputation had sunk so low that even a maid felt the need to guard against him.

"Huan'er, are you also mocking me?" Lin Wanrong grimaced, "Look at me, a cripple. It would be a wonder if you aren't the one taking advantage of me, let alone the other way around."

A soft chuckle escaped Huan'er, as she set aside her shyness and carefully helped him put on his inner garment and robe. She then smoothed out the wrinkles in his clothing. "Brother San, the

princess and the other young misses left early this morning for urgent business. Eldest Miss sent me here to make sure you have someone you're comfortable with."

"Everyone left? Did they go to see off the Madam?" Lin Wanrong said calmly.

"You... how did you know?" Huan'er was a bit startled, quickly glanced at him, then lowered her head. "Brother San, don't be angry. The Madam instructed us not to tell you, and the young misses couldn't persuade her otherwise."

"That's just great," Lin Wanrong's face flushed with anger, "Even such matters are kept from me! Have I become an outsider to the Xiao family?"

Seeing Brother San's face turn black as coal, Huan'er was frightened and kept her head down, looking quite wronged.

"Huan'er, I'm sorry," noticing the tear forming in her eyes, Lin Wanrong quickly apologized with a smile. "I wasn't directing that at you. How long have they been gone?"

Huan'er softly hummed, wiping away her tears. She looked up at the sky and softly said, "Almost half an hour."

"Half an hour?" Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed. "Call Gao Qiu to come see me as fast as possible, and have a carriage prepared for me as well!"

Huan'er hastily left the room, and within a short span of time, Gao Qiu rushed in. "Brother Lin, you were looking for me?"

"Brother Gao, I need to go to the south of the city—" Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder, his expression a mix of speechlessness and a bitter smile. "—Madam Xiao is leaving!" rA

The sky was not yet fully lit. The shops lining the long street remained closed, and the common folk were still in their dreams. The crisp clip-clop of hooves shattered the morning's tranquility. A spacious horse-drawn carriage sped down the street, making its way straight for the southern gate.

Once out of the city, the chill in the air seemed to intensify. Early spring dew covered the carriage shaft, and the warm breath exhaled from the galloping horses' muzzles instantly condensed into mist, leaving a long trail in the air.

Lin Wanrong sat in the carriage with a gloomy face, not cracking a single smile. Gao Qiu cautiously asked, "Brother Lin, what's the matter? This sullenness doesn't suit you."

"Brother Gao, I just can't figure it out," Lin Wanrong said, distressed. "Do you think Madam Xiao is displeased with me? Why is she leaving without saying a word? What angers me the most is that all of my wives kept this from me!"

"Why would she be displeased with you? Think about it, both of the Miss Xiaos have become Mrs. Lin, haven't they? Perhaps Madam Xiao saw that you were injured and didn't want to disturb you early in the morning," Gao Qiu comforted, patting him on the shoulder.

It was surprising how comforting Gao Qiu, a seemingly coarse man, could be. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Brother Gao, your way with words has improved tremendously. How many ladies have you charmed into becoming your wives?"

"What wives? What do I need them for?" Gao Qiu scornfully spat. "I, Old Gao, cherish my freedom. Why would I want a woman to tie me down? There are plenty of women out there. If I, Old Gao, wish it, all the women in the brothels could be considered your sister-in-laws. I could have a new one every day, without any repetition!"

"Hahaha—" Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter, finding Gao Qiu's reasoning extraordinarily amusing.

After the carriage had been galloping for the time it takes to brew a cup of tea, Gao Qiu pulled back the curtain for a glance and suddenly exclaimed, "Brother Lin, look. Isn't that the Princess and Eldest Miss over there—"

The sky was beginning to brighten. Far away stood a small pavilion, and through the morning light, the silhouettes of several beautiful women appeared. Xian'er and Qiaoqiao held hands, Qingxuan and Ning'er supported each other, and Yushuang and Xiao Yuruo clung together. Some looked contemplative, some were softly crying, all gazing silently toward the south.

A finely crafted carriage gradually moved farther away, leaving behind a swirling trail of mist on the official road, slowly disappearing from everyone's sight.

"Go—" Seeing the carriage receding into the distance, Gao Qiu grew anxious. He quickly stepped onto the carriage shaft and with a flick of the reins, both horses let out long neighs and galloped courageously forward.

Qin Xian'er turned around and saw the scene of Gao Qiu spurring his horses. She was immediately startled, "Is that Gao Qiu? Why is he here?!"

Xiao Qingxuan slowly shook her head, "I'm afraid it's not Commander Gao who's come, but our husband. I knew we couldn't keep this a secret from him!"

"Quick, look." Gao Qiu drove his carriage, leaping out like a flying arrow on the official road. He was tens of feet away from them but didn't stop; he just kept going straight ahead. Qiaoqiao was puzzled, "Isn't he going to talk with us?"

"He's deliberately showing us his displeasure." Xiao Yuruo's tone was melancholic, tears clearly visible in her eyes. "This annoying troublemaker. My mother didn't allow us to tell him, yet he's blaming us!"

"No, that can't be it." The Second Miss had just parted from her mother and was wiping her tearful eyes, hidden in her sister's arms. Upon hearing them criticize Lin San, she urgently raised her head to defend him. "The bad person wouldn't be so petty! He's rushing to send off our mother. He'll be back in a moment."

The sisters each had their own posture. Ning'er chuckled at the sight of them, "Complaining here is pointless, sisters. If you're really upset, just lock big brother out of the room tonight. Make him suffer a little and he'll behave."

"Well, that doesn't sound very good," Qiaoqiao whispered, "Big brother is still injured. If he catches a cold, wouldn't that make people worry to death?"

Xiao Yuruo laughed, "Qiaoqiao, it's because you pamper him that he becomes so arrogant. I think Ning'er's suggestion is a good one. Make him suffer a few times, and he'll learn his lesson."

Qin Xian'er chuckled, "Easier said than done, Sister Xiao. You haven't even crossed the threshold with our husband yet. Are you planning to keep him out so you can sneak him into your chamber? We all know about your failed attempts!"

"What failed attempts! Nonsense! I haven't had any!" Xiao Yuruo blushed deeply. Qin Xian'er was outspoken and could say anything. Her words amused all the ladies present, who began to chuckle behind their hands.

"Why don't you start, Ning'er?" Qin Xian'er said, her eyes twinkling, "If you can really keep him out, I'll follow your lead."

"That can't be!" Talented Lady Luo's vivid red lips were incredibly alluring as she coquettishly giggled, "Big brother is my precious darling. You may be willing to, but I'm not!"

"Tsk, you little vixen!" The ladies laughed and teased in unison. The Second Miss held Ning'er's hand and sighed, "Sister Ning, now I truly understand what marital compatibility means. If you say you and that scoundrel aren't a match, I won't believe it even if I'm beaten to death."

The sisters burst into giggles and laughter, dispersing much of the gloom that had been hanging in the air.

After driving his carriage frantically for a while, Gao Qiu didn't know how far he had gone when they climbed a steep hill. "Whoa," he yelled and pulled hard on the reins. The two spirited horses stopped at once, rearing and neighing loudly. The carriage came to a steady halt.

Gao Qiu quickly jumped down and moved Lin Wanrong's wheelchair. Pointing forward, he said, "Brother Lin, look—"

Fields of rhododendrons covered the mountain, as stunning as a burning hillside. Between the two slopes, a narrow and quiet official road wound ahead, stretching as far as the eye could see. A delicate carriage was speeding smoothly along the road. The sound of hooves was distant yet tranquil. The curtains of the carriage were tightly closed, obscuring any view of the occupants. However, the drooping curtain bore a conspicuous "Xiao" emblem.

The dew of early spring struck Lin Wanrong's cheeks, sending a cool sensation through him. He took a deep breath, his gaze lingering on the carriage slowly making its way down the mountain. With a vigorous wave, he called out, "Madam, Madam—"

The valley was quiet. His shouts, reverberating like thunder in the peaceful surroundings, startled a flock of early-rising sparrows. Flapping their wings, the birds soared up from the azalea bushes, scattering in all directions. The valley buzzed with the echo of their flight.

The gentle jingling of bells from the carriage masked the shouts. The spirited horses pressed on, showing no signs of stopping.

"It seems they didn't hear us," Gao Qiu muttered, cupping his hands around his mouth. Gathering energy from his core, he bellowed, "Madam Xiao, Madam Xiao, we've come to see you off—"

Being a martial artist, Gao Qiu's voice was extraordinarily loud. The buzz echoed in Lin Wanrong's ears, filled only with Gao Qiu's howls. Yet the carriage wobbled on, showing no intention of halting.

"Could they be asleep?" Gao Qiu wondered. Lin Wanrong sighed, "Perhaps—"

"Ah, it's slowing down," Gao Qiu suddenly exclaimed with delight. Lin Wanrong squinted to see the carriage finally coming to a gradual halt. The curtain lifted slowly to reveal a face of refined beauty.

"Take care, Officer Gao!" Madam Xiao waved with a smile.

"Thank you, Madam. You take care as well!" Gao Qiu responded loudly, his fists clasped in respect. Madam Xiao nodded lightly, her smile extraordinarily sweet.

"Brother Lin, why are you silent?" Gao Qiu waited but didn't hear Lin Wanrong's voice, which struck him as odd. Turning back, he found Lin Wanrong had wheeled himself slightly back, out of sight from the carriage.

"No need for further words," Lin Wanrong waved, smiling. "A simple send-off to express our sentiments is enough. There's no need to stick to formalities. Moreover, I'll be returning to Jinling."

"That's true," Gao Qiu nodded. "The intention is enough. Farewell, Madam Xiao—"

A gentle hand delicately held up the curtain of the carriage, lingering for a moment. A breeze caused the curtain to sway lightly as if moved by an unseen hand. Just when even Gao Qiu began to

wonder how long the moment would last, the curtain finally fell, and the carriage moved quietly on. The soft clip-clop of hooves seemed to strike at the heart.

The carriage vanished from their sight, its departure leaving a touch of melancholy, even for Gao Qiu. "Madam Xiao has left; we must head north. Whether it's life or death ahead, no one knows. Brother Lin, what exactly are we seeking in this life?"

"Your questions always make people ponder," Lin Wanrong sighed. "Perhaps we're all just seeking happiness. My happiest times were in Jinling, and one day I will return."

Gao Qiu chuckled at the depth of the sentiment, "Brother Lin, where shall we go now? Back to the residence? Your wives are still waiting."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Not for now. I have a very important place to go to, as vital to me as life itself."

Chapter 505 An Unexpected Encounter at the Summit

"Where are you going?" Gao Qiu's voice tinged with urgency upon hearing the news. "Do you need me to secretly deploy troops for protection? Is an army of 100,000 sufficient?"

An army of 100,000? Ridiculous. Master Lin snorted dismissively, "What I am about to do is of the utmost secrecy within the Great Hua Empire. Aside from you and me, no one else is allowed to know. Should anyone dare to pry—Gao Qiu, I trust you know what to do."

Hearing the solemnity in his voice, Gao Qiu nodded hastily, "Understood. Rest assured, Brother Lin, if anyone dares to expose your whereabouts, I will personally remove their head."

"What is he up to?" Seeing Gao Qiu's carriage moving further and further away in the opposite direction, Qin Xian'er asked suspiciously, "Is he actually angry with us? Why won't he interact with us?"

Her expression showed some worry. Xiao Qingxuan gently took her hand and reassured her, "Sister, don't worry. You know My Dear's temperament well. He has plenty of tricks up his sleeve. It's unlikely that he's easily angered. Most likely, he's hiding something from us."

Qin Xian'er felt Xiao Qingxuan's grip on her palm, struggled briefly, but seeing her heavily pregnant, her face filled with concern, she stopped resisting. "Why are you holding me? Be careful, I might accidentally hurt you." Qin Xian'er pouted and turned her face away but allowed Xiao Qingxuan to hold her hand.

Ning'er chuckled softly, "What could he possibly hide from us? Every renowned young lady in the capital who has set eyes on our big brother is already here, save those who can't catch his eye. Where else could he go to philander? Ah, perhaps some young lady from another province has arrived in the capital today?"

Her words amused the other wives, who giggled blushing. Only the Second Miss pouted, "The bad guy is not chasing after skirts. He must be up to something important. I trust him!"

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"Achoo!" Sitting in the carriage, Master Lin sneezed loudly, startling the horses trotting alongside. Gao Qiu quickly leaned in, "Brother Lin, what's the matter? Did you catch a cold from waking up too early?"

"No, no, I'm not that frail," Lin Wanrong waved his hand, chuckling. "Perhaps someone is thinking of me. Gao Qiu, how much farther to Fairy Hall?"

Gao Qiu squinted, estimating the distance, "To avoid the watchful eyes of your wives, we took a longer route. We should be there in about half an hour."

Longer route was an understatement; it felt like a journey to the heavens. Lin Wanrong shook his head and yawned, letting it pass. By the time they reached the Jade Buddha Temple, the sky was already bright. A thin layer of mist meandered through the mountains. The distant summit appeared as elusive as a fairy palace, ethereal and unreachable.

Fairy Hall had been transformed into a school. It was still the season of the spring equinox, and few people were about. The path leading to the mountaintop was already wide open. As they ascended the steps, they were greeted by green pines and vibrant cypresses, a multitude of competing blooms, and the subtle fragrance of flowers wafting through the air. The mist wrapped around them, refreshing and pleasant.

"This is quite a good place, even better than the Penglai Fairy Pavilion," Lin Wanrong mused. Despite the steep mountain path and his injuries, he and Gao Qiu were making slow progress, affording Master Lin some time to appreciate the scenery. "When I, Old Gao, retire, I'll build a

straw hut here. I'll pick fresh flowers and drink fine wine every day, living a carefree life like the immortals."

Lin Wanrong snorted, "What's so great about being an immortal? Casting aside all emotions and desires, they're devoid of even basic feelings. What's the difference between them and a tree stump? It's much better to be a mere mortal like me, deceiving and enjoying life to the fullest."

"Well said, well said," Gao Qiu laughed heartily. Then, he became shy, "But if I were to find some four-legged companions to share my carefree life on this mountain, I'm afraid I wouldn't feel at ease. You know, Brother Lin, I'm a rather introverted person. I always feel guilty for hours after visiting the Eight Alleys."

Having spent a long time with Master Lin, Old Gao had thickened his skin quite a bit. Even Master Lin admired his audacity. The two reached the mountaintop, still joking and laughing. The ruins of a once heavily bombarded archway lay before them, covered with overgrown weeds and debris, barely recognizable as the once bustling area it had been.

Suddenly, Lin Wanrong stared ahead, dumbfounded. Before him stood a small spiritual tower at the grave of the late Hall Master. An incense burner was placed on top of it, three sticks of incense rising to the sky. Beside the grave was a straw hut with a bamboo door. The stone in front of the door was exceptionally smooth, as if someone lived there.

"Fairy Sister!" Lin Wanrong yelled excitedly, forgetting his injuries and attempting to move forward. A sharp pain shot through his leg, causing him to stumble. Fortunately, Gao Qiu reacted swiftly and caught him.

"Brother Gao, help me over there quickly," Lin Wanrong urged, gripping Gao Qiu's arm painfully. Gao Qiu dared not delay; with a grunt, he pushed Master Lin's wheelchair forward.

In a few steps, they reached the straw hut. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but pause, hearing his own heart pounding. The inside of the hut was eerily quiet, the bamboo handle on the door clean and polished, indicating that the owner was a clean person.

"Yuxi," Lin Wanrong muttered, his eyes suddenly moistening. With trembling hands, he gripped the handle and slowly pushed open the bamboo door, exclaiming, "Fairy Sister, I've come—"

Crash! As soon as he opened the door, an object came flying straight for Lin Wanrong's face.

"Brother Lin, get back!" In a split second, Gao Qiu shouted and moved like lightning, positioning himself in front of Lin Wanrong. He slid the wheelchair back and swatted the incoming object away, yelling, "Who dares to attack an official of the imperial court? Do you wish to die?" R

The flying object hit the ground with a 'plop,' breaking into several pieces. It was nothing but a water ladle made from a hollowed-out gourd, weightless and harmless.

"What a malevolent hidden weapon!" Gao Qiu exclaimed in alarm, hurriedly extending his arms to shield Lin Wanrong behind him. "We shouldn't stay here long! Brother Lin, you should withdraw first. I'll cover you."

"Giggle—" A crisp voice emanated from the thatched hut. "Tell me, Lord Lin, where did you find such a bodyguard? His skin is as thick as yours. Oh, what happened to your leg? Was it my sister who did it? Serves you right!" The young woman burst into joyous laughter, clearly in high spirits.

Gao Qiu's face tightened, remaining stoic as he stood protectively in front of Lin Wanrong. Lin Wanrong patted him on the shoulder and smiled, "Relax, Brother Gao, she's no stranger; she's my sister-in-law."

From the hut emerged a girl of about thirteen or fourteen, dressed in a light yellow robe. Her face was pretty, and she had bright eyes and white teeth. Although young, she was already remarkably beautiful.

"So she's your sister-in-law," Gao Qiu nodded seriously, flexing his sturdy wrist, "Good thing I pulled my punch in time. Otherwise, your sister-in-law would have met her untimely end, thanks to my unparalleled martial arts. Quite fortunate!"

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter and said, "Well said, Brother Gao! I thank you on behalf of my sister-in-law."

"Tsk," the young girl scoffed coldly at Lin Wanrong, "Who's your sister-in-law? Don't call me so affectionately. My sister may care for you, but that has nothing to do with me. As for this burly fellow you're with, I could flip ten of him with just my little finger. He'd better keep his mouth shut, lest he incur my wrath."

Gao Qiu roared with laughter. "Brother Lin, truly, your sister-in-law is well-trained by you. She even boasts better than you!"

At this, Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes. 'When have I ever boasted? I've always been honest.' 'This sister-in-law is Fairy Ning's disciple; she could indeed beat ten of you, Gao Qiu, without breaking a sweat.'

The young girl sneered as she listened to them converse, a flash of silver flickering in her hand before she swiftly revealed a silver needle.

'Needles are coming!' Lin Wanrong felt a chill run down his spine. He hurriedly patted Gao Qiu on the shoulder, "Brother Gao, be cautious with your words. My sister-in-law is genuinely formidable."

"Ah, what's there to fear," Gao Qiu winked slyly, leering as he spoke, "It's often said that a man's sister-in-law is like his half-buttock; he can touch her however he wants. Your sister-in-law is youthful and beautiful—although a bit young, still—she's plenty interesting. Besides, Brother Lin, you're so dashing and handsome, it's only natural for a brother-in-law to flirt with his sister-in-law. After all, why let the water flow into someone else's field? Look, she's smiling at you, Brother Lin, don't forget to invite me to the celebratory feast—"

'This guy's loose lips will be the death of me,' Lin Wanrong thought, sweating profusely. He quickly looked over to see the young girl's expression growing increasingly icy, the silver needle in her hand glittering ominously. With a flick of her wrist, a flash of silver light shot directly towards him, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

"Ah!" Gao Qiu let out a pained exclamation, his face instantly turning pale. "Brother Lin, this is bad —"

"What's bad? Did you get pricked?" Lin Wanrong patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. "I warned you not to speak recklessly. My little sister-in-law is highly skilled in martial arts. Offend her and you'll suffer the consequences."

Frantically, Gao Qiu waved his hands, "No, no. Brother Lin, it's you—"

"Me? What's wrong with me? You should worry about yourself; that needle is very potent." Seeing Gao Qiu's abrupt change in complexion and the cold sweat rolling down his face, Lin Wanrong hurriedly reassured him. "However, Brother Gao, you don't need to be overly concerned. The silver

needle is actually not poisonous. At most, you'll feel a bit cold, then numb, then tingly, and finally a bit weak—like having a sauna. You'll be fine since you're skilled in martial arts—"

"No, Brother Lin," Gao Qiu cut in, finally seizing an opportunity to speak. His voice quivered, "I wasn't pricked. It's you—"

"You're not going to say that I was the one who got pricked, are you?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Today is April Fools' Day, and Brother Gao, you love to joke with me. You were the one who spoke ill of her, not me. Why would she target me?"

"Brother Lin, it's true, it's true." Gao Qiu was nearly in tears. "Quick, look at your butt—"

Butt? Can't the man use a more refined term like 'buttocks'? Lin Wanrong followed Gao Qiu's gaze and subconsciously touched his left buttock. He felt what seemed to be a thin, quivering ice thread. The chilling sensation had numbed half his backside.

"Little sister, what are you doing?" Lin Wanrong shivered, his face turning ashen. "I didn't provoke you. Why target me and ignore the real culprit? It's taboo to strike a man's buttocks and a woman's waist!"

"Hee-hee, why aren't you calling me your sister-in-law now? It sounds quite pleasant to the ears," the young girl chuckled. "This big fellow is your henchman, and whatever he says is surely orchestrated by you, right? 'Shoot the horse before the man; catch the leader first.' Haven't you heard of that?"

'Damn it, Gao Qiu, this lecherous old man is going to get me killed.' Lin Wanrong sighed, "Brother Gao, weren't you supposed to be protecting me? How did I end up getting pricked?"

"I don't know," Gao Qiu made a bitter face. "You said she's your sister-in-law. If a sister-in-law wants to prick her brother-in-law, what can an outsider like me do?"

'God, why does everything that comes out of Gao Qiu's mouth get twisted?' Lin Wanrong realized he couldn't rely on Gao Qiu anymore. Seeing the young girl on the opposite side grinning but hiding malice behind her smile, he could only brace himself. "Well, little sister, Miss Xiangjun, could you please remove this needle? If word gets out that a young girl pricked a man's buttocks, it won't sound too good."

Li Xiangjun snorted, "What doesn't sound good? If anyone dares to gossip, I'll cut off their tongue. As for the needle, it stays until I'm in a better mood."

Lin Wanrong knew Li Xiangjun's personality all too well. This cheeky girl had as many tricks up her sleeve as he did. If she said the needle wouldn't be removed, then there was truly nothing to be done about it.

"Brother Lin, how about I find a magnet to see if we can extract this needle?" Gao Qiu was ever so considerate, promptly suggesting a solution.

'How did I end up making friends with someone as detrimental as old Gao?' Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth in annoyance. If his legs were in working condition, he would've kicked the man out by now.

"Let's not do that," Lin Wanrong strived to keep his composure, his face dark as charcoal. "Force is mutual. What if the magnet also gets sucked in by the powerful pull of the needle? My behind is not a basket, you know!"

Li Xiangjun was standing quite close to the pair, and she couldn't help but laugh, her cheeks flushed as if stained by rouge. Feeling a bit improper, she hurriedly covered her cheeks with her sleeve and turned away, her ears glowing red from laughter.

"Ah, why didn't I think of that?" Gao Qiu had a moment of enlightenment, offering Lin Wanrong a thumbs-up in sincere admiration.

Li Xiangjun was blocking the entrance, so naturally, they couldn't enter the house. Seeing that the one living here was not Fairy Ning, Lin Wanrong felt disheartened. No wonder he hadn't seen this impish girl these past few days; she had gone up the mountain.

Across from them, Thousand-Forsake Peak was shrouded in mist, obscuring the view. The love chain stood still in the morning wind, quivering ever so slightly, as if it were a ladder that stretched to the heavens.

The image of Fairy Ning leaping through the air to catch the love chain flashed before his eyes, and Lin Wanrong, filled with excitement, urgently said, "Brother Gao, quickly, help me over there to have a look."

Gao Qiu was about to assist him when Li Xiangjun swiftly stepped in front of them, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "So, you're leaving just like that, without removing the needle? You should know I've coated it with 'Seven-Step Powder.' Do you know what that is? Tell him, Big Guy!"

Gao Qiu was startled and blurted out, "Seven-Step Powder is a deadly poison, made from a blend of Crane's Red Crown and Nine-Tailed Scorpion venom. Legend has it that anyone who is poisoned will not make it past seven steps. There's no known antidote."

Seeing Gao Qiu rattling off this information as if reciting from a textbook, Lin Wanrong laughed, "Where did you hear about the potency of this Seven-Step Powder, Brother Gao? It sounds quite terrifying."

"It's no joke," Gao Qiu clutched Lin Wanrong's sleeve nervously. "The storytellers at the tea houses all say so, and I've read about it in various books during my training."

Books that Gao Qiu would read? Probably something like "The Golden Lotus" or "The Carnal Prayer Mat." Lin Wanrong, exceptionally clever, didn't believe a word of it. "So what if it's Seven-Step Powder? I'm in a wheelchair! Let's go, Brother Gao!"

Gao Qiu had no choice but to push Lin Wanrong forward, his heart jumping to his throat at the thought of the legendary potency of Seven-Step Powder.

"If you don't listen to me, don't blame me for the consequences," Li Xiangjun huffed, counting aloud, "One, two, three—"

‘There are plenty of fake medicine peddlers out there. I'd be strange to fear you,’ Lin Wanrong thought, laughing carelessly.

"—Seven!" Just as the wheelchair had moved a few steps, Li Xiangjun shouted, and Lin Wanrong collapsed, falling flat on his face.