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Not to mention, even if she was granted freedom, what kind of a family could a person like her, who was without her own roots and could be compared to common duckweed, marry into? She would only be living amongst the civilians at the lowest level of society, ridden with poverty and struggling to feed herself every day.

How could she be able to live like she was now, as a manager of a pharmaceutical workshop? Even if she was a servant of the Yu Household, she still had her own private courtyard in the workshop, and in that courtyard, she even had a few maidservants who would sweep the floor and cook. It could be said that even though her status was that of a servant, her life was no worse than the daughter of a humble family.

She would wait until she was older, then look for a humble, reliable, and most importantly, loyal, steward to marry, so that she could continue to help her mistress manage the pharmaceutical workshop. Her mistress was kind and valued her relationships, so she definitely wouldn't mistreat her when she was older. She recalled the times before she was sold into the Fang Residence. At that time, her entire family survived only on rice bran and wild vegetables, and they never knew a life where they could eat until they were full. She was already very satisfied and grateful for her current conditions.

Wutong served at the side, looking at the frank and eloquent Yingtao and Yangliu who already had their own plans, and compared herself to them. Then, she felt more at ease. 'Young Miss is right, one should do only what one is capable of. With my personality, I might not be able to manage a workshop filled with up to a hundred people.'

Yingtao was bold yet meticulous, and took decisive actions, so she was able to manage the pharmaceutical workshop well and even showed signs that she was able to further expand the business. Yangliu was talented in cooking and making pastries and she had the bravery to get into the profession. If she were to open a patisserie, she would definitely astound everyone. Not to mention Hechun, even if she appeared later than all of them, her talent in crafting handmade soap and cosmetics was undeniable.

There was a reason they were given great responsibilities by their mistress. Before this, she only knew to be envious of others, and got upset because she was not put at the same level of importance. She had never thought to look for the reason behind this on herself. Now that she thought about it, what could she do if the young miss gave her the opportunity? It was better for her to serve loyally by the young miss's side and manage the matters of the courtyard. This was what she was good at!

The young miss had mentioned that she lacked a trustworthy steward who could keep an eye on the matters of the residence. In this case, she would work towards this goal. Although she wasn't able to help the young miss in her businesses, she could still work hard to become the young miss's trusted aide in the residence, so that the young miss could be rid of one more worry when she was working hard outside.

Wutong became more open-minded after she came to this realization, and the calculative air that she exuded also dissipated. It was as though she had been reborn.

One day, when Zhu Junyang snuck out of the Xishan Barracks and pestered Xiaocao to make ice cream for him, he noted the change in Wutong and secretly told his little lass that this maidservant could be tasked with greater responsibilities. As such, Xiaocao slowly started to entrust her with more and more matters regarding the Yu Residence.

Wutong did not disappoint. After oppressing a few pricks and subduing some managerial senior servants, she became increasingly more like a managerial servant who was able to take care of all the matters of the residence.

During the height of summer, the capital city felt as though it was being grilled with a torch blower. This summer, the temperature in the capital city hit a new high, and it was said that it was the hottest season in decades. Many of those that did short-term jobs and heavy labor to survive fainted due to the heat, and the hospitals became flooded with patients that got heat stroke until they were almost at maximum capacity.

Yu Xiaocao, who had given herself summer vacation, along with Doctor Sun of the Tongren Medicine Hall had finally perfected the formula to make Jintan cooling lozenges. They also worked overtime at the pharmaceutical workshop, immersing themselves into its production. The medicinal herbs required to make cooling lozenges were common and cheap, so the price of a pill wasn't expensive, yet it was effective in relieving heat. Once the pill was introduced to the market, it received many praises and caused a huge sensation in the city.

Other than that, Xiaocao also gathered the maidservants that were skilled in making pastries that Yangliu had bought for her, and quickly trained them in the ways of making iced desserts (Author's Note: mainly ice cream and smoothies of different flavors), and a variety of ways to brew herbal tea. She had opened a few shops that sold iced desserts at all four sides—north, east, south and west—of the capital city.

The key to the shops were the well-sealed ice houses. They were as big as two houses and were equivalent to a large-scale cold storage. Inside, ice ponds made from nitre were placed in neat rows, while a freezer room stored the ready-made ice. The ice used to make smoothies, ice porridge and other types of cold beverages were all taken from the ice houses. The ice cream was also frozen in here.

The majority of the people who lived in the north and south of the city were normal citizens, so the frozen dessert shops there served more simple and chilled beverages like simple smoothies which sold the quickest. Meanwhile, the east and west sides of the city were the hubs of wealthy and influential families, so their main focus products were the ice cream of multifarious flavors, fancy ice porridges and luxurious smoothies.

On a hot summer's day, ordering a bowl of ice porridge or strawberry or peach flavored ice cream in a cool iced dessert shop was definitely refreshing and would help cool the body down. It was a place for businessmen and officials that had to be out on errands to rest and escape from the scorching heat of the summer.

It was especially a favorite among the children who had tried The Yu's Frozen Desserts before. During the evening, when the sun was not too hot, they would always pester their parents to bring them to the iced desserts shop to have some ice. The children loved the smoothies that were vibrant in color and had a great texture, as well as the ice cream that had varying flavors that they could mix and match to eat. Even adults could not resist the temptation of these iced desserts, much less children.

The Yu's Frozen Desserts Store on the western side of the capital was the largest branch in the city. The shop was a part of Princess Consort Jing's dowry shops. When Xiaocao was in a hurry for her search for a shophouse, Zhu Junyang had told his lady mother about her pressing issue. Princess Consort Jing then shut down the original satin shop that was doing quite well and offered her the shophouse. But, of course, Xiaocao wouldn't be taking her shop for free. Instead, she took it as Princess Consort Jing using her shop space to buy shares, and split with her half of the profits.

The structure of this shop was similar to Zhenxiu Restaurant and it had three stories in total. The cold storage was placed in the inner courtyard, while the first floor was the front of the shop and the main hall. It was renovated to look simple yet elegant, and the tables were all simple, rectangular tables made for pairs and groups of four, six and eight people. Intricate wooden carvings were hung on the snow-white walls and elegance exuded from the simplicity of the design.

The second and third floors consisted only of private rooms, all decorated either lavishly, elegantly, simply or fancily. Ice basins were placed in every private room and it felt as though an air-conditioner was placed in the room. It was a different kind of pleasure that was felt, to be in a cool room during a hot summer's day.

At this moment, in the 'Tall Mountain Flowing River' private room on the third floor, a special customer had ordered three scoops of ice cream—herbal, strawberry and milk flavored respectively. Using a small, wooden spoon, he dug into the ice cream and sighed in praise, “Xiaocao, that little lass, she really doesn't let go of any opportunity to make a profit. She actually made ice cream! Not to mention, the taste is actually quite good!”

“Your Imperial Majesty, your digestion has not been good lately, so you should eat less of these cold foods.” Although Su Ran was advising others to eat less, he did not follow his own advice at all. A big bowl of ice porridge was placed in front of him. It had peach flavored shaved ice at the bottom while a large amount of honey beans were layered on top, making the dish extremely flavorful and extravagant.

That was right, this mysterious customer was the emperor who had come out in plain clothes. Zhu Junfan dug into the strawberry flavored ice cream and savored the smooth texture of the cold ice cream melting in his mouth. Then, he shot a side-glance at Su Ran, “Chief Steward Su, since when have you become an old mother? So naggy, it really makes people feel fed up! We don't have digestive problems; it's just the summer heat! The weather is too hot, having some ice would help cool down the body and work up an appetite. It's such a pleasure...”

Seeing the emperor enjoying himself, Su Ran shouted out of the room, “Waiter, bring me another set of ice cream. Three scoops of it!”

Downstairs, Yangliu stopped a sweaty Yu Xiaocao the moment she stepped into the shop. Yangliu personally managed this iced desserts shop at the western side of the city that was the largest among all the branches. She also personally made the desserts while a few other servants watched and learned from the side while assisting her.

Yangliu, who was panic-stricken, seemed to have found her pillar of strength once she saw her mistress, and said, “Young Miss, there are two customers on the third floor. I think it's the one from the imperial palace.”

Yu Xiaocao had her describe the appearance of the two customers. Yangliu thought about it, then said, "The two of them looked to be in their late twenties, and they look extremely handsome! One of them looked very dignified, while the other was ethereal, a little like a wise and virtuous person..."

Yu Xiaocao confirmed the identity of these two customers after hearing Yangliu's description, and she couldn't help but scrunch up her brows, thinking, 'It's such a hot day, why is the emperor parading around outside instead of hiding in his palace? Even more so, he's eating ice! Who would be responsible if he got a stomach ache? This cannot do, I must personally make a special ice cream with added secret ingredients for him.'

She was currently making a sundae. It had snow-white sweet cream flavored ice cream drizzled with strawberry, nectarine and blueberry syrup. The most important part was, the ice cream was made using mystic-stone water. Not only did it improve the texture of the ice cream, but it was also now beneficial to the body instead of being harmful!

Just as she finished crafting it, a waiter from upstairs hopped over, "Head Manager, the esteemed customers on the third floor ordered another set of three scoops of ice cream."

Yu Xiaocao replied in place of Yangliu, "Alright, we got it! You can head up first; we'll send it up immediately!"

The waiter was a clever one. Although he had never met the owner before, he could somewhat take a guess from the way Head Manager Yangliu treated Xiaocao, and smiled, "Yes, it's been hard on you!"

"Not bad! Yangliu, you have quite an eye for people. You should train these girls, soon, they'll become our dessert shop's core patissieres. And this waiter, he's clever and seems genuine." The frozen dessert shops were established in a flurry, and during those days, Yangliu was at the shop almost every hour of the day. She had lost a few pounds during that period of time.

Yangliu smiled sweetly when she heard her mistress's praise, "This is because Young Miss has taught me well. You've said before, our customers are the Jade Emperor, so we need to treat them with the same respect we give to the gods. This servant only passed on this concept to all our staff in the shop."

"Well done! No matter what, our customers are our 'parents' that feed and clothe us, so we must not slight them in any way. We must let them feel as though they are returning to the comforts of their own

homes. Alright, I'll serve these sundaes to our esteemed customers!" Yu Xiaocao patted Yangliu's shoulder and exited the production room.

Behind her, Wutong carried the tray and followed her up the stairs to the third floor. Seeing the waiter gesture to the private room labelled 'Tall Mountain Flowing River', Yu Xiaocao knocked on the door and said, "Esteemed customers, I've come to serve you the iced desserts you've ordered!"

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Zhu Junfan heard this familiar voice and raised his brow at Su Ran, chuckling, "Is her zodiac sign the dog? How is her nose so good that she catches a whiff of our scent so quickly?"

Su Ran smiled faintly and said, "It's not the little lass who is well-informed, but her maidservant. When we were coming up earlier, the manager had been eyeing you, Master, and I suspiciously for such a long time, so you can't say you didn't notice."

He stood up to open the private room's door and grinned warmly at the little lass outside. Yu Xiaocao's eyes sparkled when she saw this beautiful face, 'Wow, Sir Su is even more ethereal than the male lead in the drama 'The Journey of Flower' that she had watched in her previous life. He's such an eye candy. The emperor keeps such a handsome man by his side, could he actually be...'

"Wretched lass, what kind of dirty thoughts are you having, smiling so secretively?" Zhu Junfan noticed the sundaes of a variety of colors in the stylish, transparent glasses and raised his brows, looking quite satisfied.

Facing the emperor who was dressed in plain clothes, Yu Xiaocao did not feel as much reverence as before, and smiled, "Your Imperial Majesty, I'm but a child, so how could I have dirty thoughts? If there is Buddha in your heart, you'll see everything as Buddha; if there is dog poop in your heart, everything you see will be dog poop..."

Su Ran took the tray from the little lass's hand and shot her a look that said 'that's some guts', reminding her of the identity of the person she was referring to. She drily laughed, racking her brain for ways to tactfully resolve her statement.

Zhu Junfan dug into a strawberry flavored sundae, asking dangerously, "Beloved Official Yu, what do you think is in our heart right now?"

Yu Xiaocao's eyes rolled around in thought, then suddenly a sly expression flashed across her face as she grinned, "Your Imperial Majesty, your eyes and heart must be full of iced desserts right now. How is the taste of the sundae? I've personally made it just for you—it's an honor no one else has!"

"Good that you're clever! We're gracious, so we won't stoop down to your level. However, you opened this iced desserts shop at just the right time, when we were coming up, the seats downstairs were nearly full, and there weren't many private rooms left upstairs. How is it? You've earned quite a lot, haven't you?" Zhu Junfan felt a shot of coolness reach the bottom of his heart when he ate the strawberry sundae, but instead of perceiving the cold, he felt a kind of indescribable comfort in his stomach.

Yu Xiaocao smiled along, "It's all thanks to your gracious self. The business is going well, so I'm able to earn some pocket change!"

"Hmph! This is pocket change? A bowl of ice porridge, which is just a small piece of crushed ice and a little bit of honeyed beans, already costs five hundred copper coins! And a scoop of ice cream that's not even as big as a ping pong ball costs one tael! If we came in, we wouldn't be able to leave without spending a few taels. How is this pocket change?" Zhu Junfan paused, then nodded as he continued, "Right, compared to your 'Blossoming Beauty', which easily earns tens of thousands of taels, this is indeed pocket change!"

Yu Xiaocao giggled, adding more strawberry syrup to the emperor's glass and joked, "Isn't this because a big 'Buddha' backs our Blossoming Beauty? Don't people only trust my spa because of your gracious self and her imperial majesty?"

He thought about his empress and her ten percent share of the Blossoming Beauty's profit after it opened for business for a few months. The amount was near to exceeding his personal treasury! What more could be said about this little lass's earnings? He ate another mouthful of the sweet yet tart strawberry syrup and said with a slight sourness in his tone, "Little lass, you have so many ideas for earning money that your assets are nearly exceeding ours, as we are only a poor man."

"Your Imperial Majesty, please don't say this, this little one is really fearful! This little one is not that Shen Wansan whose fortune could match that of a country's wealth; please don't learn from that Zhu Chongba and behead this little one to confiscate this little one's assets!" The story of Zhu Yuanzhang and Shen Wansan did not exist in the current Great Ming Dynasty. As such, this classic could only be understood by her and this fellow transmigrator who came from the same world.

“Legend says...Shen Wansan died because he owned a treasure bowl and was punished because of his wealth. Moreover, his fortune could be compared to that of a country's treasury, and he was able to buy half of the empire, so Zhu Yuanzhang was afraid of him. You ah...As long as you're honest and don't become full of yourself, we won't mind no matter how much money you earn!” When he mentioned the treasure bowl, he had an odd smile on his face and Yu Xiaocao felt his gaze flicker to the multicolored stone on her wrist.

Su Ran, who was enjoying his sundae at the side, listened in bewilderment to their conversation. Although he had never heard of the story of Shen Wansan and Zhu Chongba, he could still sense something off about their conversation. It was as though the emperor and the little lass of the Yu Family shared the same secret. However, he was a dutiful chief steward, he would do his best for the matters under his jurisdiction, but for the matters that he should not know, he would pretend to be mute and deaf. This had been strictly taught to him since the day he entered the imperial palace.

“The treasure bowl is but a rumor! Shen Wansan was a genius in his trade, that's why he could become the richest man in the empire. As for me, I don't have any great ambitions, I just want to not worry about basic necessities and live life like a rice weevil which only ever eats and waits for its death. That's enough for me.” Yu Xiaocao reminded herself in her heart, 'All I need is enough money to spend. I mustn't become like Shen Wansan. He worked hard all his life but in the end, all of his efforts went to someone else instead.'

“No, that's not allowed!” Zhu Junfan now felt a bit upset, “You're our good minister, the revitalization of our agriculture and the prosperity of the empire all depend on you, beloved official!”

Yu Xiaocao waved her hands with an expression of fear, saying, “Your Imperial Majesty, the matters that you've entrusted to this little one, I will definitely give my all to complete them. However, please don't say words such as the prosperity of the empire, that would be going over the top. This little one's shoulders are too frail, I cannot handle this burden.”

After finishing the strawberry sundae, Zhu Junfan picked up the blueberry flavored one, and suddenly changed the topic, “This blueberry was imported from the western hemisphere, right? That brat, Junyang, has secretly kept quite a lot of good stuff!”

“We've only tried planting a few of these blueberry plants, so we don't produce a lot of them. Except for the small portion we leave for our own consumption, the rest have been made into blueberry jam, and we only have a few jars of it. That's why blueberry-flavored iced desserts are a few times more expensive than the rest. Please, try it. If you like it, you could bring a jar back with you?” Yu Xiaocao's heart was bleeding despite the fact that she sounded generous on the surface.

In her previous life, she liked blueberries the most, but she didn't eat them because they were quite expensive. She had mentioned it to Zhu Junyang once, but she never expected that he would let the voyage fleet actually go and search for blueberry seeds and even secretly tried to plant it. Only when the blueberry plants bore fruit was she presented with a great surprise.

As it was the first year the plants bore fruit, there were not a lot of blueberries. Zhu Junyang could not bear to eat a single one, and kept all of them for her, either to eat as a fruit, or to make them into jam. As they were scarce, she extremely treasured them.

Listing it in the iced desserts shop and marking it up to a high price was just a gimmick—she didn't expect to make money from it. She never would have thought that when the Emperor came, she would lose a jar of jam... Even though she was the one who initiated it, his words sounded like he was complaining that Zhu Junyang used his power for personal gain. If she didn't do something, she didn't know what kind of outrageous claims this person would say.

Zhu Junfan was very satisfied with her initiative. He savored the blueberry-flavored sundae and said slowly, "Honestly, the taste of blueberry jam is just so-so to me. But it's sour and sweet, so our beloved concubines and children should like it. We'll thank you in their stead! By the way, since you've made blueberry flavor, what about chocolate flavor? We haven't had chocolate in almost thirty years, we miss it quite a lot!"

When Su Ran heard this, he choked on the ice cream in his mouth and coughed a few times. Then, he waved his hand at the emperor and Miss Yu who had looked over, indicating, 'Please continue your conversation and ignore the existence of this servant.'

Yu Xiaocao shot Zhu Junfan a look that clearly said, 'Is it alright if Sir Su overhears our conversation?'

Zhu Junfan nodded slightly as if to reply, 'It's alright, Su Ran is very loyal, and he's also tight-lipped. He knows what to say and what not to say.'

Yu Xiaocao looked again at Su Ran who held a glass of sundae and pretended to look at the view outside and thought, 'Pretend, keep pretending! It's the hottest time of the day outside, not a single soul could be seen on the streets, what are you looking at?'

"This frozen desserts shop was opened rather hastily and was not planned in advance. I don't know if chocolate has been discovered yet, but I'm certain that it hasn't been brought to our Great Ming Dynasty. If we sent people to search for it now, it'd probably still take quite a while. So...this time next year, if Your Imperial Majesty returns to this shop, you might be able to eat chocolate-flavored ice cream!" Yu Xiaocao dazedly remembered that cocoa trees had already been planted in North America at this time, and wondered if the voyage fleet that set sail this year would be able to return with a surprise for her.

Alas! The ancient times lagged behind. If it were in her previous life, you could buy chocolate just by going into any random supermarket, so why would she need to go through all this trouble? Xiaocao and the emperor looked at each other, saw the same thought in each other's eyes, and let out a long sigh in unison.

The more Su Ran heard from the side, the more frightened he became. Sometimes, Yu Xiaocao was really similar to the emperor when he was young. At that time, the emperor seemed to have the whole world under his control. He knew which areas had which countries and what local specialties were available in each country like the back of his hand. Originally, Su Ran thought that these were just his master's speculations. He didn't expect that his master's speculations would be true until he accompanied his master and his ocean-voyaging fleet after it was established to, for the first time, sail across the western sea. He also didn't expect that his master, who had never been in contact with westerners before, could actually speak their language and communicate with those foreigners with yellow hair, green eyes and jutting noses without any difficulty.

He had thought that his master was unique in this world, a gifted person who had been bestowed with a unique ability by the heavens, the ability to understand things without a teacher, and know all the matters of the world without ever needing to leave his house. He never would've thought that the little miss of the Yu Family would be like his master and know everything about the land overseas. Chocolate, North America...it felt like he was listening to something too complex for him to understand, yet the two of them conversed without any difficulty.

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How did he explain this? He had a daring speculation: his master and Miss Yu came from the same mysterious place, and the people there knew the matters of the world like the back of their hands. They were like the gods in the sky, overlooking the Great Ming Dynasty from their point of view.

At this moment, Su Ran was glad that he decided to give up his wrong way of life and turn to follow his current master. His master had never disdained him for being disabled, and he never suspected him because of his previous identity. Instead, his master entrusted to him the grave responsibilities of managing the hidden guards and the firearms camp.

He could clearly sense the respect to him and appreciation of his features from Miss Yu, who possibly originated from the same place as his master. The people from his master's and Miss Yu's homeland were probably equally respected and extremely cultured. He really wanted to have a look at just what kind of a place it was, to be able to produce such talented people like his master and Miss Yu.

However, he was puzzled by the way his master treated Miss Yu. If the two of them were exceptionally talented and came from the same mysterious space, shouldn't his master be afraid of Miss Yu? As the saying went, 'one mountain cannot contain two tigers'. Was it because Miss Yu was not a threat to his master, so that was why he entrusted her with important responsibilities?

It had to be said, Chief Steward Su Ran had really unwittingly hit upon the truth. If Yu Xiaocao was a capable young man who had the means, Zhu Junfan might have considered getting rid of this threat as soon as possible. However, he saw through Yu Xiaocao completely. She was just a 'girl without the three conditions'; she didn't have the scheming, means nor the family background. She only excelled in agriculture and earned money for fun and didn't have any great ambitions. Why should he be wary of her? He wasn't so narrow-minded!

Moreover, as a transmigrator, he was also very lonely and needed someone who 'spoke the same language' as he did. When he was bored, he could have a chat with her, or even scare her for entertainment to relieve stress and relax (Yu Xiaocao: Wah, so angry!!).

At this moment, Zhu Junfan had started a new debate about chocolate with Yu Xiaocao. One said, chocolate had yet to be discovered. As a chocolate enthusiast, Zhu Junfan had spent time studying the history of chocolate before in his previous life. Chocolate first appeared in history at the start of the 16th century, but it was currently only the 14th century, so there was still a difference of nearly two centuries!

The other said, cocoa beans were among the treasures that Columbus had brought back when he had discovered the New World. That meant that before the 15th century, North America had already begun planting cocoa trees. It was currently the middle of the 14th century, who could confirm that North America didn't have any cocoa trees now, considering that there was only less than a century's difference in time? Once there was a cocoa plantation, then the precursor of chocolate, liquified cocoa drink would definitely already have been discovered.

The both of them argued their own points until their faces were flushed red and their voices grew increasingly louder. Su Ran had never seen the emperor so relaxed and acting so childish before. As

expected, any sort of pretense was unnecessary in front of the person who understood you the most. That was why the emperor was able to banter with her and even sulk about it like a normal person.

Miss Yu also had quite the guts, to dare slam the table in front of the emperor and even shout until she got spit on the emperor's face. The two of them argued over an insignificant topic until they were flushed red—it really was enough!

“Sir Su, come and reason! Isn't your master being too arbitrary?!” Yu Xiaocao started to look for allies and dragged Su Ran, who had been watching their drama while leisurely enjoying his iced desserts at the side, into the fire.

Zhu Junfan also moved his gaze onto Su Ran, harrumphing, "Chief Steward Su, what about you? Isn't this lass completely basing her assumptions on speculations that aren't concrete?"

“Tch...”

Su Ran raised his brow. 'This lass is so audacious, she actually dares to 'tch' at the emperor. It's really disrespectful ah!'

“Don't think that you're invincible just because you've studied a few more years and got into a third-rate university! You majored in shipbuilding, not history. Don't always insist that you're right, that's just you being obdurate!” Vexed by all of this, Yu Xiaocao started throwing personal insults!

Zhu Junfan chuckled and said unabashedly, “That's right, at least I've gotten into university. Someone hasn't even graduated from junior high school and doesn't even know how to write the word 'history', yet still dares to boast shamelessly that their guess is right!”

“So what if you've attended university? You can neither toil with your limbs nor tell the five types of grain apart. You can't even discern between spring onion and garlic sprout, so how do you want to revitalize agriculture? In the end, don't you still need to depend on me, a person who hadn't even graduated from junior high school?” Yu Xiaocao placed her hands on her hips in an arrogant manner.

Zhu Junfan, who was born, grew up and studied in the city in his previous life, indeed did not know how to differentiate between spring onions, garlic sprouts and wheatgrass. He swallowed hard and slammed

the table heavily, saying, "Those who toil with their minds lead those who toil with their limbs! Even if you're really capable in agriculture, aren't you still working for me, a person who can't tell wheatgrass and garlic sprouts apart?"

"This is all caused by this horrible feudal society!" Yu Xiaocao was not willing to back down one iota.

Zhu Junfan was gleeful over the fact that he gained the upper hand, "Regardless of whether it's a feudal society or a socialist society, capable people have the advantage! For example, think of the gold-collar, silver-collar workers and those CEOs, aren't they all highly educated, have a high IQ and a high income? Don't the laborers still need to work under their lead?"

Yu Xiaocao was at a loss for words, yet she was not to be outdone, "Don't drag the topic so far! We'll just keep the topic on cocoa beans. You say there are none, but I say there are! The voyage fleet had already ventured towards the Americas for half a year, we'll know who's right when they return! Let's make a bet, if I lose, I'll supply you with a year's worth of chocolate for free. What about you, what if you lose?"

"Me, lose? Me, a person well-versed in history, will lose?" Zhu Junfan racked his brain for something that could be used for the wager.

Su Ran facepalmed at the side, 'Oh, my master! You got sucked into the little lass's trap! Just think, if Miss Yu lost, the voyage fleet wouldn't even be able to bring back that bean, and if she doesn't have that bean, how would she make chocolate? If she can't make chocolate, then how would she be able to give you a year's worth of supply?' He did not expect that Miss Yu, who looked to be quite simple and naive, knew how to trick others to get something for nothing.

Zhu Junfan finally thought of a wager that he thought was quite good, "How about this? If I lose, I'll raise your feudal princess rank from fifth-ranked to third-ranked, and then I'll even decree your marriage! What do you think?"

'Fifth-ranked feudal princess raised to third-ranked? This is good! As for the decreed marriage, it's completely unnecessary! I'm well-liked and I even have a loyal dog guarding by my side, I don't need you to decree my marriage!'

“What are you pouting for? Do you think that a certain someone is already in your grasp and won't be able to escape? Let me tell you, you shouldn't be so confident, especially not towards men, they're the most fickle of animals!” Zhu Junfan had the expression of an expert in romance.

Su Ran ate sundae after sundae, glancing at his master when he heard this, thinking, 'Your Imperial Majesty, you've just sold yourself out and became the public enemy of all men!'

“What's the point even if I schemed to keep a fickle man who can't resist temptation? In this male-dominated society, men who've had a change of heart can bring in countless concubines to his home, or he could even directly divorce his wife and remarry. Those who are more ruthless could even kill off their wife, so they wouldn't even need to return the dowry. They could spend their ex-wife's money to marry another...”

Zhu Junfan pouted his lips, “Little lass, you've read too many inner courtyard fight novels, haven't you? How could the original wife be divorced so easily? Even going so far as to killing off the original wife, do you think our Great Ming Dynasty's law is a joke?”

“Law? The law back there is quite well-rounded, right? But there are still loopholes that people exploit. To divorce the wife, she needs to fulfill at least one of the seven grounds for divorce. Wouldn't he have an excuse to divorce his wife if he simply threw a man onto her bed? As for harming people...I have a thousand ways to kill you silently without a leaving behind a trace of evidence, would you believe me?” Yu Xiaocao had a dark expression on her face.

At the side, Su Ran had to interject, “Miss Yu, please be cautious of your words!”

“I'm just giving an example; it's not directed at Your Imperial Majesty! Not to mention, we're only discussing the problem of the original wife's death, you're not a female and there's no conflict of interest between us. As such, you don't need to be afraid!” Yu Xiaocao flashed a large grin at Zhu Junfan.

“Then...if ever we have a conflict of interest with you, then you'll be able to kill us off silently?” Zhu Junfan deliberately misinterpreted her words and took advantage of the loophole.

Yu Xiaocao shook her head like a rattle, “Your Imperial Majesty, you live deep within the imperial palace. I, as a normal citizen, would rarely get a chance to come into contact with you. My hands can't reach so far even if I wanted to harm you! Not to mention, you have such an expert like Su Ran who is always 'by

your side' protecting you. So much so that not even an insect could fly within a ten-step radius of you, moreover such a big target as me?"

As she said this, a fly flew out from a corner of the room. Su Ran's hand skimmed the water on the outside of the glasses on the table and, with a flick of his hand, the droplet hit the fly and it dropped onto the table, dead.

"Chief Steward Su, who are you siding with? Can you not cooperate with her so tacitly?" Zhu Junfan wanted to laugh but he stifled it until his face was flushed red.

Yu Xiaocao's sentence ended just as he was done flicking the fly. Even Su Ran himself wanted to laugh. He coughed, lowering his head and continued to dig into his sundae, thinking, 'Please continue your argument and ignore me!'

Zhu Junfan suddenly said seriously, "Yu Xiaocao, let's go back to our previous topic. What do you think of Zhu Junyang?"

"What? You really want to act as a matchmaker?" Yu Xiaocao watched the emperor with slight amusement. She didn't think that he would have such a nosy side.

Zhu Junfan shook his head with an expression that said he was anticipating drama, "Don't blame me for not warning you beforehand, you have a love rival now! When Junyang's aunt entered the imperial palace, she expressly implied to the empress that she had taken a fancy to Royal Prince Yang, and even wanted the empress to decree a marriage for her youngest daughter!"

"He attracts so many women!" Yu Xiaocao grunted angrily. The sourness in her heart could not be ignored. She couldn't help but curse Wu Junling, 'Have you never seen a man? You pursue relentlessly, not even caring whether or not he likes you. Now you've even asked for the empress to decree your marriage? With Zhu Junyang's personality, he would dare to refuse the marriage even if it was the emperor's decree, not to mention the empress's!'

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However, when she thought a bit more, she realized that people would only try to snatch men who were outstanding. Ever since Zhu Junyang managed to restrain the heart devil within him, his relationships with other people as well as his charm improved rapidly, especially within these past two years. The emperor treated him with importance and gave him heavy responsibilities. Furthermore, the

emperor even gave him the task to train and drill the Xishan Barracks. In addition, he was also in charge of the innovation of firearms and almost overlapped with Chief Steward Su's tasks. In the future, it was obvious that a commanding position would be his.

He was barely twenty yet he had reached a third-ranked position at court relying on his own abilities. His prospects were endless in the future. Consequently, Zhu Junyang had become the most highly eligible bachelor out of all of the noble bachelors in the capital. Many people had come to inquire about whether or not Princess Consort Jing had chosen his future wife yet.

Recently, Princess Consort Jing, who loved peace and quiet, had been irritated beyond measure! It was reasonable to say that her son did need to marry a wife and start having descendants as he was already twenty. Furthermore, even if the position of his legitimate wife hadn't been decided yet, there were people avidly eyeing the positions of his side consorts and other concubines.

Within a short span of time, the guests going to Imperial Prince Jing's inner courtyard had increased suddenly. All of these matrons who came to visit were discreetly making inquiries as to whether she had a daughter-in-law in mind. When they found out from her that Royal Prince Yang already had a girl in mind, they changed the subject to ask about the position of his side consort instead. In addition, these married ladies always brought some pretty and delicate young maidens along with them to visit and praised their daughters to the skies. The young maidens were all very courteous as well and always followed whatever the princess consort said in a flattering manner. Listening to all of this hinting made Princess Consort Jing feel quite exhausted!

Princess Consort Jing especially couldn't stand her younger concubine-born sister. In the past, when they were both still unmarried and living at home, they didn't have a good relationship. Her illegitimate younger sister always flaunted the fact that she was favored by their father by virtue of being born to the favored concubine in the residence. Thus, she always showed off her strength in front of Princess Consort Jing. If Princess Consort Jing didn't have a good relationship with Imperial Prince Jing, with a love more solid than gold, it was highly possible that this concubine-born younger sister of hers might have succeeded in scheming this marriage away from her!

Now, this concubine-born sister of hers decided that her older sister had something of value, so she shamelessly came over. However, she, Jiang Meijuan, was someone who held grudges! She didn't allow her husband to help with her younger sister's husband's official prospects. Thus, her brother-in-law still only had a fifth-ranked official's position in court. Hmph hmph! It was already considered fortunate that she didn't make things more difficult for them!

However, this concubine-born younger sister of hers even wanted to scheme about her youngest son's marriage! This dream was really a bit quite far-fetched! Although the lass Ling'er's looks, temperament and morals(?) were all acceptable and she liked the girl, she absolutely wouldn't agree to a marriage between her and her son solely because of her meddling, loathsome mother!!

However, judging from how Yang'er treated his younger cousin, it didn't seem like he completely rejected the maiden. At least, they were able to converse a little. Eh...in actuality, it was mostly that lass Ling'er chatting away while Yang'er listened silently. From the surface, his stern demeanor didn't hold any hints of repudiation. Perhaps in her son's heart, this younger cousin of his was different than the other young ladies.

Despite that observation, Princess Consort Jing wasn't in any hurry at this point! Even if her son didn't hold someone in his heart already, from her understanding of her son's temperament, Yang'er may not necessarily like the lass Ling'er in that way. Ever since he received his new position at the Xishan Barracks, his schedule became more erratic and he often wasn't home. When he did come back, he always detoured over to see that lass Xiaocao before he came back to the residence. This obviously showed that her son had little interest in Ling'er.

That lass Ling'er was thick-skinned just like her mother. Yang'er had already dropped a few obvious hints but she acted as if she didn't understand anything and put on an act as if she was a naive and innocent maiden. Who was she trying to fool? In the past, her concubine-born sister also used the same tactics to try to get closer to Imperial Prince Jing!!

That was not okay! She needed to find some time to remind her son in order to avoid her concubine-born sister coming up with some underhanded scheme to 'ruin' the reputation of Wu Junling and force her son to marry her!

Princess Consort Jing was quite annoyed by Jiang Meiyi and her daughter by now. Thus, she seized the opportunity to leave the capital when her husband had to travel for work and her son spent most of his time at the barracks. She instructed the maidservants and senior servants to pack her bags and silently left the capital to travel to the mountain villa that was halfway up the West Mountain at Dongshan Village.

It was currently midsummer, so the mountain villa was lush and full of blooming greenery. With its back against the ocean, it was truly a beautiful sanctuary for her to stay at. She was also eager to explore that hidden mountain ravine again to see if she could find any more rare and valuable flora to add to her collection. That way, she could astound the matrons in the capital again!

Thus, the next time Jiang Meiyi and her daughter came over to visit Imperial Prince Jing's estate, they weren't even able to pass the gates. The servants at the residence all stated, "Her Highness has left the capital to avoid the heat and none of our masters are home. Thus, we are unable to receive any honored guests at this moment!"

Jiang Meiyi was so infuriated by this that she almost ripped her handkerchief to shreds at the moment, "I see how you are, Jiang Meijuan! You're not even giving me face ah?! If it wasn't for my precious daughter, would I even bother coming to see and flatter you? And you act as if you're something special eh?!"

"Mother, be careful what you say!!" Wu Junling lifted up the curtain in the carriage and stuck her head out to look around before she finally let out a sigh of relief. From her perspective, her mother sometimes caused more harm than benefit. They clearly had to rely on her aunt's favor yet her mother continued to act arrogantly in front of her older sister and refused to back down.

Did her mother ever think about just what she had to compete with her aunt? When they were still unmarried maidens, one was born from a concubine, while the other was the daughter of the legitimate wife. Anyone with brains would try to cultivate a relationship with the legitimate daughter. Furthermore, her mother had flaunted the fact that she was favored by their father in an attempt to push down her aunt and even tried to steal her aunt's husband. If she was Imperial Prince Jing, she would also choose the gentle and sweet legitimate daughter over the competitive and scheming concubine-born one, alright?

Then, there was her father's career. If her mother had lowered herself a bit and begged her aunt for help, he wouldn't have only gotten a meager position doing idle work at the Qingshui yamen. As for her own affairs, if it wasn't for her mother causing issues, perhaps her aunt would have seen her in a better light...Argh, it looked like she needed to work a lot harder in order to smooth things over between herself and her older cousin. She absolutely wouldn't be as brainless as her mother. In the end, her older cousin was fated to be hers alone!

Wu Junling gazed at the world outside the carriage and, through the curtains, she saw a slim and delicate little figure dressed in apricot colored qi-style attire riding on a date red horse. Suddenly, an honest-sounding voice piped up from within the crowd, "Official Yu, thank you so much for cultivating high-yield corn for us. My family has three mu of land and that land is responsible for feeding more than a dozen of us. During spring, we planted them all with corn and ended up with around four thousand catties of grain at harvest. After paying our taxes, we still have around three thousand catties of corn

left. This is enough food for my entire family to eat for a year! Thank you for allowing us to not go hungry!”

Last year, they had targeted the farmers surrounding the capital by advertising corn. This spring, many families had rushed out to buy and plant the new seeds and all of them ended up with yields over a thousand catties per mu. Every family that planted the new crop had surplus grain on hand now.

The streets of the capital were filled with commoners. When they heard this person's thoughts, they also began to exclaim, “That's right, that's right! With surplus grain on hand at home, we don't have to worry. It's all thanks to Official Yu!”

“Official Yu's good deeds can be compared to the merciful Buddha's ah!!”

“Official Yu, here are some eggs that my family's chickens have laid. If you don't disdain them, please take them as a sign of my entire family's gratitude to you!”

“Official Yu, here are some apricots from my family's garden. Please take some to try.”

“Here's some vegetables I planted...”

Someone interrupted the last speaker, “Official Yu plants vegetables and her vegetables look and taste much better than yours. All of the wealthy and official families in town eat the vegetables she plants. Why would she need you to send some to her?”

“I'm just trying to show my appreciation and gratitude to Official Yu ah!”

A voice as clear as spring cut through the clamour of the crowd and everyone quickly calmed down, “Fellow countrymen, I, Xiaocao, appreciate all of your kindness and warm thoughts! It is my duty to cultivate high-yielding crops, so I feel a bit ashamed to receive your gratitude! With everyone's support here, I will continue to do my best and cultivate more crops that are high-yielding!”

As soon as she finished speaking, the sounds of gratitude, admiration, and opinions hit the air again. A youthful and somewhat lofty voice cut through the chatter of the crowd, “Official Yu, I heard that last

year's wheat harvest was a bumper crop and the yield was more than three times higher than regular wheat. Would you happen to know if this high-yield winter wheat will be sold this autumn to us commoners?"

Yu Xiaocao glanced at this youth who was dressed entirely in plain farmer's attire that was dotted with patches all over it. She smiled and said, "The seeds for winter wheat will naturally be sold to the commoners in the capital. However, anyone who has bought seeds from the government must sell it back to the court's officials come spring and no one is allowed to sell it privately. The price will be at ten copper coins a catty. Anyone who is caught breaking the rules will no longer be allowed to buy any more high-yielding seeds in the future. In addition, their whole village will also be blacklisted as well!"

Essentially, they were using the tactic of 'guilty by association'. If anyone in the village wanted to privately sell the high-yielding wheat crop for their own profit, then that entire village would be blacklisted in the future. By doing this, every family in the village would be keeping an eye out on their neighbors. It'd be very hard for someone to sell things sneakily with everyone watching everyone else!

In fact, this restriction wasn't actually that restrictive. The new winter wheat could produce seven to eight hundred catties per mu. When sold at a price of ten copper coins a catty, a farmer could make six to seven taels per mu. An adult man may not necessarily be able to make that much money by doing hard labor for a whole year!

The winter wheat that was harvested this past spring would be able to supply ten thousand mu of farmland in addition to the new ten thousand mu farmstead that had been constructed by the court. Thus, all of the farmers in the area of the capital would benefit! When the common people heard this news, they transmitted it quickly and soon almost all of the suburbs knew about this.

"Ling'er, what are you looking at right now? You seem so concentrated." Jiang Meiyi glanced briefly outside and only saw the backside of a young maiden riding a red horse.

"Mother, have you heard of Yu Xiaocao?" Wu Junling had a somewhat dark expression on her face and she clenched the handkerchief in her hands tightly. Her usually bright large eyes had a shadowy veil dimming them.

Jiang Meiyi frowned slightly and thought for a bit before she replied, "Yu Xiaocao? This name seems quite unfamiliar ah? Why are you bringing her up? What's the point?"

Wu Junling watched as that slight figure disappeared in the street before she finally lowered the carriage curtain. She smiled slightly and said, "Mother, you haven't heard of Yu Xiaocao? Then, have you heard of the imperial court's only female official?"

"Uh...are you talking about that lass who relied on her ability to plant crops and caught the emperor's eye? The one who is a sixth-ranked small official at the Ministry of Revenue and is in charge of their fields? Argh! What was the emperor thinking when he elevated a rural country brat into an official?" Jiang Meiyi thought about her own husband, who had cautiously worked in the backwards countryside for more than a decade. He only received a fifth-level sinecure position in the capital now. Yet, a little farming girl, who hadn't reached the age of majority, was actually an official around one rank lower than her husband? For what?

Wu Junling glanced at her mother helplessly and spoke in a cajoling tone, "Mother, we're no longer in that small place, Huainan. We're currently under the emperor's foot. Can you think a little bit more before you speak? The emperor's commands are all-important and holy, so do you think you're allowed to criticize him? I beg you, Mother. If you can't help me or Father, then at least don't cause any trouble for us, okay?"

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Jiang Meiyi wasn't very happy when she heard her daughter's criticism. However, she wasn't stupid beyond measure and knew that sometimes she said things that were a bit too much. Thus, she didn't retort and only impatiently said, "I understand. In the future, Mother will take more care. How come you suddenly brought up the topic of that lass surnamed Yu?"

Wu Junling let her body sway gently with the rocking of the carriage as she tightened her grip on her handkerchief, "The rumors on streets state that this Official Yu is intimately close with...Older Cousin! I don't know who started these rumors but they state that Older Cousin likes Official Yu and that once she becomes of age, he will send down his engagement gifts to her!"

"Hahaha...this rumor is really too hilarious. It absolutely is completely false!!" Jiang Meiyi used her handkerchief to cover her mouth as if she had heard the most absurd and funny joke, "I've been sisters with your aunt for many years, so how can I not understand her personality? My legitimate older sister, ah, is very aware of her noble status and somewhat aloof. That girl surnamed Yu has a lowly background, so does it matter that the emperor regards her with importance? She's only a muddy peasant farmer's girl who's risen beyond what's proper. How could your aunt possibly allow someone with such a vulgar and petty background marry her son?"

After hearing her mother's thoughts, Wu Junling felt as if her heart had lightened a bit and she slightly smiled and mumbled as if she was speaking to herself, "That's right ah. Older Cousin is as high as an immortal. He would have to be blind if he didn't pick me..."

How could she know that a certain blind man's whole heart only had room for Yu Xiaocao? As a matter of fact, he had been training the soldiers in the deep mountainous forests for half a month. As soon as he got back to the base camp, he returned to the capital that very night on a fast horse.

He instructed Head Steward Liu and Bodyguard Dong to go back to the prince's residence as he secretly went to visit the Yu Family's residence. With Zhu Junyang's skills, he was easily able to avoid the expert bodyguards he had personally trained there to go into the estate.

However, Yu Xiaocao, who was currently going over the account books, very quickly discovered that he was there because Little White, who was guarding her at her feet, had smelled the scent of Zhu Junyang in the air. The white wolf raised its ears and stood up before it softly 'woofed' a couple of times. It was reminding its master that a certain someone had climbed over the walls again.

Yu Xiaocao had long gotten used to a certain someone coming over without an invitation. She didn't even raise her head as she said, "You're here? Then come on in! Why are you standing at the doorway pretending to be a pillar ah?"

Zhu Junyang had an intoxicating smile on his face and his voice was gentle and sweet as he said, "Looks like our hearts are connected. Otherwise, how else can you always tell when this prince comes over despite the fact that none of the bodyguards can sense me?"

Yu Xiaocao, on the other hand, didn't have a single romantic bone in her body as she replied in a matter-of-fact manner, "Our hearts are connected? I think it's more likely that your heart is connected with Little White instead. Every time you come over, Little White is the first to sense you!"

Little White, who had lain back down next to Xiaocao's feet, lifted its head in alarm to glance at Zhu Junyang. Then it immediately turned its head away in disgust.

Zhu Junyang sat next to Xiaocao and didn't believe that the wolf disliked him. He gently rubbed Little White's soft and furry head and said a compliment, "Little White, you're very good! When this prince

isn't around, your master's protection is up to you. Next time, the prince will bring some roasted venison for you!”

Little White obviously didn't like his 'caresses' and forcefully shook its head but was unable to throw that hand away. Its blue-green eyes were filled with annoyance. If it wasn't for the fact that it knew it couldn't beat this human, it would have already savaged the hand on its head already!

“Your Highness, Great General Zhu, how come you didn't go visit your sweet and innocent younger cousin and came to visit me instead?” Xiaocao had long known that Wu Junling had been running over to Imperial Prince Jing's residence to visit. In fact, the princess consort herself had invited Xiaocao over to speak of this. On the surface, she was stating that she shouldn't worry but in actuality, she was warning Xiaocao that her son was quite popular and that she needed to treat him better to avoid him being snatched away by someone else.

Zhu Junyang could smell the vinegary scent of jealousy in the air and hurriedly pulled the little lass into his arms as he vehemently declared, “I'm being falsely accused here ah! Ever since that episode in front of the capital gates, this prince has never gone to see her. Furthermore, I haven't even spoken to her since then...”

“Oh? You don't feel a tiny bit of regret in your heart in not seeing her?” Yu Xiaocao pushed away the prince's chest. This fellow was becoming more and more bold. He was now openly touching her without any shame. She wouldn't allow this!

“Not even the slightest bit! I'm doing my best to avoid her, so why would I want to see her?” Zhu Junyang felt a bit lost when the lass left his embrace, so he tenaciously pulled at the little lass's pale and tender hand and gently wrapped his palm around hers.

To someone who had lived in the modern area, holding hands in a relationship didn't really mean too much, so she didn't reject this advance. That being said, this fellow had behaved quite well recently. Other than staying at the barracks, he only went out to see her and very rarely went back to the imperial prince's estate to visit. She should give him a small reward for this.

“If you don't like her, then you need to make things clear early. I don't like it when something that is considered mine is always being eyed covetously by someone else!” In her previous life, Yu Xiaocao really disliked men who pursued girls in an ambiguous manner. Obviously, she wouldn't give Zhu Junyang the chance now to act in that way.

Zhu Junyang nodded his head in a solemn manner, "Okay! The next time I see Wu Junling, I will say that I already have a shrew at home. In order to not cause a misunderstanding, she needs to stay far away from me. Does that work?"

Yu Xiaocao forcefully restrained her urge to smile and let out a huff, "That's about right! Listen well! If you start getting feelings for another woman, even if it hurts me a lot, I will still make sure to leave you. I will definitely not aggrieve myself for the sake of some petty love!"

Zhu Junyang regarded the little lass in a serious manner and stated, "Don't worry, this prince was born with very little room in my heart. I only have enough space for the tiny little you and no one else!"

Xiaocao had to admit that she did like to hear romantic sappy things sometimes just like other people. She gripped Zhu Junyang's hand and raised her head to swiftly plant a light kiss on his cheek. Then her cheeks flushed as she quietly said, "This is to reward you!"

Zhu Junyang felt his throat suddenly dry and his phoenix eyes fixated on that adorable, small pair of lips that resembled cherries and he swallowed involuntarily...

Yu Xiaocao watched as Zhu Junyang's head came closer and closer to her face. His pair of phoenix eyes seemed to be aglow with a tantalizing light and his perfectly shaped lips seemed to be beckoning towards her. She forcefully tore herself out of this reverie and managed to restrain herself from kissing him. She jerked back a few steps and placed a small hand on the lips that were inches away from her.

"Have you forgotten that I have a lot of people keeping an eye on me? I'm still a child. If you cross the line, in the future, you won't even be able to visit me secretly!" Yu Xiaocao reminded him.

Zhu Junyang had been sternly warned by Fang Zizhen in the past. He had also agreed to the terms. Before they got engaged, he couldn't engage in any intimate acts with Xiaocao. Although the residence's guards were unable to prevent him from entering, he couldn't dismiss his future father-in-law's words. He could already tell that this godfather and godmother would be much harder to handle than his lass's biological parents.

Argh! He stared at Xiaocao's tantalizing red lips for a bit and managed to dampen down his desire. He reluctantly increased the distance between him and his little lass while an aggrieved thought popped up

in his mind, 'Why can't it be like the storybooks and allow me to directly timeskip to when the little lass is eighteen and we're allowed to get engaged for marriage?'

He spent half the night with Xiaocao being sweet with her. It was only after the little lass started yawning constantly that he finally reluctantly went back to the imperial prince's estate to rest in his own courtyard. When he found out that his mother had fled to avoid that mother-daughter pair, he frowned deeply. The little lass was right. He couldn't allow this to continue and needed to make things clear to all parties.

The next day, he took advantage of his break to visit his aunt's home. When Wu Junling heard her maidservant report, "Young Miss, Royal Prince Yang is here and he says he wants to see you!!", she almost couldn't believe her ears. Her older cousin had finally decided to see her? Did her sincerity finally move him and change his heart?

"Older Cousin..." Wu Junling changed into a new set of qi-style attire that had been made by Exquisite Garments. The pale blue color outer garment delicately hugged her maidenly form and the goose-yellow cotton sleeves contrasted beautifully with her pale hands that were barely visible. At this moment, she was regarding Zhu Junyang with her doe-like eyes with a sweet and adoring expression. If it were anyone else in the room, they would have wanted to drown into those innocent and watery eyes and not come out.

Unfortunately, she was interacting with singularly unromantic, cold-faced Royal Prince Yang. It was as if he didn't see her careful attempts to dress up for him at all. In fact, he hadn't even properly looked at her since she entered the room. Wu Junling felt her heart slowly grow heavy and a bad feeling settled into her heart.

As expected, Zhu Junyang wasn't the type to mince his words around young maidens. He took a sip of tea from the cup in his hands and directly stated, "Aunt, Younger Cousin, recently you've both been visiting the residence very frequently and have disturbed my lady mother. If you were coming over as a simple visit between family members, then we would happily welcome you. However, if you're coming over due to some other ulterior motives, this prince will have to advise you to don't become the victim of your own perceived ingenuity!"

Zhu Junyang believed that he had made himself quite clear with this. After all, the other party had never explicitly stated that she liked him romantically and wanted to be with him. After he finished he stood up and swiftly turned around to leave the room. He had no desire to spend another second looking at the flattering look on his aunt's face and the aggrieved expression on his cousin's face.

“Older Cousin...you've probably misunderstood us!” Wu Junling hurriedly stood up and went forward two steps. Her large, doe-like eyes, which were very similar to Xiaocao's, seemed to be misted over and filled with tears. Although the tears didn't fall, it made her seem even more pitiful.

“Older Cousin, ever since I've arrived at the capital, I've recalled a lot of things from the past. When I was young, you took me to the back garden in the estate to play hide and seek, plucked some flowers from Her Highness's most precious plants, and added some Chinese goldthread powder to your two older brothers' tea...Her Highness has also said that our connection is even closer than two biological siblings. I don't know what someone else said to you about me, but I've always regarded you like an older brother! Older Cousin, the words you said are truly too hurtful...”

Zhu Junyang couldn't sense Wu Junling's thoughts at all and it made him feel quite uneasy. The younger cousin in front of him gave off an aura that was completely different from Xiaocao. Whenever he was with Xiaocao, he felt as if his heart was at peace and that he could completely relax himself. However, whenever he was with this young maiden, who was currently pitifully looking at him as if she was an innocent who had been vilely bullied, he felt irritable and on edge. The darkness within the deepest corner of his heart seemed to react to this and started to act up again. His heart devil, which he hadn't felt in a long time, seemed to be waiting for an opportunity to rise so it could show itself again...

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In fact, Wu Junling's appearance was quite similar to Xiaocao's, but there were also some obvious differences. Her skin was as white as snow but it wasn't as flawless and exquisite as Xiaocao's. They both had large doe-like eyes that seemed to be pure but Xiaocao's eyes seemed to have more light within them and they always shone with liveliness. Occasionally, Xiaocao's eyes would even flicker with some craftiness. They both had slim and delicate figures but his Xiaocao didn't seem the least bit sickly or weak. In fact, she always seemed full of energy and exuberance...

Furthermore, the feelings he had towards the two people were completely different. When Xiaocao revealed a sad and hurt expression, he felt so bad that he wanted to bring the whole world in front of her to cheer her up. On the flip side, the young maiden in front of him, who was weeping pitifully in a way that made her seem beautiful, gave him, instead, a slight feeling of disgust and desire to stay away from her.

Other than Xiaocao, Zhu Junyang had never treated any other young maiden in a gentlemanly manner. Instead, he coldly stated, “All of those stories occurred when this prince was around six to seven years old, how could I remember any of this? However, Younger Cousin, your memory is quite good. You can recall things that happened to you when you were three to four as if they had just happened!”

Wu Junling's face paled and her eyebrows slightly furrowed together. She revealed a weak and pitiful expression, "Older Cousin, when my father was dispatched to a distant territory, I became quite introverted and shy because of the language and cultural differences. Thus, my wet nurse often told me stories of what had happened when we were visiting the imperial prince's residence. At that time, we had no worries or fears..."

"At that time, both of us were still young. Men and women should stay apart when they reach the age of seven. You are, after all, this prince's maternal cousin. We still need to make sure to abide by these customs!" After Zhu Junyang finished this sentence, he continued to stick more verbal knives into her, "Aunt, Younger Cousin must be around seventeen, right? It's time for her to settle down on her marriage. If you don't have any good candidates in mind, then I have some good young generals under me who are possibilities as they are from good families. I can help you choose a suitable match!"

"Older Cousin..." Wu Junling's face was deathly white as she tottered. In a manner that seemed to show that she was ready to let things loose, she deeply inhaled and said, "Older Cousin, why do you have to treat Ling'er in such a heartless manner? Is it because you believe my father's official position is too low and that my status doesn't match up to yours ah?"

Zhu Junyang frowned impatiently. He had already said it very clearly. Why was she still hanging on and insisting on ripping all pretenses between them?

"Younger Cousin, where do these words come from? Didn't you just say earlier that you see me as your biological older brother ah? Between blood-related siblings, why do we need to talk about our statuses matching each other?" Although Zhu Junyang could not read her mind at all, he wasn't a complete idiot. In the end, Wu Junling was still a nobly-born young maiden who had been raised in the inner courtyard her whole life. Although she may have a few tricks up her sleeve, she wasn't an expert schemer by any means. The more he investigated, the more holes turned up in her story.

"Older Cousin!" Wu Junling had a mournful look on her face, "I don't believe you can't tell the way I feel about you. Why do you need to treat me this callously?"

Zhu Junyang coldly regarded her pretty face and there wasn't even a hint of pleasure on his face as he quirked up the corner of his mouth, "There are many women in this world who have good feelings towards this prince. It's not as if you're the only one. If this prince decided to answer every single person, then I could spend my entire day going from beauty to beauty without doing anything else!"

Despite her desire to interrupt several times during their conversation, Jiang Meiyi had managed to keep herself silent throughout all of this as she remembered her daughter's earlier warnings. However, she could no longer resist and rushed forward to scream at Zhu Junyang, "How could you treat your younger cousin in this way? My Ling'er has both the looks and talent, so what part of her doesn't pair well with you? She has deep feelings towards you yet you insist on hurting her. Are you still a man ah?"

"Whether or not this prince is a man is not to be determined by the wife of only a fifth-ranked official!!" The frostiness in Zhu Junyang's eyes became more apparent as he smiled coldly, "Official Wu's abilities as an official can be considered alright. Do you know why he was only given a position at the Qingshui yamen ah? It's because he has a wife who doesn't understand how to be humble, is greedy, and believes she's smarter than everyone else! If his inner courtyard isn't well organized, how can he possibly govern the rest of the country?"

If it were anyone else with slightly more of a brain, they would have reflected and felt bad about their conduct. However, Jiang Meiyi wasn't that type of person. When she heard Zhu Junyang's criticism, her eyes turned red and her expression twisted as if she wanted to rip the person in front of her into shreds as she shrieked, "How did your mother bring you up? You even dare to say such slanderous things to your own aunt. How can one disrespect their elders?! If Imperial Prince Jing's household stood out, then how could my husband's career be this bad ah? You guys are the ones who are cold and aloof and don't know how to treat one's family properly..."

"Mother..." Wu Junling wanted to stop her mother from exploding but was thrown off by her. The despair within her heart increased as she saw the increasingly icy expression on her older cousin's face.

"Shut your mouth! What kind of elder are you? You're only the lowly seed of a prostitute from a brothel yet you dare to criticize this prince's lady mother?" Zhu Junyang felt as if an evil devil inside of him was stirring awake. He did his best to tamper down on the thought of wringing Jiang Meiyi's neck as he silently began to recite a heart sutra. Unfortunately, the heart sutra clearly had no more power over him.

It was too late! Zhu Junyang began to hyperventilate and beads of cold sweat rolled down his face. The green-blue veins on the sides of his face began to bulge with effort and both of his eyes turned a blood-red color. His face twisted into a malevolent expression and he no longer resembled an elegant and handsome young youth anymore. A ruthless and cruel air surrounded him like a cloak, as if an evil demon had just been resurrected. Wu Junling scuttled back a few steps in astonishment at his change and her legs weakened as she sat onto the ground.

Jiang Meiyi, who was the person nearest to Zhu Junyang, bore the brunt of the damage. The crazy evil aura that was bursting from the prince hit her directly and she tottered a bit before she fell over into a dead faint.

Since the Wu Family's women were receiving the guest in the inner courtyard, Head Steward Liu and Bodyguard Dong, who were both highly skilled at martial arts, had been left in the outer courtyard and were being served refreshments. Head Steward Liu could acutely tell that something had changed in the atmosphere. He threw down the cup of tea in his hand and silently hollered that something wasn't right. He speedily headed towards the inner courtyard. When Bodyguard Dong saw the change in Head Steward Liu's expression, he also felt that something wasn't right and didn't hesitate to follow the eunuch. The head steward in charge of taking care of the guests in the outer courtyard was stunned for about three seconds when he saw them speed out. Just what had happened?

Fortunately, the Wu Family's residence wasn't large. Head Steward Liu only needed a few large jumps to go from the outer courtyard to the receiving room in the inner courtyard. When he saw that familiar stance of his master, Head Steward Liu rushed forward as he wanted to strike before his master completely fell into darkness. He wanted to take his master to a place where there were no people in order to avoid his master hurting others.

"Head...Head Steward Liu, what's wrong with my older cousin?" Wu Junling saw that both Head Steward Liu and Bodyguard Dong had arrived. She timidly stood up and her colorless lips trembled for a bit before she finally inquired.

Dong Dali glared at her with an unhappy look on his face before he said, "It's been so many years since the master last had this happen! You guys truly have skills to make the master lose control of himself..."

"Xiaodong, don't waste your time flapping your lips at them. Quickly bring the master to Miss Yu!" Head Steward Liu had wanted to press the master's acupuncture points to delay the time to madness but he had been pushed fiercely away by Zhu Junyang, whose eyes were completely red!

"This is bad!" Head Steward Liu could tell that his master's reason had been completely eaten away by that heart devil. With his master's current skills and abilities, he would only last about half an hour before he would get beaten, "Xiaodong, quickly go to the Yu Residence to bring Miss Yu over. I'm going to restrain the master for now!"

“Miss Yu?” Dong Dali hesitated. Judging by how much the master valued Miss Yu, if he accidentally harmed her while in his frenzy, the master would definitely be heartbroken when he finally woke up and probably gut him right there!

“Xiaodong, what are you waiting for? Do you want the Wu Family to perish in a river of blood ah? Quickly go!! I can't handle him for too long!” Head Steward Liu picked up the fainted Jiang Meiyi and threw her towards Wu Junling's direction as he hollered, “Quickly take your mother out of here. If you don't want to die, then don't come back!”

At this moment, Zhu Junyang felt like everything around him was full of darkness and evil. The people around him seem to flicker. Some of them were angrily raging at home, some of them wanted him to die, some of them wanted to destroy his lady mother...he had the desire to destroy everything around him. Thus, he used all of his energy to rush towards the area that he felt like held the most malicious aura...

Head Steward Liu felt his heart skip a beat and his body moved before he could think. In that moment, the area where he was before he moved now had a deep crevice in it. The nearby pillar had been completely severed in two and the roof above had started to sway alarmingly.

Wu Junling, who was currently struggling to drag her mother out of the room, had almost been scared silly when she saw what had just happened. She almost dropped her mother's body to the ground to flee. Danger could always stimulate a person's inner potential. The amount of strength she had to move her mother suddenly increased by a lot. Thus, by the time Zhu Junyang discovered her, she had just left the reception room.

The current room had long been destroyed beyond repair. Tables, chairs, shelves, and valuable items had been smashed until they were just rubble. Head Steward Liu was currently doing his best to dodge his master's attacks but he had a few close encounters.

The amount of rubble inside the room increased by the second and the floor was strewn with trash, as if a horrible war had reached here. Head Steward Liu could only helplessly leave and run towards the outer room. There was more space outside and it'd be easier for him to avoid his master's attacks. It had been a while since he was his master's match in battle so he could only rely on running away to drag things out. He hoped desperately that Dong Dali would be able to find Miss Yu without much issue.

Fortunately, the heavens had heard his prayers. When Bodyguard Dong arrived at the Yu Residence, Yu Xiaocao had just gotten back from the frozen dessert store and hadn't entered through the gate.

“Miss Yu, my master is waiting for you to save him!” Although Dong Dali didn't quite understand exactly why Head Steward Liu instructed him to get Miss Yu, his words weren't an exaggeration. It truly was to save someone's life as they were trying to save Head Steward Liu's and the entire Wu Family's life.

When Yu Xiaocao noticed that the normally taciturn and calm Bodyguard Dong was frazzled to the point of babbling, worry exploded in her heart. She didn't even bother to ask him what was going on as she turned her horse around and sternly asked, “Where's your master? Quickly take me there!!”

Dong Dali had run over like a madman earlier and had leapt across countless roofs to get here. He didn't even bother to catch his breath as he snatched the reins from Yingchun's hands and pulled the maid down. He flipped onto the horse and spurred the horse to a gallop in the direction of the Wu Family's residence.

Yingchun, who was caught off guard by all of this, had almost fallen onto her bottom. If it wasn't for Wutong supporting her, she absolutely would have fallen flat on her face! After she finally stood steady, she cursed a few times at Dong Dali's disappearing figure. That wasn't enough to sate her anger, so she tore off her embroidered cloth shoes and hurled them forcefully at the man. Dong Dali and Xiaocao had long galloped off and they couldn't even be seen anymore, so naturally, she wasn't able to hit the object of her frustrations.

The young maidservant in charge of keeping an eye on the gate hurriedly rushed forward and brought her embroidered shoes back. She knelt down to put them back on the other maid. Wutong comforted Yingchun, “There must be something really important going on. Otherwise, Bodyguard Dong wouldn't act in such a way.”

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Yingchun curled her lip and remarked in worry, “Will the young miss be in danger? Earlier Bodyguard Dong said that he needed the young miss to save someone...if even Royal Prince Yang is unable to handle this, how could the young miss be any different? This is not okay. Let's go find some skilled bodyguards and send them over to protect her.”

“Do you know where the young miss is now though?” Wutong was also worried about her mistress's safety but she was quite helpless in this situation.

When Yingchun heard this, she burst into fury and cursed, "That wretched Dong Dali! He couldn't say things more clearly. If even a single hair on the young miss's head is harmed, just watch as I shave him bald!!"

Dong Dali, who was currently bolting down the streets, suddenly felt an icy coldness go down his scalp. It was so sudden that he shivered and a bad premonition settled into his heart.

By the time Yu Xiaocao arrived at the Wu Residence, the entire inner and outer courtyard of the estate had turned into rubble. If it weren't for Head Steward Liu doing his best to draw things out, then there would be dozens of casualties among the Wu Family and their servants. The Wu Family's maidservants and senior servants were all cowering in the back of the residence in fear.

At this time, Jiang Meiyi had already woken up from her faint. When she saw the rampaging Zhu Junyang, however, she almost fell into a dead faint again. As Wu Junling watched her older cousin, who resembled an evil monster, with increasing horror, she realized that she was no longer interested in him anymore. She could only pray now that there was someone out there who was able to stop this out of control fiend.

Apparently, the bad rumors regarding her older cousin weren't just a result of those who maliciously resented his status and skills. If she had known this earlier, then she would have never tried to seduce her older cousin, the royal prince, even if she had ten times the courage she had now. Clawing her way up the social ladder was definitely something she desperately wanted to do. However, compared with her life, anyone with half a brain would know what to choose first.

As the mother and daughter pair stared at Zhu Junyang, who had lost all reasoning and was currently a 'residence destroying fiend', their hearts filled with utmost regret. Why did they have to provoke this calamitous star? Why did they have to infuriate him? Wu Junling continuously thought back to their interaction, trying to figure out exactly what she said to cause her older cousin to transform into a monster.

When the Capital's Militia received the Wu Family's cry for help, they arrived at the scene just moments before Xiaocao did. The commander of the militia was an old fox, so when he saw Head Steward Liu being pushed back continuously by Royal Prince Yang, he felt his scalp turn numb. Even the highly skilled Head Steward Liu was helpless in front of this madman. If he and his men rushed to help, they would only become cannon fodder.

Many of the officials within the Capital Militia had illustrious backgrounds. In fact, if you randomly picked someone from the ranks, they were probably the descendants of second ranked and third ranked military officials. Many of these people used the Capital Militia as a springboard for their future career so that in the future they could enter the emperor's personal bodyguards or become future generals in training. If these people encountered something bad, the commander of the militia was very sure that his position would no longer be his anymore!

Without the commander's orders, the officials within the militia could only stare blankly from horseback. They watched as the out of control Royal Prince Yang rampaged fiercely and they felt their hearts tremble at the sight. Head Steward Liu was now decorated with many wounds all over his body and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he looked quite dismal now. This was only because he had never tried to confront his master and instead did his best to avoid the prince's attacks. He was doing his best to stall for time and hoped that he could hold on to his old life by the time Miss Yu came over.

“Let us through! Those who can't help should disperse!” The sound of Dong Dali's voice seemed like it had come from the heavens. Although there was still some distance between them, it gave Head Steward Liu some hope and extra energy to hold on.

The men from the Capital's Militia had pretty much plugged the streets until they were full. Outsiders were not able to go in. Dong Dali was worried that his master and his good friend Head Steward Liu were in danger, so he was so rushed that he started to curse. When Yu Xiaocao saw this, she quickly said a few words into the bodyguard's ear.

Bodyguard Dong's eyes lit up and he raised his voice to holler towards the Wu Residence, “Head Steward Liu, Miss Yu and I can't cross over. Can you bring the master over here...”

When Head Steward Liu heard this, he leapt up onto one of the remaining side buildings in the Wu Residence. Before he could steady himself, the thundering sound of brick and tile collapsing could be heard and half of the building had turned into rubble. Broken pieces of brick and tile flew out of the residence and the alleyway became chaotic. Many of the officials standing there were injured by the flying rubble.

“Retreat...let's first retreat out of here!” The commander of the militia noticed that the battle was about to occur in the streets and hurriedly hollered out his commands. The soldiers and guards in the alleyway quickly fled out of the offending street. Before long, the street became empty and quiet and only the sounds of Zhu Junyang fighting with Head Steward Liu could be heard.

Dong Dali could tell that Head Steward Liu wouldn't be able to hold for much longer so he rushed forward to give a helping hand. He had been born and raised at Imperial Prince JIng's estate and had trained since he was young with the master in martial arts. Since he was clearly talented in this area, he was able to become well known in the estate. Thus, he was selected by Head Steward Liu to personally serve the master. Although he could be considered a top-level expert, compared to Zhu Junyang and Head Steward Liu, he was only a small fish in the end.

This fellow wasn't as nimble as Head Steward Liu. As soon as he stepped forward, the wind coming off of Zhu Junyang's strikes ended up hitting him in the chest and pushing him away until he hit a nearby wall with a thud. A burst of blood came out of his mouth.

Yu Xiaocao was completely shocked by this. A complete expert seemed to have no defenses against the prince. Every strike Zhu Junyang threw out seemed to be covered by an aura that billowed, causing a destructive power that was astonishing. In fact, that one simple and elegant looking punch seemed to have completely subdued Bodyguard Dong in a jiffy. Even the extremely skilled Head Steward Liu could only retreat repeatedly in front of the prince. He was truly an expert among experts!

While she was mesmerized by the scene in front of her, Head Steward Liu had also been struck by his master and couldn't get up from the ground. In the blink of an eye, two experts had both been subdued. This was truly a sign of how powerful the prince was in battle ah!

Head Steward Liu, 'My little ancestor, please stop sighing over this! If you don't come out now, this old servant will have to eat a lunchbox from hell ah!!'

The current Zhu Junyang was like a puppet being completely controlled by his heart devil. He felt like every blade of grass, every tree, every tile, and every brick was imbued with the heavy aura of malice. This type of malice entwined around him and fettered him so tightly that he almost couldn't breathe. His heart only had one thought: destroy everything! He needed to tear down everything that was around him in order to eliminate all of the sources of malice that were shackling him down.

"AHHHH——" A scream ripped from his throat as if it was a voice coming from hell. It couldn't be described as a human sound and more resembled the anguished cry of a beast. Everyone that heard it trembled in fear.

Yu Xiaocao could hear the pain and despair that Zhu Junyang felt within that cry and a flood of tears involuntarily came to her eyes. Just as Zhu Junyang was lifting a stone lion about the height of a grown man in the direction of Head Steward Liu, who was no longer able to move, a heavenly voice seemed to have cut through the darkness with him, lighting up the dense dimness around him. The voice seemed to dispel some of the thick malice around him and it flittered into his ear brightly, “Zhu Junyang—”

Who? Who was calling his name? Zhu Junyang slowly turned around with the stone lion still high above his head. A flicker of reason seemed to shine through his bloodshot phoenix eyes.

“Zhu Junyang, the stone lion must be very heavy. Isn't it tiring for you to raise it up so high ah? Quickly put it down!” Yu Xiaocao wasn't the least bit frightened by the malevolent expression on the prince's face. Instead, she slightly frowned and looked at the stone lion in his hands with an expression full of pity and worry.

The sound of that voice seemed incredibly familiar and pleasing. It was as if the coldest spring water was currently being poured onto his head. His muddled mind somewhat regained a bit of logic, 'Who? Just who was calling his name in that manner?'

The elders who were close to him would all call him 'Yang'er', whereas those of the same generation who had a good relationship with him would call him 'Junyang'. Those who were a bit more distant would call him 'Royal Prince Yang'. It seemed like there was only one person in this world who always boldly called him by his entire name. He had resisted many times as he wanted her to call him 'Older Brother Yang' but he had never succeeded in convincing her to do so.

Zhu Junyang continued to have a perplexed expression on his face as he shuffled a few steps in the direction of the voice while he still held the stone lion high above his head.

Dong Dali, who was in slightly better shape, had already sneaked by and gotten to the place where Head Steward Liu was lying. He wanted to bring the eunuch someplace safe. When he saw the scene in front of him, Dong Dali remarked in worry, “Head Steward Liu, will the master harm Miss Yu ah? If that happens, once the master regains his senses, he will feel so regretful.”

At first, Head Steward Liu was also quite anxious about something like that happening. However, once he saw his master stop rampaging as soon he heard Miss Yu's voice, he felt that his decision in bringing her over was one of the wisest ideas he ever had. He fished out a pill to heal internal injuries from his clothes and popped it into his mouth. After coughing up a lot of clotted blood, his chest felt a lot more comfortable. The medicine that Miss Yu personally made herself was truly very excellent.

“Don't worry, even when he's rampaging, the master couldn't bear to harm even a single strand of Miss Yu's hair. Let's just watch and see ah!” Head Steward Liu managed to slowly sit up with Dong Dali's help. He leaned against the damaged wall and gradually caught his breath.

“Zhu Junyang, snap out of it and come back to reality. I'm so worried about you!” Yu Xiaocao's voice seemed a bit choked with emotion as she slowly headed towards Zhu Junyang. Despite her roiling emotions, she kept that smile he liked so much on her face. He had once told her that her smile was his savior. Even though tears continued to drip down her face, her smile never wavered.

Zhu Junyang cocked his head to the side and the stone lion in his hands fell with a thud to the ground, leaving behind a deep crevice. The malevolent expression on his face slowly disappeared and he felt like his head was becoming clearer. It was his little lass! Darn it! How did he forget his little lass? The sound of her voice, the smile on her face, and her way of directly calling him by his given name had already been deeply engraved within his heart and soul.

“Xiao...cao?” Zhu Junyang still felt a bit muddled inside but the darkness around him seemed to be dissipating. That delicate and skinny little figure in front of him was becoming more and more clear. A sweet aroma seemed to be wafting off her body and all of that malice surrounding him was rapidly being eradicated by that smell.

The smile on Yu Xiaocao's face deepened and she went forward two steps and stretched out her pale little hands. The tears in her large eyes made them seem even more limpid and clear as she said, “That's right! It's me—Yu Xiaocao! Come, I'm going to bring you home!”

Home was that safe harbor without the glint of knives or swords. There was no scheming or cheating, no backyard tricks and no overflowing malice. Because there was her, he could relax...

“Don't...don't come over! I...will hurt you...” Zhu Junyang suddenly stopped reaching towards her hands when he saw a red line cutting across Xiaocao's white and tender little face. He forced himself to retreat a few steps. As he distanced himself from his savior, the heart devil within him started to stir again.

Yu Xiaocao wiped a hand in the direction that he was looking at and felt a twinge of pain. This must have happened during the battle earlier as she probably got cut by a piece of rubble flying in the area. She secretly dripped a few drops of highly-concentrated mystic-stone essence onto her hand and rubbed

that area clean. The small cut instantaneously healed and the scab also fell off, leaving behind only a faint pink line.

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“Look! You didn't harm me. It's only just a stain!” The smile on Yu Xiaocao's face was still as sweet as before. Her eyes were curved up in glee and they seemed to glitter with a bit of craftiness. They were so lively that it made a person want to stare at them endlessly.

Zhu Junyang looked at the faint red scar on Yu Xiaocao's face and revealed a hesitant expression. At this moment, he was slowly becoming more clear-headed. He had a faint impression of what had happened when he lost control this time, which was different from previous times when he had no recollection whatsoever. Perhaps it was because his mind-reading ability was becoming more and more sharp, but he could clearly feel Head Steward Liu's feelings and thoughts when he was fighting with him. He truly knew that the eunuch was his most capable servant yet he still had been deceived by his heart devil and couldn't stop fighting.

Ever since he met Xiaocao, although he couldn't always control the heart devil, he was always able to pull himself away during the past few years. He thought that he had the ability now to control the darkness inside of him. However, he didn't expect that the heart devil was still inside of him, just waiting for an opportunity to explode.

Today, with Head Steward Liu by his side and fighting for his life, he managed to avoid massacring the Wu Family. Zhu Junyang actually didn't care whether the Wu Family lived or died. However, what if one day he harmed the Yu Family or the Fang Family? Would Xiaocao hate him for the rest of his life? Or perhaps, when Xiaocao was by his side and he was taken over by the heart devil...he was too afraid to think further down that line. Maybe...staying far away from her was the best way to protect her!

Immense distress and sadness shone in Zhu Junyang's eyes and Yu Xiaocao could clearly see that the prince had made the decision to decisively cut all ties with her. This made her feel incredibly flustered. She had a feeling that if she wasn't able to resolve this situation perfectly, he would leave her forever...

“Older Brother Yang, I'm so scared, I want a hug...” Yu Xiaocao shamelessly acted like a spoiled little girl and cutely asked for a hug.

A sorrowful feeling rose up in Zhu Junyang's heart. His little lass was finally willing to call him 'Older Brother Yang'. However, this was likely the first and last time that he would be able to hear her call him in such an adorable and sweet way. If he couldn't give her happiness by her side, then he could only stay far away and watch as she lived contently.

Ordinarily, Zhu Junyang was always looking for an opportunity to get closer to her. If she 'begged for a hug', then he would gladly turn into a 'hungry wolf' and rush towards her. However, today, he actually retreated a few steps. His eyes shone with tenderness and were so filled with emotion that it made a person's heart ache.

At that exact moment he turned around, Xiaocao felt like something was ripping her heart in two. 'Zhu Junyang, you bastard, didn't you say that you were going to stay by my side and guard me? That you were waiting for me to become an adult ah? Don't tell me that your previous promises and oaths were as insubstantial as smoke ah?'

That wouldn't do, she couldn't let him just leave. Even if he had to go, he needed to make things clear first. Yu Xiaocao slightly frowned as she contemplated what to do. She didn't believe that Zhu Junyang, who had always cared dearly about her, could harden his heart that easily and ignore her.

"Aiya——" She deliberately exclaimed in a distressed manner and gritted her teeth as she made herself fall towards the ground that had rubble strewn all over it.

In the moment she cried, Zhu Junyang, who had originally been jumping up onto the roof, glanced over with his phoenix eyes and clearly saw her headed towards the broken bricks and tiles on the ground. A distance of seven to eight strides was covered in a blink of an eye by his skills. He appeared almost instantaneously next to Xiaocao and reached out vigorously and supported her back up by grabbing her thin, slender arm. He gently lifted her and drew her into his arms as he anxiously asked, "What's wrong? Did you twist your ankle? Did you fall anywhere and hit yourself?"

From the flurry of questions he just asked, she could tell just how deeply he cared about her. Then, why was he going to leave? Yu Xiaocao leaned into his embrace and tightly hugged his chest. She spoke in a voice that had a hint of a sob in it, "Don't go. You told me that you were going to protect me as I got older. Don't leave me..."

Zhu Junyang felt his eyes grow hot, and he gently stroked Xiaocao's silky long hair as he sighed, "I'm afraid...afraid that one day I'll do something that I'll regret and can't fix. I'm an unlucky and ominous person and will only bring unhappiness to the people I care about the most. Perhaps, staying far away from you is the best decision."

“Nonsense! You're not an unlucky and ominous person! You're my God of Protection!” Yu Xiaocao raised her head and exclaimed, “Because of you, I'm able to relax and do whatever I want to do without having to think of auxiliary issues. This is because I know, that even if I rip a hole in the sky, you will help me patch it up.”

She sniffled and then tightened her arms around him even more, “All these years, if I didn't have you around, then my life would have been much more difficult. Without you, the watermelons, early-ripening vegetables, and secret recipes I came up with in Dongshan Village would have long been schemed away by some evil person. Without you, my family's braised food shop in the prefectural city would not have been able to open so smoothly and some local tyrant would have long snatched it away from us. Without you, the high-yielding crops that we planted in the Tanggu Farmstead would have had some local official taking credit for us instead. Thus, naturally, me becoming an official and titled a feudal princess wouldn't have happened either.”

“The only reason I am so successful today is because you were by my side. Otherwise, I would still be in that tiny fishing village and living a downtrodden and difficult life!” Yu Xiaocao deliberately stated the worst case scenarios that could have happened, “Have you ever thought that if you leave, the emperor would lose a great helper at court and become angry? He might even become angry at me and take back all of the glory and honor he has given to me before. Perhaps he would send me back to be a little farmer's girl in a tiny fishing village.”

“At that time, then the Imperial Plantation's fruit orchard, your farmstead's greenhouse vegetables and fruits, as well as the beauty salon, pharmaceutical workshop, and frozen dessert store would all slowly be taken away by those people who are envious of me.” Yu Xiaocao raised her head slightly to secretly glance at Zhu Junyang's face to gauge his reaction to all of this. When she noticed that he had become quite solemn, she continued, “Also, you always say that I'm very muddle-headed and don't have a brain for scheming or politics. Without you as my patron, I, with nothing behind me, would probably be used by someone and forced by that person to work for very little profit...”

“That won't happen! This prince will handle everything before I go. Whoever wants to touch a single hair on your head, I will make sure to make their entire family pay in blood!” When he thought of Xiaocao being imprisoned by someone, losing her independence, and being forced to work for them...rage roiled up in his heart and his eyes gradually became red again.

Yu Xiaocao held on tightly to his neck and rubbed her soft and tender face against his as she softly said, “Even if you killed all of those people in the end, it still won't take away the hurt and harm I've experienced, right? If you don't want me to get harmed, then say by my side and keep me safe forever. Continue being my shield against those with evil intentions and let me grow up without a care in the world.”

How could Zhu Junyang not want to stay by his little lass and watch as she slowly grew up, become his wife, and then have a group of little cute buns with him? However... "I'm afraid if I stay by you, I will become the person who hurts you."

"Master, have you not discovered that whenever you're about to lose control of yourself, as long as Miss Yu is around, you're able to suppress that heart devil? Let's take today for an example. You had been completely consumed by the heart devil but as soon as you heard Miss Yu's voice and saw her, your reason and mind gradually returned. Miss Yu is the nemesis of your heart devil. You not only won't harm her but with her by your side, you will also get farther and farther away from the devil and inky darkness inside of you!" Head Steward Liu managed to slowly walk over with the help of Dong Dali after taking a pill to heal his internal injuries.

His words were like the strikes of a clock chiming and woke Zhu Junyang up from his confusion. That was right. In the past, before he met Xiaocao, the darkness within him seemed to always be hazily present and waiting for him to lose control. However, with Xiaocao around, she somehow managed to disperse the inky fog around him, and, like a ray of sunlight, warmed his entire being and soul. She allowed him to experience the warmth and happiness of a normal person.

Head Steward Liu was right. Xiaocao was the nemesis of his heart devil! Just like earlier, when he had been consumed by the darkness and controlled completely, the sound of Xiaocao's voice penetrated the confining fog and reached the bottom of his heart and roused his consciousness again. The aura around Xiaocao was like the warmth and fragrance of a spring breeze. Although it was gentle, it was able to disperse all of the negativity away from him.

He lowered his head to sniff gently at the little lass's hair that was lightly fragranced. The sweet smell of her finally released the last bit of moodiness and darkness out of his heart. Earlier, he had boxed himself in a corner. If he left Xiaocao, then it was likely that he would once again be in the thrall of that heart devil and be completely controlled. There would likely be one day when his two hands were covered completely with blood and his eyes completely red. At that time, could he still remember then how much he cared about her?

"Zhu Junyang, Head Steward Liu is right. If you let me stay by your side, we can work together to resist and defend yourself against the monster inside of you. Believe me, the last victory will definitely be ours!" Yu Xiaocao's large eyes were filled with anxiety and worry, which made him feel a pang inside.

He lightly stroked the little mark on his little lass's face and finally made a decision. The little lass had so many secrets on her. If he wasn't by her side, once those secrets exploded, it would probably be the day she was condemned to hell. He needed to stay by her side forever, protecting her and all of her secrets and become a man who would sweep all of her troubles and worries away!

“Didn't you call me 'Older Brother Yang' earlier ah? How come you're using 'Zhu Junyang' again? Call me 'Older Brother Yang' again.” Zhu Junyang had returned back to his roguish self and started to tease Yu Xiaocao again.

Yu Xiaocao unexpectedly didn't blow up at this frivolous statement of hers. The tears in her eyes slowly flowed down her face while she still had that beautiful and sweet smile on her lips. She foolishly said, “As long as you don't leave me, I can call you 'Older Brother Yang' all you want.”

“Eh? Looks like I didn't need to come here today!” A clear and gentle voice could be heard from the right side of these two people.

The two of them, who had been firmly embracing each other, finally let go of the other person and turned to face the familiar voice. On top of the eaves that were tiled with light green tiles, there was an elegant figure dressed entirely in white. The slight breeze gently lifted his long, dark hair and made the sleeves of his outfit dance gracefully. The person in front of them resembled an ethereal and beautiful immortal that could only be found in paintings.

“Sir Su, how come you're here?” Yu Xiaocao raised her head and looked at that man who resembled a perfect gentleman carved out of the finest jade. She used a sleeve to wipe the tears from her face and revealed a smile as bright as a blooming flower.

Su Ran lightly jumped off of the roof and landed on the ground soundlessly. He glanced at Zhu Junyang, who had regained his usual calm, and then raised an eyebrow at the ruins of the Wu Family's estate. He lightly chuckled, “Someone told me that the Wu Family was currently deconstructing their home. I had nothing better to do, so I came over to take a peek!”

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The Wu Family had narrowly escaped disaster and they apprehensively came out of the back room. The maidservants and senior servants surrounded Jiang Meiyi and her daughter, and all of them had still somewhat panicked expressions on their face. After they heard Chief Steward Su's words, the entire Wu Family opened their eyes wide in disbelief. This...was clearly a sign that he was shielding the prince!

The male master of the Wu Family, Wu Dingsen, was a perceptive person and hurriedly agreed, "That's right ah, that's right! We have a lot of people at home and the residence was too small. We wanted to expand a few buildings but we didn't expect to alarm Chief Steward Su...and Royal Prince Yang. It is truly embarrassing ah!"

Jiang Meiyi had wanted to use this opportunity to ask for more money from Zhu Junyang as compensation. When she heard her husband speak in such a way, she immediately panicked, "Lord Husband, our family doesn't have enough money to rebuild..."

"Shut up!!" Wu Dingsen growled out, seething. He had admonished this stupid woman so many times that she needed to have a good relationship with Imperial Prince Jing's estate and Royal Prince Yang. They were not people she could afford to offend. However, this woman never listened to him. Every time she went to visit Princess Consort Jing, she always held head up high and spoke in an incredibly arrogant manner. She never thought about the fact that she was only the wife of a fifth-level small official. Did she have any qualifications to act so pretentiously in front of a first-ranked princess consort? She truly managed to make a giant mess out of an originally good hand! At that time, how could he have been so blind to marry such a muddle-headed person?

Today, when he had left court, he had heard that Royal Prince Yang had come to the residence to pay a visit. This was such a good opportunity to make a connection with the prince. However, he didn't know how this mother-daughter pair somehow managed to offend this calamitous star. The entire estate was almost ruined in their hands! He could always rebuild the buildings that had been destroyed but if his son, who he had gotten with great difficulty, and the favored concubine who bore him his son died, then he would cry until he had no tears left in him.

It had been difficult for the Wu Family to beget an heir. The only son he had was born only after he had taken in a dozen or so concubines into the residence in his forties. Wu Dingsen regarded the crowd with a bit of panic as he continued to shield his son and concubine. He came to a decision within his heart. He could no longer indulge the mess-maker, Jiang Meiyi! Since feelings of hate had arisen towards his wife, he even felt a bit dissatisfied towards his normally clever and sweet daughter.

"Chief Steward Su, Royal Prince Yang, it's a bit inconvenient to receive you two today at the residence. I will act as the host another day and invite you two to eat and chat merrily then!" Wu Dingsen squeezed out a smile and spoke in a very courteous tone.

Zhu Junyang took out a banknote worth five thousand taels from a very ugly waist pouch and handed it to Wu Dingsen and said, "There's no need for that! Let me give my congratulations right now for your

new home. I will be unable to make it to your housewarming party once construction is done as this prince will be at the army barracks. Here is a token to take instead. Please don't disdain it, Official Wu.”

Yu Xiaocao stared at that crookedly sewn pouch that was embroidered with an unknown pattern on top. Her eyes twitched. Didn't she tell Yingchun to throw away the pouch that she had practiced on? How did it end up appearing on that fellow's waist belt? Even she felt embarrassed looking at that ugly pouch, yet he, on the other hand, was wearing it as if it was a precious treasure. Was he not afraid of being laughed at by other people?

In actuality, many people had made fun of Zhu Junyang while he was in the barracks because of this pouch. However, he didn't think it was an embarrassment and instead, considered it an honor. He regarded all of the people teasing him with an arrogant and boastful expression. 'This prince's woman had personally made this and this prince is extremely happy to wear it. The rest of you are just single dogs who are envious of me!'

They weren't envious of you, okay? However, the impression the officials and soldiers had of Yu Xiaocao had improved a bit—Finally, there was something that even Official Yu wasn't good at!

A little preteen lass had suppressed all of the young men in the capital. You couldn't find another person in the capital who was as talented as Official Yu. This made the bunch of old men in the army feel a bit ashamed of themselves. However, there was nothing they could do. They knew how to march in the army, use different battle formations, and fight bravely. In terms of farming, trade and making money, they could be left in the dust behind Yu Xiaocao. It made this group of men feel uncomfortable being surpassed so easily by a little lass. Now, after seeing that incredibly ugly pouch, they finally felt a bit more comfortable again.

Zhu Junyang didn't know that the little lass was currently trying to figure out a way to get that extremely ugly pouch back in her hands. He directly stuffed the banknote into Wu Dingsen's hands. Although Jiang Meiji and her daughter were the direct cause as to why he had lost control of himself, he had still destroyed their family's residence. Five thousand taels was more than enough to rebuild the estate or even buy a completely new one.

Wu Dingsen still wanted to refuse but Zhu Junyang stopped him from protesting, “Just take it as it is! I hope, in the future, Lady Wu and Miss Wu will stop displaying themselves in front of this prince. This prince is afraid that I may lose control of myself again and cause some harm...”

Wu Dingsen felt his face go numb when he saw Zhu Junyang crush a ceramic tile in his hands into a bunch of dust. This stupid mother-daughter pair had truly offended the prince completely. In the future, even if they wanted to grow closer to Imperial Prince Jing's household, they wouldn't be able to! Wu Dingsen pasted a smile on his face and repeatedly assured the prince that he would restrain his wife and daughter.

In actuality, even if he didn't restrain them, Jiang Meiyi and her daughter were scared to their bones after this episode. They no longer dared to shamelessly get closer to Zhu Junyang. The images of Zhu Junyang transforming into a mindless monster were deeply engraved in their hearts and they would never forget it.

Su Ran left to go back to the palace to report after he confirmed that Zhu Junyang was back to normal and there was no big fallout from this episode.

As they were about to leave the remains of the Wu Residence, Yu Xiaocao looked at Zhu Junyang, who was covered in head to toe with dust and dirt, and the two injured servants next to him. She didn't feel that it was safe for them to just head back to Imperial Prince Jing's Estate like this. Head Steward Liu and Bodyguard Dong were both so heavily injured that they couldn't ride horses, so she rented a carriage from the streets and had the two men lie down there in order to avoid worsening their injuries.

“Just what did that mother-daughter pair do to make you suddenly lose control of yourself?” Yu Xiaocao thought that it'd be wise for them to figure out the root cause of the problem. That way, they could come up with a targeted solution and thoroughly suppress his heart devil.

Zhu Junyang frowned slightly and thought carefully for a bit before he said, “Although they are both very irritating, they didn't do anything too excessive. Only...”

“Only what?” Yu Xiaocao pursued this line of thought.

“Only that...that Wu Junling gives off some kind of weird smell that makes me feel very uncomfortable.” Zhu Junyang also thought it was weird that he had lost control of himself after so many years of quiescence. In fact, even when he was in the midst of battle, fighting a dangerous war, he had never gotten close to falling into the darkness. This lapse had to be heavily related to the Wu Family.

Yu Xiaocao deliberately used a juvenile tone to reply, “What sort of smell? Are you saying that your younger cousin has some body odor that you can't stand?”

Zhu Junyang, who was walking abreast with her on the street, smiled at that comment and used his finger to gently tap her head as he said, “It's not in the least bit related to her body odor! Is this prince that weak to go out of control because of a little bad body odor? As for what sort of smell it is, I really don't know how to describe it. I can only say that it's a feeling that makes a person want to rampage!”

[I know what the problem is!!] The little divine stone had been mediating and cultivating for the entire day and finally decided to show itself.

Yu Xiaocao's spirits rose and she quietly asked, 'Quickly tell us, just what is the reason?'

[Your little lover's younger cousin is a pure yin girl. She was born on a yin year, in a yin month, on a yin day, at a yin hour. She must have been very sickly and weak when she was young. In addition, she probably easily attracted remnant spirits here on earth that continue to linger on after death. In more common terms, she attracts ghosts!] The little divine stone explained to Xiaocao the facts about being a pure yin girl.

'So what does this have to do with Zhu Junyang losing control of himself?' Yu Xiaocao couldn't quite make heads or tails of this. Were people with pure yin bodies able to disturb heart devils?

[It usually wouldn't have much of an effect! However, your little lover's younger cousin is quite favored at home and her mother couldn't bear to see her enduring hardships, so she invited an 'expert' to change her fate.] The little divine stone paused a bit as it seemed to like to keep its audience in suspense.

Yu Xiaocao frowned deeply and impatiently grumbled, 'Can you just say it all at once? Hemming and hawing all the time is so irritating!'

Zhu Junyang observed as the little lass first grinned happily and then revealed an unhappy look. Her facial expressions changed alarmingly quickly. He really wanted to know what his little lass was thinking about at this time.

“Xiaocao, what's wrong?” He lightly pushed on Xiaocao's shoulder and gently asked.

Yu Xiaocao was right in the middle of the most important part of the little divine stone's story, so she waved a hand at the prince in dismissal and turned all of her attention back to the stone.

[Unfortunately, your little lover's younger cousin's mother is a stupid one. She didn't seek out any of the true expert monks in the world. Instead, she had to find a swindler who dabbled in some type of sorcery. However, this swindler did have some tricks up his sleeves. He used a spell to steal from a person's life force to suppress that poor girl's fate.]

'Stealing a person's life force?' Yu Xiaocao was quite startled by this. This type of sorcery definitely caused harm to a person, 'Then, doesn't that mean that this spell is eating away at Wu Junling's life span?'

[That's right ah! If that spell doesn't get broken, then I bet she won't live past the age of thirty! However, if the spell does get broken, she will revert back to having spirits congregating around her at every night and her nightmares will go on without stopping. That will also influence her life span! In any case, this lass wasn't born to live a long life ah!] The little divine stone spoke in a manner that made it seem like it was a swindler waving around a magic wand.

“Argh...sorcery can truly harm people ah!” Yu Xiaocao revealed a sympathetic look on her face and inadvertently said her thoughts out loud.

Before Xiaocao could walk into a pillar in front of her, Zhu Junyang pulled her aside to avoid getting hit. He asked worriedly, “What sort of demonic sorcery? Xiaocao, just what is going on? Did you encounter a sorcerer?”

“It's not me who's been enspelled; it's your younger cousin!” Yu Xiaocao looked at him and wanted to say more but she was also afraid he would dig deeper into this.

“How do you know that Wu Junling had a spell cast on her? She looks like a normal person.” Zhu Junyang didn't think she was speaking nonsense. He solemnly looked at Xiaocao. He didn't care whether Wu Junling had encountered demonic sorcery but he was afraid it might affect Xiaocao in some way.

Yu Xiaocao prepared what she was going to say first before she replied, “If I told you that I know a bit of 'the way of mysterious learning' , would you believe me?” She lifted her large, glittering eyes to look at

Zhu Junyang in a hopeful manner. She wasn't expecting him to believe her nonsense but was mostly trying to pave the way to the topic at hand.

'The way of mysterious learning'? What the hell was that? Was that the Daoist way of catching monsters and spirits or the feng shui way of predicting one's fortune? Zhu Junyang's phoenix eyes flickered, showing that he didn't believe the little lass's words. He had known her since she was eight years old and had never seen her learn how to cook, concoct medications, come up with skin and body nourishing recipes, or build greenhouses. However, she knew how to do all of those things and do them quite well.

Now, she said she knew a bit about the way of mysterious learning. He thought it wasn't out of the ordinary. Even if she claimed that she was the earthly incarnation of the Queen Mother of the West, he would still take that as fact. However, if she was the Queen Mother of the West, he wouldn't be able to marry her. She absolutely could not be the Queen Mother of the West!

"Alright, Immortal Teacher Yu, what have you discovered?" Zhu Junyang was as calm and collected as ever.

Yu Xiaocao slightly relaxed when she saw that he wasn't going to pursue this line of questioning. She stated, "Your younger cousin has traces of being enspelled by someone. This is the reason why whenever she gets close to you, the heart devil inside of you will have a reaction. Your exposure to her caused your heart devil to wake up and control you."

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Zhu Junyang clearly had no doubts regarding Xiaocao. The little lass was sometimes quite mysterious. She even knew how to distinguish between the way of mysterious learning and sorcery. Was there anything in this world she didn't know how to do?

When he saw her frowning perceptibly, he knew that she was worried about him. He felt his heart warm and he ruffled the little lass's head as he smiled, "Now that we know the reason, then it's easy to handle! In the future, when I see Wu Junling, I'll stay far away from her. That way, I won't be influenced right?"

Yu Xiaocao mumbled quietly, "That solution only treats the symptoms but not the root cause. Is there any way we can completely remove this hidden danger?"

“Lass, are you talking to me ah? Completely remove this? Are we going to secretly kill her?” Zhu Junyang was actually in the mood to crack a joke. Not to mention the fact that Wu Junling was his blood-related younger maternal cousin, but even if she was just an ordinary daughter of an official at court, killing her with his hands was also quite inconvenient. Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes at him.

In actuality, her last question was directed at the little divine stone. A tiny spell was not even a speck to the little divine stone, who had already regained almost half of its spiritual power. It'd be able to handle it in a jiffy. Once she got a definitive answer from the stone, Xiaocao felt her heart settle down. Following that, as long as she found an opportunity to meet Wu Junling, then they'd be able to release the magic on her.

As for what would happen once the spell suppressing Wu Junling's fate was removed, it wasn't within her scope to think about. Hmph! That girl had tried to target her man. If she didn't get a little revenge back, then she wouldn't be called Yu Xiaocao anymore!

Before Yu Xiaocao could come up with an excuse to meet up with Wu Junling, the target had presented herself to her door. Three days later, Yu Xiaocao received an invitation from the Ministry of Appointments Left Assistant Minister's residence to participate in Yu Wanqing's thirteenth birthday party. This was also the first time that Yu Wanqing had invited people over to her family's estate.

After three months of careful facial treatments added on to taking medicines and tonics for her body, Yu Wanqing's face had completely recovered. The little maiden had a round and adorable face, pale and tender skin, and a pair of smiling eyes. Her adorable looks made it very easy for other people to immediately like her.

Official Yu had invited young maidens who were the daughters of his colleagues to the banquet, the daughters of his friends and family, as well as the ladies who were good friends with his daughter.

Although Official Yu had already taken up his post and been in the capital for more than two years, this was the first time his daughter was showing her face in public. Many people were curious about Miss Yu and wanted to know what she looked like. Was she truly like what the rumors claimed? So ugly that she was embarrassed to see people?

There were always bored people in the world who loved to exchange gossip behind people's backs. As for Official Yu's daughter, she was always sickly and very rarely went out to see people. Thus, when the rumors came out that she was ugly beyond comparison, there were people who thought that there was a grain of truth in it all.

As soon as they found out that Yu Wanqing would show herself in front of everyone at her birthday party, many noble matrons and maidens were very curious to see what she looked like. Even those with only tenuous connections to the Yu Family came over to partake in the festivities after getting the news. All of these people came with gifts on hand. Official Yu was a bit flabbergasted at how good his relationships were with other people and hurriedly told the servants to prepare a few more banquet tables at the residence to avoid slighting any of the guests.

In fact, Wu Junling was one of those unexpected guests who showed up. Using the excuse of being distantly related, she and her mother went to participate. Official Wu had thought that being able to have a good relationship with the third-ranked Left Assistant Minister from the Ministry of Appointments would be beneficial to his future career and promotion. Thus, he had presumptuously sent his wife and daughter to Assistant Minister Yu's banquet. Before they left their home, he had especially warned Jiang Meiyi, "If you manage to cause trouble this time, in the future, you will be shut in the inner courtyard's family temple and forced to be vegetarian and recite sutras!"

Ever since the fiasco regarding Royal Prince Yang had occurred, Wu Dingsen had removed the power of managing the household from Jiang Meiyi's hands and had temporarily given it to his beloved concubine who had birthed him a son. Whether or not Jiang Meiyi managed to reflect on her actions and grow up was a future question! Currently, Jiang Meiyi felt very aggrieved at all of this and a wisp of hatred was threaded through her heart. However, she didn't dare to throw a tantrum in front of Official Wu, so she could only resentfully pass the power away.

This time, when they went out, Wu Junling had also repeatedly warned her mother, "When we are there, you should speak less and just keep a gentle smile on your face. If you really can't keep quiet, then make sure to say some things that sound nice. Keep an eye out for my expression."

Now, even her most beloved daughter was no longer on the same wavelength as her. Jiang Meiyi was so incensed that she babbled incoherently, "Do you also think that I, as your mother, make you lose face ah? Have you ever thought as to why I can't raise my head around your father? It's because I birthed three good-for-nothings in a row!! If you were a son, do you think your father would treat me this way? Would there still be that cheap slut in the house?"

Wu Junling almost wanted to cry from her mother's stupidity. She took in a deep breath and explained, "Mother, is there any point in talking about this now ah? You are still the legitimate wife of the Wu Family. As long as you don't make another mistake, your status at home will not change. Your top-most priority right now is to change the way Father sees you! This isn't the time to throw a temper tantrum!!"

Jiang Meiyi had also been scared after the recent events and was afraid that she would be locked up in the family temple, forced to endure hardships. She curled her lip and said, "I know. I just won't talk when we get there, that's all!"

At the Yu Residence, they had especially prepared an elegantly decorated little courtyard to receive the young maidens as guests there. The young ladies first went with their mothers to greet the Assistant Minister's matriarch and wife before they were brought to the courtyard.

Because she was friendly with Yu Xiaocao, Yu Wanqing also became acquainted with the spirited and lively He Wanning, the outwardly cold but actually easy to get along with Yuan Xueyan, and the gentle and sweet Li Mengru. The good friends had arrived relatively early and had already been seated at the main table to drink tea and eat pastries.

The tea there was provided by Yu Xiaocao and it was the famous flower tea that nourished one's body. The pastries were provided by the Yu's Dessert Shop and they were the new western-style pastries. Fruits had also been obtained from the back mountains in the Imperial Plantation. The group of young maidens happily sipped at the fragrant rose blossom tea, ate cream puffs stuffed full with luscious cream, and chatted merrily amongst themselves about interesting happenings throughout the capital.

As soon as Wu Junling entered the reception pavilion, she saw Yu Xiaocao, who was dressed in a set of beautiful qi-style attire and had her hair combed up into a pair of cute flower buns. The other girl was currently pointing at a platter full of jewel-toned purple grapes and telling her good friends to taste them.

Wu Junling stopped walking and silently measured up Yu Xiaocao in her eyes. Her heart was filled with dissatisfaction. The girl in front of her was merely a short wax gourd who was so skinny that she didn't have a figure. At most, her features could be considered cute. Anyone with eyes would choose herself, who was much more beautiful and alluring! Was her older maternal cousin blind ah? Or was it that this lass used some underhanded methods to seduce him? How could he only have eyes for a little brat who didn't even look like much?

A woman's heart was truly unfathomable sometimes. For example, Wu Junling had personally experienced what Royal Prince Yang was like when he lost control of himself. Other than deep fear, she held no other feelings towards him. However, when she encountered the woman he liked, she felt incredibly jealous for some reason. It was as if she needed to compete with Yu Xiaocao no matter what. Only when she had firmly pushed down her 'rival' beneath her feet would she finally feel happy.

Yu Xiaocao could sense the other girl blatantly staring at her and glanced at Wu Junling through the corner of her eyes. She silently laughed inside. The heavens truly had eyes. Before she could even start scheming, the person in question had sent herself over. Today, she was going to use Younger Sister Wanqing's birthday celebration to thoroughly get rid of the hidden danger to Zhu Junyang!

Yu Xiaocao lowered her head and took a sip of the fragrant tea. The dimples at the side of her face were barely visible. Those who were familiar with her would have known instantly upon seeing that expression that she was up to no good again.

Although Yu Xiaocao could happily ignore Wu Junling, Yu Wanqing, as the hostess, couldn't. Even though she had never met this beautiful older sister before, the maiden in front of her was still a guest. Yu Wanqing cheerfully went up to greet her. After Wu Junling introduced herself and gave the birthday girl a present, she was then sent to one of the tables to the right of the main table to sit at.

The vast majority of young maidens at this table were the daughters of fourth and fifth-ranked officials. Most of them already knew each other, so only Wu Junling was an unfamiliar face here. When they found out that she was only the daughter of a small fifth-level official and that her father was working at the Qingshui yamen, the rest of the ladies at the table exchanged looks. They gradually began to ignore her. Was being beautiful anything to be proud of? Within the noble circles in the capital, being beautiful alone was not enough. The most important thing was still your family's status!

How could Wu Junling, who was quite sensitive, not figure out that she was being snubbed by the other girls? She had attempted a few times to make conversation with some of the young maidens at the table but all of her attempts were either rebuffed or duly ignored. It looked like she needed to do something else at this rate.

She discovered that the two young ladies sitting next to her praised the tea that they drank and the pastries that they ate without end. Some of the young maidens continuously sipped at the rose-blossom tea. After all, one cup of flower tea cost at least a few dozen taels! As for the pastries and fruits, they all said that apparently Feudal Princess Jinan had provided them to the banquet for free.

"Who would have thought that Miss Yu would manage to become friends with Feudal Princess Jinan? In the future, the Yu Residence will absolutely not lack for fresh fruits or vegetables! As for these cream-based pastries, even if you line up you may not be able to buy any."

"I heard that, in the past, Miss Yu had fearsome looking pimples growing all over the face. They were simultaneously red and very swollen and she couldn't go out to see people! It was only after she went to

Feudal Princess Jinan's 'Blossoming Beauty' health and beauty club that her face healed. I heard that she spent around tens of thousands of taels on this treatment. This Yu Family truly has money!”

“My mother told me that when Lady Yu married Official Yu, her dowry chests made a long train. In fact, in terms of cash alone, she had brought over tens of thousands of taels. The Yu Family doesn't lack money at all. Lady Yu only has one precious daughter. Let alone tens of thousands of taels, even if it reached hundreds of thousands of taels, she would happily spend the money to treat her daughter!”

“If my mother was this rich, that would be so great! I had my eye on a set of whitening skincare from 'Blossoming Beauty' that cost around a thousand taels. I begged my mother for a long time yet she still couldn't bear to take out the money to get it for me. You guys should look at Miss He. In the past, her skin was so coarse and tanned but now it's so tender and pale. It's obvious just how well those cosmetics work.”

“I heard that Miss He is one of the very few who has a diamond card level membership at the spa! Furthermore, many of her personal cosmetic items were custom-made by Feudal Princess Jinan herself for free!”

“Feudal Princess Jinan is so generous ah! If I could become friends with her that would be great...”

“If any of us were able to become friends with Feudal Princess Jinan, that meant that our ancestors had done a lot of meritorious deeds ah. I heard that the two beauties of the capital and Royal Princess Minglan had been invited on an outing to the Imperial Plantation. You all know about the fruit orchard on the back mountains of the Imperial Plantation, right?”

“Psh! Who doesn't know? The fruit trees that Feudal Princess Jinan plants all produce fruits that are a hundred items more delicious than regular fruits! Especially the honey peaches. As soon as they enter one's mouth, they melt into juice...just thinking about it makes my saliva flow. Unfortunately, sales of fruit are rationed every day and as soon as they hit the shelves they disappear. My family was just able to snatch a box after trying for a long time. The peaches cost a hundred taels a box and each box only has six honey peaches in it. However, the taste is so incredibly delicious. I've never eaten such delicious fruit in my life before!”

Wu Junling looked at the entire table of young maidens who all had looks of envy on their faces. They made it sound like eating a honey peach was truly an experience to remember. She couldn't help but become curious. Wasn't it just a peach ah? She had often eaten peaches when she was living in Huai'an

prefecture. These young maidens in the capital were truly too uncouth to even brag about eating peaches in this way!