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Once the eldest imperial prince's two imperial bodyguards found their master and made sure he was safe, they followed the noise and discovered the weak and delicate looking Official Yu holding a dagger as she stood next to a very dead tiger corpse. She was currently wondering just how she should skin the tiger in order to keep its pelt as intact as possible.

The two bodyguards had their eyes wide open and it seemed as if their eyeballs would fall out of their sockets at any moment. Yu Xiaocao revealed an embarrassed smile and said, "Please don't misunderstand. This tiger was killed by Little Black and Little White. I mostly thought that the animal didn't have much meat on it and wanted to skin the pelt to bring back."

The situation had already passed and the two imperial bodyguards had already heard the gist of what had happened from the eldest imperial prince. A little girl, around thirteen to fourteen years of age, was able to boldly lure a fierce tiger away from the eldest imperial prince. Furthermore, she was able to stay completely unharmed and was now calmly holding a knife in an attempt to skin the dead tiger. This was already incredibly amazing! Any other young maiden in her shoes would have only screamed in fright and gone into a dead faint, becoming no help at all and likely becoming an impediment instead.

Originally, Xiaocao thought that even though the tiger was very skinny, she still wouldn't have enough strength to carry it back to the rest area. Now, with two free laborers around, if they wanted to bring the entire animal back, they were more than welcome to! Little Black and Little White had been keeping guard over Xiaocao this entire time. When they noticed that more protection had arrived, they eagerly leapt into the forest. There was still prey that they had killed earlier that they hadn't brought back.

"Wah wah wah...Official Yu, I didn't know if I'd be able to ever see you again..." What was this little brat saying? Can't he be happy and excited to see her alive? Seeing him sob like this made it seem like he didn't actually want to see her.

When the imperial bodyguards picked up the tiger corpse, the little brat's expression immediately cleared and he bounced around the dead tiger excitedly, "Official Yu, did you kill the tiger ah? You're so strong ah! You're even stronger than Wu Song !!"

'Child, you're thinking too much. Can't you see the dead tiger's throat? It's clearly been ripped open ah.' Yu Xiaocao silently pointed at the wound on the dead tiger. The little brat believed that he had discovered something amazing and continued to remark emotionally, "Little Black and Little White bit the tiger to death ah? Goodness gracious! Official Yu, the hunting dogs you raise are so fierce and

powerful, even a tiger isn't their opponent!! Third Young Master Ning even claims that he is the best expert in the capital at training hunting dogs. He must be talking big, right? The best expert really should be you!! Where's Little Black and Little White? Did they get injured in the fight?"

"They went off to hunt more game! Your Highness, I'm not sure if this area is safe right now. How about we go back first ah?" Yu Xiaocao still had some lingering fears after that thrilling episode. If the person who let out the starving tiger had another trick up their sleeve, they only had two bodyguards here with them and it'd be very difficult for them to get out without any problems.

Fortunately, the eldest imperial prince grasped the severity of the situation that they were in and nodded his head in agreement, "That's a good idea! When we get back, I'll have Imperial Father look into this. Why would a tiger appear in this area? We got a pretty good haul today. After all, not just anyone has the skill and luck to be able to kill a tiger!!"

They returned back to where they had hitched the horses and the two maidservants were already there waiting for them. Chunhua noticed that Xiaocao looked quite disheveled and even had a scratch on her face. The expression on her face changed and she hurried over to ask, "Master, what happened—did you encounter a fierce tiger?"

Qishu also frowned and remarked doubtfully, "Didn't they say that the areas in this vicinity only contained small animals ah? How could a vicious tiger appear?" The two imperial bodyguards also had similar doubts.

Yu Xiaocao waved a hand at the two girls and said, "Don't be nervous, I'm fine!! Let's go back first and see what the emperor says!!"

At this moment, Zhu Hanwen had already completely calmed down and a cold sneer was on his plump face as he said, "That's right ah! Not only did a tiger 'coincidentally' appear in this safe area, but it also appeared at my back. If it wasn't for Official Yu, this prince would have been devoured with nothing left!"

Anyone born into the imperial family didn't get a true childhood. Only those who forced themselves to mature quickly would be able to survive the treacherous political currents and not get buried behind in the ground. Zhu Hanwen was already considered quite lucky. He was the legitimate son of the empress and was also the first child of the emperor. He was also the only imperial prince in the palace and there were no rivals fighting for his position. However, even at such a young age, he was able to sense that there was something off about all of this and that someone was plotting against him.

Since it involved the imperial family, Yu Xiaocao was not going to voice her opinion at this time. She only silently rode her horse behind the eldest imperial prince as they went back in the direction of the camp.

The eldest imperial prince's pony took the lead. The emperor and empress, who were idly strolling on the outskirts of the camp, spotted their son far in the distance and they felt their anxious hearts finally relax. Zhu Junyang, who was also patrolling around the perimeter, also saw a familiar figure and the expression on his face gentled considerably.

Suddenly, he frowned as he observed the faraway figures of the people. A severe expression settled onto his face as he reported to the emperor, "Imperial Majesty, there's something off. It looks like Official Yu had gotten injured! This official asks for permission to go over and check..."

"Go ahead, go ahead ah!" Zhu Junfan wasn't going to believe his cousin's lies. They had only been separated for half a day yet the youth still couldn't sit still and was looking for an excuse to get closer. Didn't he know to come up with a better explanation? There were bodyguards and other experts protecting them, how could they possibly let that lass Yu Xiaocao get injured?

Zhu Junyang speedily mounted his horse after getting imperial permission and bolted off towards the small hunting group. When he saw the dead tiger being carried on one of the imperial bodyguard's horses, the worry and caution in his eyes became much more distinct.

"Imperial Highness, are you okay ah...Xiaocao, you got injured?!" While he was conversing with the prince, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Yu Xiaocao's hair was all mussed up and there was an eye-catching scratch on her fair little face. He almost couldn't resist the urge to pull her into his arms.

What had happened? Everyone else didn't have a single scratch on them. It was only his little lass who had her clothing all messed up, her hair in disarray, and a wound on her face. Judging by the injuries on the dead tiger, did he even need an explanation now? If the little lass hadn't raised two wolves, she...Zhu Junyang didn't even want to go down that line of thought!

"Just how were you two protecting your master?!!" Zhu Junyang vented his entire temper on the two maidservants. He had spent a lot of time snatching them out of the hidden soldiers' ranks, but they had decided to act like they were young misses instead? Their master had gotten injured yet not a strand was out of place for either of them! This was a crime that could not be forgiven within the hidden soldiers' ranks...

Chunhua and Qiushi trembled as they knelt down in front of their infuriated previous master. For them, their master's safety and well-being was more important than their lives. If they were unable to protect their master, then they would be tortured within the hidden soldiers' hidden chamber. Even if they didn't die, they would still lose a layer of skin. These two female bodyguards, who had just reached the age of sixteen, didn't even dare to beg for mercy and could only wait in despair for their punishment.

“Zhu Junyang, just why are you scaring them? The scratch on my face is only from a branch that I brushed past, that's all. Only the skin got broken, and I don't even need to put on any medicine in order to have it heal without a scar!!” Yu Xiaocao explicitly expressed her disapproval of the prince's way of handling things. These two maidservants had already been given to her. As their mistress, she hadn't even said a word, so why should someone who was irrelevant butt in? Was that really proper?

Zhu Junyang immediately stowed away his temper when he saw that she had gotten angry. He gently clasped her small face in one hand and inspected the cut on her cheek as he gently said, “Are you sure it happened because a wayward branch hit you and not because the tiger's claws had narrowly missed you?”

Yu Xiaocao pretended to be completely carefree as she replied, “With Little Black and Little White around, even if another tiger appeared, I wouldn't be hurt at all! This was the first time I had seen a tiger in person and was a bit flustered. When I was turning around, I wasn't paying attention and had brushed past a branch that had thorns on it. That's all.”

Zhu Junyang, on the other hand, saw through her bold façade and discovered the fear within her. He gently pulled her into his arms and felt her body still trembling slightly. He hurriedly tried to comfort her and his voice became even more gentle as he soothed, “Don't be scared! This prince is here now! Our Xiaocao is so awesome that you can even calm me down when I'm in a rage. How could a tiger be counted as anything in front of you?”

During the moment she was pulled into his warm embrace, Yu Xiaocao felt tears come to her eyes. However, after she heard Zhu Junyang's subsequent words, she burst into laughter. She remembered the scene at the Wu Family's residence. The prince had completely lost control of himself and had destroyed the area, making it look like an earthquake had just passed through. At that time, he was ten times more fierce and scary than a tiger. Despite that, she had confronted him in that state and hadn't felt the least bit afraid the entire time. Perhaps she unconsciously knew that he would never harm her, right?

She sniffled a few times and then used a spoiled tone to complain, “When the tiger ran towards me, I was so scared! I was afraid that if I died, what would you do in the future? I also wondered if Sir Su would be able to subdue you in the future should you lose control without me!

“The only person in the world who is able to control me is you. Thus, you absolutely cannot have anything happen to you. Otherwise, this prince will also go down to hell with you...”

Zhu Junyang tightened his arms around that slim and weak little figure and gave her a kiss on the head. Relief was entwined with a bit of sweet happiness—the little lass had only thought about him when she was in imminent danger. Zhu Junyang had finally comprehended the true meaning of 'happiness' at this moment.

“And then what happened?” Zhu Junyang quietly asked.

Yu Xiaocao returned his hug. His embrace made her feel very warm and safe inside. It was as if a sailboat that had endured the stormy waters of sea had finally gotten back to the tranquil safety of the harbor. She had a home now for her heart.

“Next? What do you mean what's next??” Yu Xiaocao's voice sounded quite stuffy as her head was buried into his chest. It was a sound that brought pure pleasure to his ears.

“You said that the tiger leapt towards you. So what happened next?” Zhu Junyang gently patted her back with extremely soft movements. It was as if the girl in his arms was a weak and precious little infant.

Yu Xiaocao blinked her large eyes a few times at an angle where he couldn't see the expression on her face. Anyone who knew her would know instantly from looking at that face that her following words were not to be trusted. Sure enough, she concealed the little divine stone's contribution and pushed Little Black and Little White out instead, “Then...naturally Little White came by at just the right time and bravely appeared between me and the tiger. It managed to engage the tiger and pull it away from me to battle it. Following that, Little Black also ran over. If it wasn't for the fact that I wanted the tiger pelt, Little Black and Little White would have long torn the tiger to pieces by working together!!”

Zhu Hanwen was silently listening at the side as Xiaocao described how the two wolves had fought the fierce tiger. He gazed at Little Black and Little White with a look of pure admiration in his eyes. He

esteemed their strength and boldness and admired their loyalty towards their master. Although he would have luckily gotten away today, if it wasn't for the two wolves, then he would have had to sacrifice Official Yu's life. The loss would still be great. His imperial father would lose one of the best ways to strengthen and enrich the country, and he would have to bear the guilt and shame towards the Yu Family for the rest of his life. Furthermore, it was likely that he would have to bear the loss of losing Royal Prince Yang, who was a brilliant general...

"Official Yu, you are my savior! Expressing my gratitude for such a boon is not enough. This prince will remember your deeds in my heart for the rest of my life!" Zhu Hanwen had an extremely solemn look on his childish little face and his eyes were filled with gratitude.

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After Yu Xiaocao calmed her nerves down, she emerged out of Zhu Junyang's arms and addressed the serious looking eldest imperial prince, "Your Imperial Highness, you don't need to take this episode to heart. I also did this to save my own life. Just think about it, if something happened to you in front of this official, and I just stayed on the sidelines, running away for my own life, how could the emperor possibly spare me?"

Zhu Hanwen revealed a slight smile and his expression relaxed a bit. He shook his head and said, "However, I still need to thank you because not everyone would be able to sacrifice their own safety to save another person in the face of immense danger. Although Official Yu is a woman, your actions and bravery are above most men! Imperial Father was right. The world has so many women of distinction who are buried in the inner courtyards, forbidden to go outside. We need to release them and give them their freedom to reach their true potential!"

By the time the group of them reached the edge of the campgrounds, the emperor had already gotten a full report of what had happened. The empress pulled the eldest imperial prince aside and inspected him carefully from head to toe before she was finally convinced that not a hair had been harmed on him.

She pulled her son into her arms. Currently, she was only an ordinary mother who was concerned about her son's safety. She haltingly stated in a voice choked with emotion, "My child, why couldn't you just obediently stay next to Imperial Father's and Imperial Mother's side? Yet you insisted on going out to hunt! If something terrible had happened to you, how would Imperial Mother feel then?"

Zhu Junfan looked at Yu Xiaocao for a minute and then looked back to address the mother-son pair, "Don't cry, isn't our imperial son fine? A pine tree raised in a greenhouse will be unable to reach the skies. As the heir to the throne, if Wen'er can't even handle the slightest bit of trouble, then we will truly be worried about the throne in the future."

“Imperial Father, the appearance of this tiger was a bit strange...” Zhu Hanwen wriggled out of his mother's arms and his pair of round eyes held a hint of seriousness. The appearance of the tiger was too coincidental. Why did it not appear in a different area and instead showed up right where he was at? If this wasn't fishy, then he...would eat this entire tiger!!

Zhu Junfan narrowed his eyes, which had a bit of resemblance to Imperial Prince Jing's eyes, and raised a hand to stop the eldest imperial prince from stating his next thoughts. He had a solemn look on his face, “Wen'er, you've been frightened, so you should go back to the temporary residence to rest a bit. Tonight, we still have a bonfire and banquet to participate in! Don't worry, we have our own suspicions about this. Someone come...take this tiger away!”

“My tiger pelt...” Yu Xiaocao was very interested in this tiger pelt but she had to stare blankly as servants took it away. She revealed a reluctant expression on her face which was very obvious to everyone that was present. However, when she saw the faint look of amusement on the emperor's face, she shrank back in fright. She didn't dare to bring up the topic of the tiger pelt again.

Sigh...the little lass had a bunch of regret within her heart. In her previous life, Amur tigers had been classified as a grade one state protected species. It was said that the country only had around a few dozen wild tigers. She could only see tigers in zoos, but the animals there had been raised as if they were giant house cats and had no wildness left in them. It'd be impossible in that time period to get her hands on a tiger pelt even if she wanted to!

Even after transmigrating over, it wasn't as if a tiger could be hunted whenever one wanted to. In Yu Xiaocao's eyes, if she was able to have a tiger pelt to be used as a mattress, that would be incredibly awesome. However...the tiger pelt that had appeared before her eyes had been shamelessly snatched away by someone who had way more power than she did. She could only grit her teeth and twist her handkerchief as she blankly watched as the tiger pelt was taken further and further away from her.

“Beloved Official Yu, we will gladly receive this game that you have offered as tribute!” The same shameless bandit was shoving another dagger into her heart. Who sent this up as tribute ah? Clearly it was you snatching it away from me!

“Our imperial father has had a weak body for quite some time and cannot tolerate the deep cold during the winter. This tiger pelt will be a sign of our filial respect for him. We will not take this pelt for free from you and will definitely compensate you fairly with treasures.” Zhu Junfan deigned to give an explanation to her.

“Your Imperial Majesty has an imperial father?” Yu Xiaocao couldn't help but blurt out the question that was twirling in her mind.

Zhu Junfan lightly chuckled and replied, “It's not as if we were born out of a crack in a rock like Monkey Sun. How could we not have an imperial father ah? However, Imperial Father's body has been weak and he has been recuperating in the south all this time. After thinking about it, it seems like it has been many years since we last saw our imperial father!”

The emperor's father was Imperial Prince Duan. In the past, during the chaos of war and the fight for the throne, in the middle of winter, he had harmed his body and constitution when he saved the emperor emeritus who had fallen into an icy river. His body's condition was sometimes good and sometimes bad, but he had been weak and sickly ever since that incident. As for the emperor emeritus, he had the halo of transmigration and hadn't even gotten a cold or cough after spending a copious amount of time in the icy water.

Yu Xiaocao had originally thought that the reason why the emperor emeritus had passed on the throne to his grandson was because the current emperor's father was no longer alive. She didn't expect that he had skipped a generation and directly transferred the throne to the grandson he looked the most highly upon.

“Imperial Father, this son acts for permission to go see imperial grandfather in Jiangnan so I can do one's filial duty for you.” Zhu Hanwen's eyes glittered with the craftiness of a child as he butted into the conversation.

Zhu Junfan glared at him. Earlier the child had just mentioned that there was a plot against him and they hadn't even found out who the culprit was, yet this kid now wanted to go play in Jiangnan. Hmph! It looked like he needed to temper his son a bit more. In the future, he was adding more schoolwork to this brat!

“Your imperial grandfather's body has gotten a lot better after eating the warming pills made by Tongren Medicine Hall. We plan on bringing our imperial father back and have the imperial physicians take a look at him and see if there's any hope in healing his body back to normal.” Zhu Junfan easily rejected the little brat's request.

Zhu Hanwen was a bit disappointed but continued to sincerely think of his grandfather, “Imperial Father, are you sure that bunch of charlatans in the imperial physician compound are up to it? If we're talking about healing the body, Official Yu should be the best expert here. Wasn't Princess Consort Jing's body healed by her?”

At that time, everyone in the capital knew that Princess Consort Jing was an invalid but now she seemed to have no problems at all. In fact, compared to people of the same age as her, she even looked healthier and livelier. This was truly all due to Official Yu's medicinal cuisine!

“Imperial Son, you must think before you speak!” What charlatans? If the imperial physicians accompanying them heard his son's words, what would they think? Why did this child have to speak to truth so candidly?

Ever since his son found out that his life had almost been lost by the ineffective treatments of the imperial physicians, he had always regarded the bunch of old men with disdain. In addition, the imperial physicians only knew how to prescribe incredibly bitter tonics that he hated to drink. Yu Xiaocao, on the other hand, knew how to make sweet and tasty medicine to treat his illnesses. This child now believed that all of the imperial physicians added together were not as skilled as Official Yu!

He couldn't have his son continue believing this! After all, Zhu Junfan knew what cards Yu Xiaocao had in her hands. Should the intelligent stone leave her one day, then all of her so-called medical expertise and ability to concoct astonishing medications would disappear. Although the old fellows at the imperial physician compound were a bit more conservative in their prescribing methods, they had all been born and raised in medicinal families, so they weren't all incompetent.

After getting scolded by his imperial father, Zhu Hanwen pouted his lips slightly in discontent. What good were the old men at the imperial physician compound if they couldn't even diagnose dysentery? Now, most of the imperial physicians had switched to using the pills and syrups that were made by Tongren Medicine Hall.

The efficacy and nature of these medications had all been proven. What sort of contributions did they have if they used someone else's medications to cure a patient? Furthermore, these pills and syrups had all been invented by Official Yu and were manufactured at workshops owned by her. Who was more skilled now? Wasn't the answer obvious?

“Imperial Majesty! Official Yu has gotten injured. This official will escort her back to the temporary imperial residence and ask one of the imperial physicians to take a look.” Although Xiaocao had

continued to emphasize that it was only a small flesh wound, the scrape was still on her face and it was better to be extra cautious. Young maidens needed to be careful with their faces. After all, if it didn't heal right and left a scar, wouldn't that ruin her looks?

The imperial couple had been preoccupied with their son and only now discovered that there was a three inch gash on Yu Xiaocao's face. The empress stated in a slightly worried tone, "Xiaocao got injured? You mustn't be too cavalier about an injury to the face. Chunhong, give Miss Yu some of my 'Healing Jade Ointment' to use. Xiaocao, don't worry. The efficacy of Healing Jade Ointment is quite good."

"This official gratefully accepts Your Imperial Majesty's benevolence!" Yu Xiaocao kneeled to express her thanks.

After getting permission from the emperor and empress, Zhu Junyang rode with the lass on pillion to the temporary imperial residence. Before long, Chunhong appeared with a bottle of Healing Jade Ointment on hand.

"Miss Yu, the recipe for this Healing Jade Ointment has been passed down for generations by her imperial majesty's maternal family. It is only given to women and not men, daughters and not sons. The ingredients for this ointment are quite precious and rare. The empress herself only has three bottles on hand! The fact that the empress has given you one bottle for your injury truly shows how highly her imperial majesty regards you." Chunhong was the personal palace maid of the empress and knew how to drum up support for her mistress.

"Thank you, Miss Chunhong, for running this errand. Please make sure to express my gratitude to the empress!" Yu Xiaocao still wasn't very used to the winding and graceful speech that was required when speaking to the imperial family. However, the smile on her face was quite sincere.

Ever since Yu Xiaocao had used the empress's name to open 'Blossoming Beauty', the renowned beauty and cosmetics spa, the empress had more opportunities to leave the imperial palace. Chunhong had also interacted with the young girl a few times and had a decent understanding of her. The maid smiled and then left the room, leaving Xiaocao and Zhu Junyang alone again.

"Come here, this prince will spread the ointment on for you." Zhu Junyang took the bottle of ointment from Wutong's hands and scooted forward a few steps. He bent down and held her face in one hand as he carefully inspected the wound. Although it was only a minor, superficial wound like she said it was, he still revealed a tender expression.

Yu Xiaocao stopped him from continuing, "Wait a moment, I need to clean the wound first. Hm, use the water in my water pouch then. That'll save us a trip to get some water."

Zhu Junyang's phoenix eyes glanced briefly at the water pouch at her waist and a hint of a smile appeared, "How about we use the water in my water pouch instead? I've only had a few sips of it and there's still quite a lot left!

"That won't work!" Yu Xiaocao was very opposed to this idea. The water in the prince's pouch was only ordinary water while the water in her pouch was the multi-use mystic-stone water that could reduce swelling, relieve pain, and prevent inflammation. How could they be the same thing?

When she saw the look in Zhu Junyang's eyes, she carefully crafted a believable lie to explain, "You've already taken sips from your water pouch. A person's mouth has a lot of germs in it. If my wound got infected from that, wouldn't that make be causing a serious injury from a minor one?"

"Then...are you telling me you haven't taken a sip from your water pouch?" Zhu Junyang expressed that he was quite curious about the term 'germ'. The little lass often said some interesting phrases that he had never heard of before. He had already gotten used to this quirk of hers.

"I...I'm already immune to the germs that live in my mouth. Perhaps you don't understand what 'immune' means, but you should understand the term 'resistance' right? Therefore, I won't get infected!" Yu Xiaocao made a few leaps of logic and twisted her words to suit the situation.

"Then...how come this prince has heard of the fact that saliva can help wounds heal? Just look, many people lick their wounds when they get injured, so isn't that a valid thing to do?" Zhu Junyang knew that the water in the little lass's pouch as well as all of the water consumed by the Yu Family was different from ordinary water. However, he just wasn't making it known that he knew about this.

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Yu Xiaocao's willow-like eyebrows came together in a frown as she tried to think of a way to convince Zhu Junyang to use the mystic-stone water within her pouch to clean her wound. Zhu Junyang suppressed the smile on his lips and earnestly said, 'What's wrong? Don't you think this prince makes sense ah? How about this? I could help you lick your wounds and use my saliva to help you disinfect it...'

Wutong, who was waiting at the side if her master needed anything, felt her face turn bright red! She hesitated a bit. If Royal Prince Yang really planned on using his saliva to wash her young miss's face, how should she stop him?

“Go away! Aren't you dirty ah? Isn't it disgusting to use your saliva to lick my wounds?” Yu Xiaocao almost wanted to laugh at the absurdness of it all. This fellow just knew how to take advantage of her. Why did she used to think that he was a cold and aloof person? Clearly, he was just a shameless rascal!

Zhu Junyang couldn't restrain his laughter any longer and took the water pouch from her hands, “Alright, I'll stop teasing you! This prince will help you clean your wound. Wutong, where's your young miss's cosmetic box? Go take out a few cotton swabs and bring them here.”

Although Yu Xiaocao hadn't reached the age when she would start using cosmetics, she had already prepared a beautiful red sandalwood box that was delicately carved to carry them. Inside the box there were some daily necessities, skincare items, and some small pieces of jewelry. Cotton swabs were something she came up with but she didn't normally use them very frequently. Using them to clean and treat a wound was quite appropriate though.

Zhu Junyang dabbed the cotton swab into some mystic-stone water and carefully helped her to clean the gash on her face. After he cleaned up all of the congealed blood in the area, he discovered that the wound was quite deep. He couldn't help but tenderly help her blow a few times on it, “It's so deep, I don't know if it'll leave a scar or not!”

“Are you trying to tell me that you'll no longer like me if I have a scar on my face?” Yu Xiaocao, on the other hand, didn't really care too much about the wound on her face. Mystic-stone water was quite effective at preventing and removing scars. Even her mother, who previously had old scars on her hands from cutting grass, almost had no scars left after using it. How could a mild scratch on her face even compare?

Zhu Junyang helped her spread on some Healing Jade Ointment. His movements were incredibly gentle as if he was doing something that was very holy. The expression on his face was solemn and when he heard her remark, he rebuked it instantly, “Nonsense! Is this prince someone who has such a fickle heart ah?”

“It's hard to say ah! Men are visual creatures. As soon as they see a beautiful woman, their eyes are stuck on them and don't move! If I was like Official Yu's youngest daughter and had a face full of pimples, so swollen that I resembled a pig's head, and also had pustules that oozed pus and blood,

would you still like me?” Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes at him while she obediently kept her face still to allow him to spread the ointment more easily.

Zhu Junyang gave her a good-natured glare and stated, “When did you ever see me staring at another woman as if I didn't want to look away? If this prince really was a womanizer, wouldn't my inner courtyard be filled with beauties by now? How could I possibly set my eyes on you, an immature little lass?”

“Just what are you trying to imply here?” Yu Xiaocao instantly erupted in fury, “Are you claiming that I'm not beautiful? I have such tender skin, large doe-like eyes, long and lush eyelashes, and a delicate egg-shaped face. Do you still think I'm not pretty at all? Just what part of my looks don't meet up to your standards?”

Zhu Junyang deliberately held her face in his hand and stared at it for a long time. His sword-like brows knitted together into a frown and he solemnly declared, “Mm...after looking at your face closely...looks like your features have really opened and look quite fine together. All in all—you still resemble a silly little girl!”

“You're the silly little girl ah! Say it again, I dare you to say it again!!” Yu Xiaocao seethed at his comments and resembled a puffed up little frog. Her feet, which were shod in embroidered shoes, stamped down furiously at Zhu Junyang's boot-covered feet. That wasn't enough to vent her anger, so she even started jumping up and down on his feet.

Zhu Junyang handed the bottle of Healing Jade Ointment to Wutong and drew the little lass, who was still hopping up and down, into his arms. He let out a laugh that sounded as melodious as a string instrument and said, “My little silly girl, quickly grow up. Once you become a young and virtuous lady, then I will marry you. That'll stop you from having flights of fancy in that weird little head of yours. I just found out today that apparently you're quite afraid of this prince having a fickle heart ah!”

“Just who wants to marry you, hmph——” Yu Xiaocao arrogantly moved her head to the side even though her face was bright red. In her previous life, she had been solely preoccupied with earning money to support her family and never had the time to indulge in the pleasure of romance before she perished early. However, she never would have expected that after transmigrating over, the God of Transmigration would give her a chance to be with such a handsome and loyal dog of a man. As someone who had no romantic experience whatsoever, it was a bit embarrassing that she had no defenses against such an alluring man at all.

Zhu Junyang decided to give her a break and quietly changed the subject, "Where did you guys meet up with the tiger? Be as detailed as you can."

Yu Xiaocao described everything as they happened today to him. She also added her opinion of the situation at the end, "Everyone had confirmed that the hunting area that we were at didn't have any ferocious beasts. In fact, even the slightly more dangerous wild boars and pigs weren't allowed in that area. How could a tiger suddenly appear then? There must be a conspiracy afoot, one that is targeting the eldest imperial prince!"

Zhu Junyang gently knocked on her head and smiled, "Oh! Looks like you finally grew some brains! Your analysis makes a lot of sense. This situation is not very simple so we cannot assume that there was no outsider involvement. However, there's no need for you to worry about this. I'm sure the emperor has his own suspicions. Go eat something now. In a moment, when the other people out hunting come back, wouldn't you want to see the results from today?"

Yu Xiaocao remarked in an uninterested tone, "You didn't even participate in the competition today, so whoever is first today has nothing to do with me. It doesn't matter if I even go out or not."

"Xiaocao, who would have thought that you were hoping that this prince would get first place ah? Alright, tomorrow I'll ask the emperor for a day off so I can help you get a tiger pelt! I guarantee that the pelt I get will be that much better than the one the emperor took away!" Zhu Junyang, who always kept a close eye on the lass, naturally spotted the disappointment that had flashed through her eyes when the tiger pelt had been taken away from her.

Yu Xiaocao's spirits immediately came up and a brilliant smile blossomed onto her face, "Okay ah, okay! With your archery skills, killing a tiger must be a piece of cake for you. However...do you think there is another tiger to be had on these hunting grounds?"

Zhu Junyang tapped on her nose and lightly chuckled, "Don't worry, even if these grounds don't have any, this prince will head into the deep mountains to find one for you! When have I ever not done what I promised before? Let's go, we should see what their spoils are like today!"

In the evening, before the sun had set behind the western mountain range, the people who had gone out to hunt had all successively returned. There was quite a lot of game to be had on these hunting grounds and everyone more or less had some sort of harvest. Even He Wanning, who was a noble young maiden and had been taught some rudimentary equestrian archery, came back with game on hand.

He Wanning walked over with a string of colorful wild pheasants and plump wild hares. From the self-satisfied expression on her face, one could easily tell that she was very pleased with her results today. Royal Princess Minglan also had a decent amount of game on hand and she had even managed to bring down a fat and plump roe deer! There were also some young maidens from military families who participated in the hunt. They were dressed valiantly and had long strings of game hanging off of their horses. These maidens all had proud expressions on their faces.

As for the men who were skilled in martial arts and equestrian archery, they naturally had very good hauls from the hunt today. However, the person who did unexpectedly well was the rascally good-for-nothing Third Young Master from Duke Rongguo's Estate. The amount of game he brought back was easily more than the other people's and he even had a large wild boar in his haul. No one needed to even count to know that he was the one who was going to take first place today.

“Congratulations Brother Ning!” The second place winner, Lu Hao, elegantly cupped his hands at the other man while he congratulated the first place winner.

Ning Donghuan squeezed out a smile, “Brother Lu, how could you, as a close friend, not know how much game is from my own efforts? More than half of the game here wasn't killed by me!”

Lu Hao noticed that most of the game had been killed with a snap to the neck. Then he looked at the two heroic looking mastiffs behind Ning Donghuan and said, “The game that your hunting dogs catch are also counted under you. You do deserve first place for this, Brother Ning.”

Ning Donghuan waved his hand frantically, “How would my hunting dogs have the ability to kill a wild boar so easily? Look more carefully at the wounds on the game. Don't you have a feeling of *déjà vu* seeing this?”

Lu Hao had also gone out on the outings that Yu Xiaocao had organized before. Thus, he was a bit familiar with the hunting tactics that her two large wolves had. When he noticed that the vast majority of game here had all had their throats ripped out and their necks snapped in two, without any other wounds on their bodies, he had a better understanding of what had happened.

He remarked in puzzlement, “Aren't Little Black and Little White quite protective of their spoils ah? Why did they allow you to take their game?” He also remembered that Ning Donghuan had once coveted the two wolves' spoils when they were in the back hills of the Imperial Plantation. However, the young

master had been punished summarily by these two wolves and had ended up with his clothes ripped to ribbons and his naked butt revealed to everyone there. When did this Ning fellow become some close to these two creatures?

“Sigh...don't even mention it or ask!!” Ning Donghuan had a resigned expression on his face.

Apparently, Ning Donghuan had brought his two mastiffs along with two servants along to the hunting grounds. He chose a relatively safe area to hunt. As he shot prey himself, he was also training his two beloved dogs how to hunt properly. As they wandered around, the two mastiffs suddenly put their tails between their legs and looked terrified.

Ning Donghuan had thought that he had come across a dangerous animal. With his own skills, he'd be able to bring down a medium sized animal without any problems. However, if a tiger appeared or some other incredibly vicious beast, he could only run away for his life. He at least had this much self-awareness. Immediately, his heart started pounding faster as he looked around to see what was going on.

At this time, he heard the familiar howl of Little Black in the near vicinity. Ning Donghuan had salivated over these two wolves for a long time so he naturally recognized the howl. From the sounds of it, Little Black had likely encountered a large opponent and Ning Donghuan wondered if he should head forth to help in order to curry favor with Little Black and Little White. In the future, when the two of them had puppies, he might even be able to shamelessly cajole one out of them.

Thus, he gathered his courage and walked towards them. He was just in time to see Little Black easily subdue a large wild boar. Wild boars had thick hides but Little Black bit through the animal's neck in a single bite. It was very clear that the wolf had razor sharp teeth from that demonstration. Ning Donghuan thought his eyeballs were about to fall out of his head and desperately wished he could immediately bring Little Black back home. Unfortunately, even a wild boar couldn't put up much of a fight with Little Black, so how could he possibly subdue the wolf?

When he got closer, Little Black sensed him. Since Ning Donghuan already had a criminal record in the eyes of Little Black, the wolf stood menacingly in front of the dead boar and showed him his long, white teeth in a warning snarl.

“Don't misunderstand!” Ning Donghuan knew Miss Yu had raised Little Black and Little White to be incredibly intelligent and that they could mostly understand what a human said. He revealed a flattering smile and said, “I'm not here to try to steal game from you...this wild boar looks quite heavy, so won't it

be quite strenuous for you to bring it back? I have a lot of people here, how about we can help you move it back?"

Little Black understood the word 'help' but still gave Ning Donghuan a look that was full of distrust. Ning Donghuan immediately raised his hand to swear an oath to the heavens stating that he absolutely wasn't going to try to steal their game. He had a very sincere expression on his face and was doing all he could to convince the wolf of his good intentions.

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For the time being, Little Black decided to believe his 'sincerity'. However, the wolf didn't forget to bare his teeth at the youth one more time. Its meaning was very clear: 'If you decide to play some tricks, just watch as I make you show your bare butt to everyone!!'

With someone to help move the game, Little Black gleefully ran to the area where it had hidden its spoils and dragged out what it had caught one after another. There truly was a lot of game to be found at the hunting grounds. In a short period of time, the wolf was able to kill around a dozen prey.

Among them included a roebuck, a deer, and a roe deer. It also caught ferrets, red foxes, hazel grouses and other animals that were highly valued for their furs or delicate meat. It even had killed a giant elk that had to weigh around four to five hundred catties. Little Black was extremely strong to be able to drag over a piece of game that was even larger than it was.

When Little White got 'the news', it also hurried over to bring over what it had killed. Its haul was no smaller than Little Black's and had about the same variety as its brother. However, Little White had an addition of a beautiful animal from the wild cat family— an Amur leopard.

From Ning Donghuan's understanding of the Amur leopard, this creature had a very keen sense of smell, which helped it stalk its prey. It had four slender legs, razor sharp claws, and incredibly sharp teeth that were all used to strike its prey dead with one blow. Out of all of the animals in the kingdom, Amur leopards were considered one of the top three hunters. Let alone smaller prey, it routinely dined on larger, more dangerous animals like wild boars and black bears.

He would have never have expected that Little White, who he had determined to be a 'proud and adorable pet', actually had the ability to fight with an Amur leopard and even kill it without getting a single injury. Ning Donghuan's understanding of the two wolves' hunting ability had gone up another few notches.

By the afternoon, Ning Donghuan and his two hunting dogs had been downgraded to transporting game for the two wolves. Along with his two servants, they hauled the game on their shoulders before riding on their horses back. When he got back to the main campgrounds, he was simultaneously gratified and a bit at a loss when he saw that the pile of game in front of him was the largest of the lot. Unfortunately, more than half of the game wasn't considered his, so he could only be happy for a short while.

Little Black and Little White appeared to blindly follow him from behind. In other people's eyes, the procession was quite grand and impressive but Ning Donghuan knew that these two were only keeping a close eye on him. As soon as he showed a hint of trying to snatch away their game, they would start biting at his buttocks in revenge.

Therefore, as soon as Xiaocao appeared, Ning Donghuan hurriedly delivered these 'hot potatoes' to her, "Miss Xiaocao, this pile of game is all from the efforts of your two hunting dogs. This one is merely helping them bring them over for you. No need to thank me at all!"

The two of them sat in front of Xiaocao, one on the right and one on the left. Their azure blue eyes glittered with joy. Little Black looked especially happy as it used its paw to point at the wild boar that it had killed. The expression on its face clearly showed that it was asking for compliments. Xiaocao stood on her tiptoes and used her hands to stroke their heads before giving them each a large hug.

Out of all of the game here, she didn't seem very interested in the largest ones – the wild boar and elk. As for the delicate looking hazel grouse, the sables and red foxes that had gleaming fur, she took a second look at those. Little Black seemed to have learned something from that first day as in the following days, it ended up killing many hazel grouses, sables, and red foxes.

Sable fur was a valuable type of pelt and was considered one of the three treasures of the northeast, along with ginseng and young deer antler. In some previous dynasties, only officials of a high enough rank were entitled to wear clothing made from sable fur to show their status. In fact, there was a saying about all of this: 'First-ranked wears silver fox, second-ranked sable, third and fourth-ranked are allowed to wear common fox'. The meaning was very clear. Only second-ranked officials and above had the qualifications to wear sable fur. Fortunately, the current dynasty didn't have such a custom. Otherwise, Xiaocao, who was only a sixth-ranked official, was quite a bit away from being able to wear sable fur.

Although red fox fur was not as famous and valuable as silver fox fur, it was brightly colored and was often liked by young maidens. Red foxes were a commonly seen creature in the northeast of the country and the red foxes in these areas had full thick pelts with gloriously colored fur. Therefore, by the time the hunt ended, Yu Xiaocao ended up with around thirty to forty red fox pelts in her luggage and had around a dozen sable pelts as well. The young maidens who were close to her, such as He Wanning,

Royal Princess Minglan, Yuan Xueyan, Yu Wanqing and Li Mengru, all got a few red fox fur pelts from her. She gave some sable pelts to the empress, Princess Consort Jing, her godmother and mother. In the end, she only had enough furs left to make two sets of clothing for herself. Naturally, this was all in the future.

After checking the amount of game that each person who had participated on the first day had caught, as the master of Little Black and Little White, Yu Xiaocao had almost placed in the top three. If they had added on the tiger that the emperor had taken away from her, she absolutely would have placed in the top three and might have even been a contender for first place. Other than giving out the first three prizes, the emperor had also taken off a dragon-shaped jade pendant and given it to Yu Xiaocao, who had been looking at him in grievance this entire time.

The dragon-shaped jade pendant had been given to the emperor during his full moon ceremony by the emperor emeritus. Seeing the jade pendant was akin to seeing the emperor himself. Whoever had this pendant, no matter what sort of crime he or she committed, it could all be forgiven. Thus, it was equivalent to the golden token that excused being sentenced to the death penalty. The people who had taken the first three positions in the hunting competition were very envious of this prize. However, when they found out that Official Yu had risked her life to save the eldest imperial prince, they had no objections to this anymore. After all, the court only had this one prince, so his safety was absolutely more important than a mere jade pendant.

After receiving the equivalent to the 'golden token that saved one from the death penalty' and the 'sword that bestowed imperial power', Yu Xiaocao suddenly felt that the tiger pelt was no longer as important as before. Her large pair of eyes crinkled up in a joyous smile and her whole face resembled a tiny squirrel who had just stolen a hazelnut.

A few chancellors at court, who were very good at toadying up for personal gain, looked at her now in a different light. They were all wondering if there were any suitable descendants at home who could possibly become a good marriage match for little Official Yu. After all, she was heavily favored by the emperor so it might not be a bad idea to make an alliance with her. Furthermore, those officials who claimed that Yu Xiaocao was a 'woman who usurped authority' were once again squarely slapped in the face by the sight of this little lass gaining more favor from the emperor through her own skills and efforts.

For the next following few days, the hunt continued with enthusiasm from all participants. The younger generation all did their best to fight over the first three places. It was normally hard to come by a chance to show their faces in front of the emperor.

Unfortunately, none of them had any fate with taking first place anymore because Royal Prince Yang had entered the scene. Other than standing out the first day, he participated in all of the following days and easily snatched first place every day. All of the game he hunted, whether it was in terms of numbers or quality, easily surpassed the hauls of those in second and third place. Consequently, the legend of Royal Prince Yang dominating first place at the hunt became a sure thing.

On the very last day of the hunt, the sun had already set but Royal Prince Yang was still nowhere to be seen. The curtain of night was being pulled across the large grasslands and the stars started to twinkle naughtily in the dark blue sky. A cold night breeze began to blow and it brought along the fresh, unique smell of the grasslands with it. The bonfires had all been lit up in the camp. The emperor looked at the color of the sky and then glanced at the youths who were all waiting for the placings and rewards. There was still one person, the most spirited of them all, missing from that group of people.

“Su Ran, that fellow hasn't come back even now. Do you think he encountered a sticky situation somewhere ah?” The emperor kept a faint smile on his face as his lips barely moved while conversing with Chief Steward Su.

Su Ran replied as if nothing had happened, “Imperial Majesty, Royal Prince Yang is a genius at martial arts. These past two years, his skills have advanced by leaps and bounds. In fact, this servant may not be able to prevail against him in a one-on-one fight. Thus, there's no need for you to be worried.”

Even though the eunuch had said the words 'this servant', Su Ran's handsome appearance and demeanor still resembled that of a pure and lofty immortal.

Zhu Junfan gave him a look that said 'you broke the rules just now' and then continued to pretend to be dignified. After waiting another few minutes, although the officials and their offspring didn't obviously show their anxiety and impatience, it wasn't quite right to make them keep standing there in the cold wind. After all, there were quite a few older officials in the group and it wouldn't be good for them to be exposed to the elements for too long.

Just as the emperor was about to decide to stop waiting and announce the first three places as is, in the distant thickets, there was a flicker of torches. Yu Xiaocao keenly saw the light and cheered in a trumpeting tone, “Imperial Majesty, someone has come back. It must be Royal Prince Yang and the others!”

Even though it was getting dark and late and the forest was full of danger, Xiaocao wasn't too worried. Not only was Zhu Junyang's skills top-notch, but he also brought along Head Steward Liu and Bodyguard

Dong along, who were both top-experts at martial arts. In addition, no one else at court was possibly able to bend the bow that he used, so he was the top predator in the forest. Although she wasn't anxious about their personal safety, she was still worried about them being out so late and for so long.

As the torches got closer, it became clear it was Zhu Junyang and his subordinates. As they got even closer, everyone could see their haul from today and they all breathed in sharply in astonishment. Although they didn't have a lot of game on them, what they did have was more than enough to blow the rest of them out of the water. They had a giant bear that weighed around four to five hundred catties and an Amur tiger that had been killed with a single arrow in the eye. Just these two specimens alone would be enough to win first place here.

“Wow! My tiger pelt!!” Yu Xiaocao was incredibly excited. Although she knew that Zhu Junyang had promised her earlier and that he had never broken a promise, as the end date to the hunt got closer and closer, the disappointment in her heart had also increased with each passing day. Today, she had already prepared herself mentally. Even if he wasn't able to encounter a tiger, she was not going to reveal one iota of her disappointment to him. After all, so many days had passed and there were so many people out hunting every day. None of them had even seen the shadow of a tiger, so how could he just coincidentally come across one?

As evening rolled across the sky and more time had passed without Zhu Junyang returning, Yu Xiaocao began to feel moved and remorseful. She knew that the reason why he was returning so late was to find a tiger for her. No matter what sort of outcome he had today, she needed to say the words 'thank you' to him.

“Why is the tiger pelt automatically yours? Everything that is under the skies here is under my jurisdiction. Technically, all of the game that has been caught at this hunt is our personal property!” Zhu Junfan deliberately expressed an opposing opinion to Xiaocao's.

The bright smile on Xiaocao's face immediately froze and congealed. If the emperor was really planning on snatching this tiger pelt from her, as a tiny official, what could she say?

“However...if you want to trade that dragon-shaped jade pendant for the tiger pelt, then we will have to acquiesce to your request.” Zhu Junfan regarded the little lass's conflicted expression with a sense of wicked delight. He was in a very good mood now.

After he had given out his jade pendant, that night, the empress had tactfully hinted that giving out something that was that significant and important to a young maiden may not be the most suitable

thing to do. Thirteen to fourteen year old girls were naïve and inexperienced. If she decided to flaunt this jade pendant in her hands and do something inexcusable, was that really okay?

Zhu Junfan, on the other hand, had a pretty good understanding of this little lass and consoled the empress, “The little lass is quite cowardly and knows what can and cannot be done. Fei'er, the situation that you're worrying about will not appear. That being said, a jade pendant is dead whereas people are alive. Is it really worth it to get ourselves in a tizzle over a dead object?”

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After interacting with her a few times, the empress also had a good impression of Yu Xiaocao. The lass was smart, lively, and wise beyond her years. She not only was extremely talented but also had an amiable and friendly personality. This wasn't something that every lady had.

There was one other point that the empress liked about Xiaocao. It wasn't exhausting interacting with her as the empress didn't have to bring out the imposing mother of the empire demeanor with the lass or have to worry about whether her bearing was appropriate or not. Everything felt very natural around the lass, as if she could relax and be herself. Thus, the empress naturally agreed with what the emperor was saying. With this little lass's personality, the dragon-shaped jade pendant was safer in her hands than anyone else's.

“Since the emperor is aware, then I won't say anything more.” The empress paused for a moment before she continued, “That being said, Miss Yu is the savior of our imperial son. The value of the dragon-shaped jade pendant can't even compare to our imperial son's life. Emperor, we absolutely cannot allow the person scheming from behind to get away with this!!”

The empress gritted her teeth as she said this, wishing that she could tear that person into pieces right now. She was childhood sweethearts with the emperor and had been married to him for a full three years before she had Wen'er as her only child. The imperial couple had a good relationship and only had this one child between them. Furthermore, he was also the emperor's only son. The medical ladies from the imperial physician's compound had already told her that she had a particular body constitution and it'd be hard for her to bear a second child. If anything had happened to Wen'er, it'd be worse than taking her own life.

Zhu Junfan lightly patted her hand and promised her, “Don't worry, even if you didn't say anything, we would not be merciful to the people who dare to scheme against the imperial family's descendants!”

That moron was really too idiotic. His own younger sister had just reached month six of her pregnancy and the doctors couldn't even accurately determine whether the child was male or female, yet he was

scheming for the position of an imperial uncle! The man had no brains and was clearly being used by someone who tempted him with the dream of becoming one of the most powerful officials at court!

In actuality, even if the hidden soldiers hadn't been sent out to investigate this matter, the emperor already had a suspicion of who was behind this. Consort Yi was the only one in the imperial palace to transmit good news recently. All of the other palace concubines had been eyeing her belly as they were all afraid that she'd be lucky enough to bear a son and receive more imperial favor.

Zhu Junfan never took the little petty movements in the inner palace too seriously. On top was the empress, who he trusted to manage everything. None of the women there had the guts to scheme against the imperial heir. Consequently, as long as their little schemes didn't hit his bottom line, he would just pretend to not notice anything.

Consort Yi was an obedient one and there was only a thin line between being obedient and being a coward. Her older brother had been spoiled by everyone in her family. Naturally, he had an elevated opinion of his own abilities yet he never used his head when making a decision. Four months ago, his younger sister's belly hadn't even started showing and even the imperial physicians didn't dare to hazard a guess about the gender of the child. He, on the other hand, decided to listen to the ramblings of a traveling priest who stated that he had the fate of becoming the imperial uncle. Unfortunately, there was a barrier in his way. As long as he got rid of that problem, then his path to glory would be smooth and guaranteed.

This fellow had no learning or skills to bring to the table. The only reason why he had the title of 'Count Mingzheng' was because his younger sister was a titled consort in the imperial palace. Thus, he had an idle position at court. Unfortunately, this fellow had overweening ambitions but no talents to back it up. In addition, his ego was larger than his brains, so he wasn't satisfied with his current lot. Consequently, he was easily swayed by a stranger and came up with a plan that actually required some thinking which had almost succeeded.

When Count Mingzheng found out that his younger sister was pregnant, he managed to acquire an idle job at the hunting grounds. The head steward in charge of the grounds was very courteous to him because of his relationship with Consort Yi and didn't give any hard work to him. Thus, this gave him plenty of time to work out his scheme to perfection.

He spent a vast sum of money to hire some roaming martial arts experts and had them search for the signs of a tiger within the hunting grounds. Then, they sprinkled some powerful mind-muddling drug on some badly mangled bait for the tiger. The tiger ate the bait and fell into their hands easily. Following that, they raised the captured tiger in a special steel cage deep within the thickets.

A few days before the imperial hunt started, they started to short the tiger of its food. After confirming where the eldest imperial prince had gone, he had his underlings calculate how long it would take for the drug to wear off of the tiger and then placed the drugged tiger in the vicinity of the eldest imperial prince. When the starving tiger woke up, clear-headed, it would see its prey right before its eyes and absolutely wouldn't let this chance to eat meat go...

Although his plan seemed quite absurd on paper, it was actually quite efficacious. If it wasn't for Yu Xiaocao using her own body to lure the tiger away and if she didn't have her two strong and fierce wolves with her, not only would the little lass be hard pressed to escape the tiger's jaws, but even the eldest imperial prince might have also met his end!

Although a lot of things had happened at the imperial hunt, no one had lost their life or had gotten crippled from injuries, so it was considered quite a successful event! The giant bear that Zhu Junyang had killed was also divided up appropriately to reward the accompanying powerful officials, princes and dukes. Out of the four bear paws, the emperor emeritus was given one, Imperial Prince Jing's Estate was given one, Yu Xiaocao was allotted one, and the last one, the plumpest right front paw, was left for the emperor.

The emperor emeritus scurried over to find Xiaocao with his bear paw in hand. He now had no faith in the abilities of the imperial chefs and only trusted Xiaocao's culinary skills. As his grandson, Zhu Junyang also came over with his bear paw in hand. This fellow knew that Xiaocao had the ability to cook bear paws, so what was wrong with adding another one to her queue? In conclusion, out of the four bear paws that had been divvied up, Xiaocao now had three of them in front of her.

But there was a problem! Whether it was Asiatic black bears or brown bears, in modern times, they were all considered protected animals. Yu Xiaocao had never seen these ingredients on the market let alone know how to cook them. If she just brazenly tried without experimenting, she was afraid that she'd end up wasting these valuable ingredients. She stared at these three bear paws without any solutions coming to her head. In the end, she had to ask the imperial chef who was the best at preparing exotic delicacies from the deep mountains to cook them instead.

Whether it was preparing the bear paws or cooking them, all of that took quite a bit of time. The next morning, the imperial chefs all became very busy. With the addition of the bear paw from the emperor, they had four bear paws that they needed to prepare. Thus, they racked their brains to figure out the best way to cook them.

They decided to use different methods to cook all four bear paws. There was 'bear paw steamed with ginseng and young deer antler'. This dish had a golden-yellow color, preserved the original flavor of the ingredients, and was exceptionally delicious. Then there was 'superb bear paw', which kept the paw completely intact. It had a rich and mellow flavor with glossy shiny meat. Following that was the 'simmered red bear paws', which had flaky and soft palm meat that was incredibly fragrant. Finally, there was 'ribboned bear paw'. It had a lustrous red color, concentrated fragrant flavor, soft and tender texture, and the shining appetizing juice...

When it was all done, the emperor waved a hand and proclaimed, "At noon, the whole family shall enjoy this meal together. The more the merrier!" Consequently, the high-ranking members of the imperial family all got together and enjoyed the feast. The emperor emeritus's youngest son—the idle Imperial Prince Sa had smelled the aroma of the food and shamelessly came over to cadge a meal. If they eliminated Yu Xiaocao from this meal, then it would have become a meal reserved solely for the imperial family members.

Yu Xiaocao had complied to popular request and made a 'Buddha jumps over the wall' that was comprised of exotic delicacies from the deep mountains. In addition, the imperial chefs had carefully prepared a bunch of other dishes for the meal. All of these powerful people ate to their heart's content and complimented the food endlessly. Even the empress herself, who was usually a very elegant and refined person, had eaten until she was stuffed!

The last bits of the fruit Xiaocao had brought along had also been served up at this meal as a way to cut the grease. For the people who had drunk a bit more alcohol, she had also considerably pressed some fruit juice for them. The emperor emeritus revealed a pleased expression and slapped his grandson's—Zhu Junyang's arm. He remarked with a bit of a lisp, "That lass Xiaocao truly agrees with this old one! She refused my offer to become an adopted granddaughter. Who knows which big bad wolf in the future will take her away once she comes of age. Quite a pity!"

Imperial Prince Sa had somewhat of a loose tongue. He hiccupped and interjected, "Then isn't...that easily fixed ah? Our family has nothing more than sons to go around. We have plenty of youngsters around the lass's age. If you think it's a pity that she'll marry someone else, then have one of our kids marry her instead!! It wouldn't be considered a disgrace for her to marry into the imperial family!!"

Zhu Junyang saw that his third uncle was blabbering more and more nonsense. If he didn't butt in now, then that uncle of his might take his lass away to become his daughter-in-law instead. Before he had the chance to open his mouth, Imperial Prince Jing, whose face had already turned completely red from drinking too much alcohol, slapped the table and spoke to Imperial Prince Sa, "Third Younger Brother! Don't you understand the concept of following seniority? As your second older brother, I haven't even had the chance to voice my opinion, so why do you get to state yours first?"

Following that, he narrowed his eyes and glared at his own son as he scolded, “Stinky brat! Your lady mother has had strands of her hair turn white fretting over your future marriage! You're already twenty and don't have a wife yet. So useless!!”

He paused for a bit and then pointed at Xiaocao before speaking to his son, “Your lady mother quite likes this lass. Your mother has never liked another young maiden as much as she likes this one! Her appearance is decent and she also knows how to cook. Furthermore, she can help your mother nourish and heal her body...as your father, I command you to take this lass into your own residence!”

What the! His father was being quite blatant about his intentions. He wanted his son to marry a wife not for his son's sake but for his princess consort's sake? Imperial Prince Jing was quite righteous about all of this. As long as his wife was happy, he wouldn't just be willing to choose a wife for his son, he would even be willing to sacrifice his grandson's marriage as well!

Zhu Junfan watched with avid interest from the side. The little lass very rarely showed such an abashed and embarrassed expression on her face, as if she didn't know what to do. A sense of evil pleasure rose within his heart.

Just as his younger cousin was about to open his mouth to say something, Zhu Junfan suddenly butted in, “Imperial Uncle, the lass Xiaocao is still quite young and has a childish air about her! Junyang may not necessarily like her that way!”

“He dares to not like her!!” Imperial Prince Jing was clearly quite drunk now. The man, who was usually in control of himself, was now being quite impolite. He forcefully slapped the table, causing the plates and bowls to jump up and down, “What does he have? His face resembles a woman's and he has a cruddy personality. If he wasn't lucky enough to be born into the imperial family, who would want to marry him?”

Zhu Junyang was speechless at this. Apparently, in his lord father's eyes, he had become a pitiful person who wasn't able to find someone willing to be his wife! Sigh, with a father who was solely preoccupied with his mother, what did he expect? For the sake of a beauty's smile, this man was even willing to sacrifice his son's future happiness in marriage. He was really too much!

He claimed that he looked like a woman? And that no one would want him? Only his biological father could say something like that. If anyone else tried, just see what would happen! His little lass really quite

liked this face of his and had often been entranced by his looks on end. Hmph! It didn't matter what other people thought. He didn't care as long as his lass liked him!

His unhelpful father started talking again, "Although the lass is on the younger side, this brat isn't in any hurry to get engaged. Waiting a few more years for the lass to reach her age of majority wouldn't be a problem. Yang'er, your lady mother and I will wait patiently for two years, so please shape up a bit. Don't let your lady mother, myself, and your imperial grandfather be disappointed! Do your best!"

When he noticed the extremely awkward expression on the little lass's face, Zhu Junyang's protective instincts for his future wife rose up, "Imperial Grandfather, Lord Father, Imperial Uncle, is it really appropriate to be talking about this in front of the person in question? Look at her. She's so embarrassed that she's about to become one with the table!"

The emperor emeritus chuckled in amusement when he saw the bright red cheeks on Xiaocao's face, "Lass, what are you embarrassed about? You're almost fourteen. In the previous dynasty, you'd be almost ready to get married at this age. It's time for you to also think about the most important event in your life, marriage! From what I see, it looks like your family cares a lot about your opinion. As long as the person who catches your eye isn't too bad, I'm sure your family will allow you to marry him. Speaking of that, my grandson is not bad, how about...you consider him ah?"

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He couldn't let these people continue, or else his duck, which was about cooked, would fly away! Zhu Junyang had an idea and tried to change the topic, "Xiaocao, hadn't you made a few earthen jars of grape wine before you came? I remember that you brought two jars over. Counting the days, they should be about ready to drink. Quick, bring it over so everyone can try."

The emperor emeritus forgot about everything else the moment he heard this. Only the words, 'grape wine', resonated in his mind. He had tried the fruit wine that Xiaocao had made before, and especially liked her grape wine and pomegranate wine.

"Little lass, you dare dream to hide good things in front of me? Go, quick!" The white wine of this time were all grain wines which had low alcohol content, so he did not feel so satisfied drinking them. In the emperor emeritus's point of view, it was still the Maotai that had been specially crafted for the army from his previous life that had enough punch. The taste was mellow and sweet, while the texture was smooth and the rich aroma, long-lasting...

However, a shrimp will do if there was no fish. The grape wine that Xiaocao made had a rich texture, and it was even beneficial towards the body! He had snatched a jar from her last time, and after he finished

that jar, he clearly saw that the internal injuries that he had suffered from the war previously had healed significantly, not to mention that it was not so hard for him to get by on a cold day anymore. Hearing that the little lass had stored quite a lot of grape wine, the emperor emeritus rubbed his chin, thinking that he should get a few more jars from her this time.

From the heated gazes she received, Yu Xiaocao knew that she could not hide her grape wine anymore. She fiercely glared at Zhu Junyang while no one was watching, 'This scourge! Not only did he let me be teased, he even sold out the grape wine I just made! I haven't even tried it myself!' She decided to be upset at him for the next three months

The pitiful Zhu Junyang was schemed against by his closest relatives, but he could only silently swallow this loss. 'Ai...the thoughts of a girl are too hard to guess. One moment of carelessness would land him on a landmine!'

The grape skins and pulp in the wine jars that Yu Xiaocao had brought over had not been strained out yet, so these men, who knew the process, patiently waited for her to carry out the filtration. Imperial Prince Sa curiously watched his father and older brother's eager expressions, wondering, 'Father said that even the good wine that was supplied to the imperial family was tasteless like plain water, isn't this sweet grape wine for women? Why are they showing such an odd expression?'

The red wine danced in a swirling dance as it was slowly poured into a transparent, crystal glass, exuding a thick, pleasant aroma. Imperial Prince Sa held the crystal glass filled with the crystal bright and transparent wine, and lightly sniffed at it. A fresh, pleasant fruit fragrance hit his nose, making him unable to resist taking a sip of the sweet, crisp, red liquid. It flowed slowly from the glass into his mouth and infiltrated the taste buds on the tip of his tongue. The balance between sourness and sweetness was just right, the aroma was refreshing, and the texture was smooth...He did not know if it was an illusion, but a warm feeling spread among his internal organs as the liquor flowed through, invigorating him.

"Good wine! It sure is good wine!" Imperial Prince Sa praised upon recovering from his daze. He was a man who knew how to enjoy himself, and he followed his heart in everything that he did, pursuing quality in life. Aside from beautiful women, he had another great passion—wine! Over the years, he had quite often shamelessly asked for imperial wine from the Imperial palace. His collection of wine was much larger than the palace's storage!

He had drunk a lot of fruit wine before, but they were sweet as juice, so he thought it was only suitable for women. But today, this jar of wine from Xiaocao changed his opinion. If the ordinary fruit wine was like a soft beauty, then this wine was akin to a strong yet gentle female general—there was a beautiful

side, but there was also a strong side. A beauty like a delicate flower was easy to come by and could be easily replaced. However, a perfect woman was hard to come by, and when you meet one, you would definitely not marry any other women!

How could he drink other good fruit wine after he had tasted this grape wine? After Imperial Prince Sa dazedly finished his glass of grape wine and returned to his senses, he found that the two wine jars had been almost completely shared out.

He heartachingly grabbed a jar of wine and hugged it close to him. Then he pointed at his father, brother and nephew, who were all red-faced, and said, "How can you drink so recklessly? Isn't this just wasting good wine?"

"Little Third, are you going to drink it or not? If you're not, hand over the jar, I haven't had enough yet!" The emperor emeritus reached out to grab the wine jar in his arms.

Imperial Prince Sa swiftly dodged him and snorted in a burst of drunken bravery, "All of you are like Zhu Bajie eating ginseng fruit—you don't know how to appreciate the taste! It's such a waste, such a waste..."

Before he could finish his sentence, someone slapped the back of his head "You little brat! Who are you calling Zhu Bajie? If I were Zhu Bajie, you'd be a bunch of piglets!" While he was still dazed from the beating, the emperor emeritus took advantage of this chance to snatch back the wine jar and pour himself another full glass.

Stars were still dancing in front of Imperial Prince Sa's eyes but another slap came down on him, "Little Third, you're really capable now, aren't you? How dare you snatch my wine? Don't you see, except for Xiaocao, who among us can you steal from?"

Following seniority and status, the emperor emeritus, his imperial brother, the emperor, the empress... Imperial Prince Sa really didn't dare to stomp his foot in front of them. He was about to say something when he turned to his young nephew, Zhu Junyang, but he was glared back by his cold, sharp gaze.

The only person here who was lower than him in rank was his young nephew, and he was a 'Buddha' that even he, who was his uncle, usually avoided. He had heard about the matters with the Wu Family. If it weren't for the two servants who risked their lives to stop him, the Wu Household would have already

been awash with blood. Rumors said that it was only when Chief Steward Su Ran had been called to the scene did they manage to subdue him. If his young nephew lost all his rationality, he would not care if he was his uncle and just squash him like an ant.

'Forget it, let's just have a drink to calm down—Huh? Where's the wine? There's not even a drop left?' Imperial Prince Sa had the urge to look up at the sky and wail.

The last glass of wine had been personally poured into the empress's glass by the emperor himself. Zhu Junfan knew that, with the mystic stone in Xiaocao's possession, the wine she made must be extraordinary. The empress had not been feeling well lately, so drinking more of this wine would only benefit her.

Imperial Prince Sa couldn't snatch his niece-in-law's wine now, could he? Not to mention that she was the mother of the nation! He only had one glass of wine out of a whole two jars! Imperial Prince Sa wanted to pound his chest and stomp his feet! He turned his sorrow and anger to his appetite, and ate a whole bear paw on the table, along with half a jar of 'Buddha jumps over the wall'. A moment's carelessness caused him more tragedy—unable to move because he had stuffed himself full. He was then placed in a situation where he was forced to be carried back home by his guards.

The next day, the emperor, who had been relaxing outside for nearly a month, announced that he was heading back to the palace. Not only was he able to enjoy the unique grassland scenery on this trip, but he also witnessed the thrill of the hunt. As the emperor, although Zhu Junfan could not freely participate in the hunt, he went down to the Imperial Hunting Grounds and personally shot quite a few game. He had also met with the chieftains of the nearby tribes, taking the opportunity to show them the prowess of his people, especially Royal Prince Yang's bow, which had struck fear in many of those who had claimed to be strong and brave men.

The return journey was smooth and uneventful. Shortly after returning to the capital, Yu Xiaocao heard word that a certain favorite concubine in the palace had been placed into the cold palace and soon hanged herself, killing herself and the child in her womb. Her family, the Count Mingzhen's Household, was also confiscated of their assets and executed. Yu Xiaocao then understood that the conspiracy at the Imperial Hunting Grounds had come to an end, and those who should be punished had already paid the price.

When Yu Xiaocao delivered the grape wine to the Imperial Palace, the empress held her hands and sighed, "Concubine Yun was actually a good person. She was only implicated by her brainless brother. Ay, this Concubine Yun. Even though she was demoted and moved to a more remote palace, living a hard life is still better than a good death! Not to mention that she still had hope of a fresh start with the

child in her womb. If she had been able to look past it, there was still a possibility that her rank as an imperial concubine would be restored once she gave birth to an imperial child in a few months and the emperor's anger subsided. What a pity! Her character had preordained that she wouldn't last long in the palace..."

Yu Xiaocao deliberately made a clueless expression, thinking in her heart, 'Your Majesty, is it really appropriate to tell me, a young, teenage girl, the secret matters of the Imperial Palace? I'm really still a child and don't understand anything that you said!'

The empress looked at her childlike expression and laughed, "Silly me, why did I tell you all this! By the way, if you have nothing to do today, dine with me in the palace! Wen'er has been missing you for the past few days. If you still didn't enter the palace, he would've asked his imperial father for permission to leave the palace to visit you! Speaking of which, you've saved his life twice..."

"This official doesn't dare..." Yu Xiaocao expressed her fear.

The empress took her little hand and chided lightheartedly, "You, when did you learn to pretend? Rarely can I find someone that I can talk to—you can't turn into those women who always follow the opinions of others! It's so tiring to talk to them!"

Yu Xiaocao laughed drily. Fortunately, only she and the empress were in this palace, otherwise, if word spread, she would be hated by those ladies!

"Xiazi, go see if the eldest prince has finished his homework. Tell him that Miss Yu has come, and tell him to come over to my Kunning Palace as soon as he finishes his lessons!" The empress instructed her personal maidservant, then turned back to Xiaocao and boasted, "Ever since we returned from the Imperial Hunting Grounds, Wen'er seems like he's matured a lot. Not only is he more sensible, he's also more attentive to his homework. He especially worked hard to improve his skills at mounted archery, so much so that even the mounted archery teacher kept praising him, saying that he's improved very quickly!"

"His Highness did really well at the Imperial Hunting Grounds, hunting hazel grouse and hares with only a toy-like little bow. He definitely would've gotten more game if he wasn't so small and weak!" Yu Xiaocao agreed.

The empress's loving smile continued to beam as she said with obvious pride, "Right now, Wen'er is building his strength every day, saying that he'll definitely be able to draw the lightest bow next year. He's not even ten years old, yet he lifts rocks that weigh more than ten kilograms fifty times a day! I'm really afraid that he'll hurt himself."

"Oh my, His Highness is really striving to be better. Don't his arms ache from practicing like that every day?" Yu Xiaocao let out a genuine exclamation.

The empress was slightly distressed as she said, "How could it not ache? He could barely hold his chopsticks while eating. His hands shook so much that he couldn't pick up the food. The next day, he couldn't even lift his hands, yet he still clenched his teeth, determined to practice! I can't bear to look at him..."

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"This subject has a cream that can promote the blood circulation of the body. If Your Majesty doesn't mind, this subject will have a servant go and fetch it at once." To have such self-discipline at the age of seven, Yu Xiaocao admired yet felt her heart ache for the child.

The empress was well aware of her prowess in medicine. Her smile widened as she nodded, "Even if you didn't mention it, I would still shamelessly ask you for some medicinal remedy for my son. Those mediocre doctors in the Imperial Hospital...ahem, the imperial physicians are sometimes too careful with their prescriptions, so the effects are slower..."

"Imperial Mother, Imperial Mother!" A clear and bright childish voice sounded from outside the palace hall, glee prominent in his tone, "I heard that Older Sister Yu has entered the palace! Is it true?"

Hearing this, the empress grinned and said to Xiaocao, "I've just praised him for his steadiness, and immediately, he comes and slaps me in the face."

'Face slapping' was a phrase that the emperor had brought up to her in private. She had even specially asked the meaning behind it, and now she was putting it to practice.

"He is still a child, so it's in his nature. Besides, it's good that he's lively! His Highness sometimes handles matters even more maturely than this subject, and he only shows such a lively side in front of you, Your Majesty." Yu Xiaocao did not have much resistance towards little children, so once she heard the eldest prince's voice, a smile crept up her face without her even realizing it.

Seeing this, the empress's gaze was filled with even more sincerity. As long as you treat others sincerely, it would eventually return in the form of a true friendship.

“Older Sister Yu, it really is you! I thought Little Zhuozi, that servant, was lying to me!” Zhu Hanwen's affectionate attitude and address of Xiaocao made her feel somewhat uneasy.

She hurriedly stood up and bowed towards the eldest prince, “Your Highness, you mustn't address this subject as such, I can't accept this!”

The empress pulled Xiaocao to sit beside her, saying, “You ah, you've been 'wrongly' taught by your godmother. What can you not accept? You've saved his life twice and you're also older than him by a few years, so what's wrong with him calling you 'older sister'? I still remember that when Wen'er was still small, his imperial father had asked him if he wished for me to give him a little brother or sister. Do you know what his answer was?”

“Imperial Mother!” Zhu Hanwen was unhappy now. His imperial mother once again was finding enjoyment out of his embarrassing incidents.

Seeing the eldest prince's exasperated and flustered reaction, Xiaocao asked with slight curiosity, “How did His Highness answer?”

The empress disregarded her son's various attempts to obstruct her and said, stifling a laugh, “He said that he wished I could give him an elder sister because the older sisters of other families always leave a portion of the good food for their younger brothers, and they would also embroider a nice pouch for their younger brothers. Older sisters are so gentle and considerate, so he wanted such an older sister.”

“Imperial Mother...” Zhu Hanwen was full of resignation as he made a long face. His whole demeanor screamed that he was an unhappy little baby. Older Sister Xiaocao was his 'idol', but his imperial mother was 'tarnishing' his good name in front of her! It was too embarrassing! He couldn't face the world anymore!

“Sometimes, the words spoken by a child can be really surprising. When my little brother was small, he also said a lot of funny things. I remember that there was a time when he plucked a fat caterpillar back from the vegetable farm. My hair was nearly standing on end when I saw the caterpillar wriggling on his

palm! But seeing him excitedly toying with the caterpillar, I didn't have the heart to tell him to throw it away, and only said, 'Shitou, the caterpillar's mother will be anxious if she doesn't find it!' Do you know what he did afterward?" Seeing the eldest prince enjoying her story, Yu Xiaocao couldn't help but leave him in suspense.

Zhu Hanwan promptly responded, "Your little brother immediately released the caterpillar?"

Yu Xiaocao pretended to breathe a long sigh, "Ah, he took off toward the vegetable farm again. I thought he was only going to release the caterpillar, who could've expected that within moments, when he returned, there would be a larger caterpillar on his palm! He even gleefully said to me, 'Older sister, look, I've brought the caterpillar's mother here!'"

Both the empress and the prince were so amused they could not stop laughing. Yu Xiaocao continued to talk about a few of her little brother's embarrassing stories when he was younger, not expecting that the eldest prince would, because of this, become very interested in this young county official who was only older than himself by a few years. Many years later, the eldest prince who had already ascended the throne to become the emperor, would often use these stories to tease his trusted aide, Little Shitou, who was then already a first-ranked official.

Once she finished having lunch with the mother and son, Yingchun, who had gone back to retrieve the cream, had also returned. Little Zhuozi brought his master to the side hall and helped Zhu Hanwen to apply the cream. He did not know whether it was just a psychological effect, or if it was really the cream that had wondrous healing properties, but after applying the cream, Zhu Hanwen felt the burn in his arms suddenly replaced with a cooling sensation.

Later in the afternoon, when he went to practice mounted archery, the sore ache in his arms was completely gone. He even performed outstandingly well during practice, earning him praises from his mounted archery teacher. As such, the little fellow idolized Xiaocao even more, and kept bringing her up every day until even the empress felt a little jealous of her.

Even though her rank as an official did not change, Yu Xiaocao had been awarded the title of a feudal princess because she had saved the eldest prince. She was also rewarded with a lot of good things, which had mostly come from the empress's own private storage—the value of the items was evident.

The young ladies of the capital could only look on with envy and discuss the matter sourly behind closed doors while they would still flatter her when they were outside. After all, she was currently favored by the emperor and managed the supply of the entire capital's vegetables and fruits through fall and

winter. They were not as blind as Assistant Minister Li's daughter who had brought tragedy upon her own family.

This fall, thousands of mu of experimental corn plantation produced a great yield that was slightly more than last year's. However, this was only the yield of the experimental plantation. The farmers who had planted corn at the start of spring had kept the seeds, but their corn yield during fall was lesser than the experimental plantation by three to four hundred catties per mu. Although each mu had yielded more than a thousand catties of produce, it was still nearly one fifth less than the yield during spring.

Yu Xiaocao, who had received the statistics, started to worry. The seeds that had been immersed in the spiritual energy of the little divine stone would definitely produce high yields, but as she had expected, following each generation, the spiritual energy contained within the seeds would diminish more and more, and as a result, the yield of corn would also follow suit and decrease.

If she couldn't overcome such a phenomenon, when the little divine stone accumulated enough merit and returned to its original world, would everything return to its original point? To her, it was of absolute importance that she cultivated seeds that could truly produce high yields.

The little divine stone, who could understand her thoughts, rolled its eyes, feeling that her worry was for naught. Once its powers were completely recovered, it would be a simple thing for it to make a few types of high yielding crops. It might even be able to steal the new species that the Goddess of Spirits had bred—that was the true high-yielding, healthy crop that could prolong a person's life so that every person could live beyond a hundred years! The people of this world were so easily surprised because they weren't exposed to more things!

Since the winter wheat had been sowed into the ground, the vegetables in the greenhouse were once again planted in a flurry. Besides the Imperial Plantation, the farmsteads under Zhu Junyang, Imperial Prince Jing, and Imperial Prince Sa's name around the area had all been turned into greenhouses to plant vegetables and fruits under Xiaocao's instructions. Of course, they, as her elders, would not take advantage of Xiaocao, so they would still give her twenty percent of the profits of each greenhouse.

As there were more greenhouses this year, not only did they manage to supply the whole capital with fruits and vegetables without limitation, the nearby counties and prefectural cities also came to the capital to buy them regardless of the length of their journey. Perhaps it was because the temperature was low during fall, so the greenhouse vegetables were able to last almost two times as long as the vegetables on other seasons, and no one was afraid that the vegetables they bought would spoil if they could not finish them.

All the managers of the Imperial Plantation, regardless if they were in charge of the experimental plantation, the orchard or the greenhouses, had slowly begun to mature in their ways of dealing with their responsibilities. Although the experimental plantation this year had spread among quite a lot of farmsteads around the capital, the court officials of the Ministry of Revenue, who were stationed at the Imperial Plantations, and the stewards at the Imperial Plantation had all been able to carry out their responsibilities and had managed the experimental plantation well. As for Yu Xiaocao, the agricultural official who had been promoted to a feudal princess, she only needed to trouble the little divine stone to emit its spiritual energy to the seeds, or make an occasional visit to the farmsteads to check up on them.

With the experience and success of last year, the vegetable farmers who had filled their coffers put in even more effort for the greenhouse fruits and vegetables. Even though there were two more farmsteads of greenhouses this year, they didn't let Xiaocao worry too much. Thus, she still passed her days leisurely.

Once they entered the last month of the year, the farmers began to hide at home, so Xiaocao also let herself off on a winter holiday after asking for her direct supervisor, the empress's permission. She packed her bags and headed back to her village under the envious gazes of her colleagues from the Ministry of Revenue. She had decided to pass this spring at Dongshan Village. Xiaocao, who had not been reunited with her family for a long time now, missed her parents and fellow villagers dearly.

When they passed-by the prefectural city, Yu Xiaocao made a detour into her family's braised food store and pickled food shop with her two maidservants, Yingchun and Wutong.

Most of the maidservants under her could already assume important responsibilities. Yingtao, who was managing the pharmaceutical workshop in the capital that had expanded to twice its size, was now the head manager that the pharmacies nearby tried to curry favor with.

Yangliu's pastry shop had already opened branches in the east, south and north of the city. It even introduced beautiful gift boxes that were now the most popular choice for souvenirs in the whole of the capital. The end of the year was the busiest time for them, so Yangliu could not even make time to send her mistress off when she came back.

Manager Hechun's 'Blossoming Beauty', the beauty spa, was filled to the brim nearly every day. The customers were required to make appointments to do skincare treatments, and their supply of skincare products and cosmetics could never fulfill the demand. She had planned a huge end-of-the-year sale,

and added batch after batch of silver and gold membership cards, to the point where her hands had gone weak from dealing with money.

Xichun frequently stayed at the farmsteads. She helped her manage the orchards, flower farms and greenhouses. Besides that, she even received Xiaocao's teachings and built a fruit wine distillery at the foot of the hill. For now, the fruit wine did not have much of a variety, and mainly consisted of grape wine and pomegranate wine, with a small volume of others like apple wine, plum wine and jujube wine. The orchard on the hill of the Imperial Plantation had expanded to more than ten times its original size this year, and along with that, they also started planting other varieties like mulberries, raspberries and tangerines. She believed that in the following year, the variety of fruits and the fruit wine distillery's fruit wine would definitely increase!

Additionally, as the volume of fruit wine was not enough this year, she did not sell them commercially. She sold most of it to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and either sold or gave the rest to the people that she was closer to. Now, when the emperor rewarded his officials, those old officials did not want gold or silver nor various precious silks and cloths, they only hoped to be rewarded with a bottle of fruit wine for them to strengthen their constitution.

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These old officials gossiped privately amongst themselves. Who among them had drunk the fruit wine the emperor emeritus had given them? Those who used to be bedridden for most of the year could now get out of bed and move around. Who among them had a body full of old injuries after battling for the throne with the emperor emeritus? After drinking the grape wine that was given to them, they no longer felt the pain of those old injuries in the winter. Their legs and feet had also become more nimble as well...

Even taking the emperor emeritus as an example would work. When he was young, he spent many years out on campaign and was famous for risking his life. Consequently, he constantly added on new injuries on top of the old. Ten years ago, he had abdicated from the throne and gave it to his imperial grandson. He was in his early sixties then but resembled a doddering old man with illnesses all throughout his body. When his old injuries flared up, he wasn't even able to mount a horse then.

But what about now? He was in his seventies but resembled a man in his early sixties and seemed even younger than he was ten years ago. It was as if he had obtained a second spring in his body. His body was full of youthful vigor now and his complexion glowed with health. During the autumn hunt, he even competed with men much younger than him and had killed quite a bit of game with his arrows.

In the eyes of these old officials, these changes in the emperor emeritus were linked heavily with the fruit wine. Although fruit wine had just started being used by the emperor this year, those old generals

with a good relationship with the emperor emeritus had tasted some grape wine with him before. When they went home, they couldn't forget the taste of that beverage.

Therefore, in many people's hearts, the fruit wine was more effective than the most miraculous medicine being produced by Tongren Medicine Hall. There were plenty of old men whose bodies were deteriorating, yearning to stay in power, and reluctant to retire from their official posts who privately tried to investigate the origins of the fruit wine. However, other than the imperial family, very few people knew about where the wine came from. Of the people who had an inkling, they kept their mouths shut and refused to divulge the secret. Thus, they could only stay disappointed!

However, going off topic for long was not good, so it was best to go back to the maidservants by Xiaocao. Out of the four personal maidservants she had first chosen, Xiaocao now only had Wutong and Pipa left by her side. Pipa had a steady and introverted temperament, so she was currently in charge of managing all of the affairs at the Yu Residence.

Originally, Xiaocao had been planning on giving this task to Wutong. After spending two plus years with her mistress, this maid had tempered herself and was now very loyal and skilled at managing people. However, Wutong personally made the decision to stay by Xiaocao's side as a personal maidservant as she felt she could continue to learn a lot more and sharpen her skills. Nevertheless, she did a very good job in managing Xiaocao's courtyard. Everything was clear and orderly under her management and the maids in the courtyard were more afraid of her than they were of their master. Because of this, she had trained quite a few useful maidservants.

If Wutong was considered her left hand, then Yingchun, who had gradually matured, could be considered her right hand. Although the little lass was a bit talkative at times, she resembled a completely different person on the outside. She was very decisive in her actions and never made her master lose face.

Tanchun was the youngest of the bunch and was currently studying very hard with a teacher to learn arithmetic. She noticed that her mistress seemed to labor hard over the account books every day and wanted to help her mistress out. Thus, she secretly learned how to read account books by her master's side. When Xiaocao noticed that she was quite diligent about this, she hired a specialist to specially teach her. She wasn't the only student. In the future, as the family's businesses increased, she would need more and more people who had the ability to read and balance account books. Right now she was recruiting more talent for the future!

Tanchun's goal was to become the best bookkeeper under her master! In the past, accounting and bookkeeping were only done by men but times had changed! Her mistress had said that women could

hold up half of the sky. She wanted to become the best female accountant in the nation, one that would make men envious of her skills! However, the most important task right now was to carefully learn the 'Arabic numerals' and the 'multiplication tables' that her master had talked about.

Consequently, the maidservants under her were now even more busy than herself. Yu Xiaocao felt a bit embarrassed about this fact. However, with people willing to help out, there wouldn't be anything wrong with delegating the management of her industries to these maids she had personally taught herself, right?

Thus, the maids that accompanied her on this outing were still Yingchun and Wutong. Ah! She also had the two bodyguard maids that Zhu Junyang had sent to her, Chunhua and Qiushi. Speaking of them, Xiaocao felt a bit remorseful for what had happened to these two maidservants.

After the hunt had ended, these two had disappeared for a long period of time. At first, Xiaocao had thought that that fellow Zhu Junyang had taken them back for a mission. After all, it wasn't easy to raise and keep female hidden soldiers who were skilled at martial arts. Later on, she discovered that her assumption was wrong. In fact, Chunhua and Qiushi had the crime of not protecting their master well and were duly punished. They were bedridden for a whole month after that.

If it wasn't for the fact that Zhu Junyang worried that Xiaocao would feel sad if he gave her new people, these two maids wouldn't be able to even keep their lives. Every time he thought of his little lass confronting that starved and half-mad tiger, helpless and alone, Zhu Junyang had a desire to go out and slaughter people.

Although the little lass had put up an external act of being perfectly fine, she had had nightmares for several nights in a row. If another weak and delicate noble maiden had been in her place, they would have become severely ill from the fright and might have laid in bed half-dead.

In Zhu Junyang's eyes, making the two maidservants, Chunhua and Qiushi, bedridden for only a month was a sign of mercy for them. After all, they weren't able to protect his little lass well. Since the two of them had escaped the death penalty, they were even more loyal to their 'savior' and now naturally accompanied Xiaocao wherever she went.

Little Black and Little White also came along. To them, the mountainous deep forests in Dongshan Village and West Mountain were considered their true home. Thus, the tiny little patch of mountains behind the Imperial Plantation wasn't enough for them to play around in. It was only during the trip to the hunting grounds that they were able to show off their true natures and they nearly terrorized almost

half of the beasts living there. However, these two didn't stay with Xiaocao as she traveled back. Instead, they ran on the small side roads around them. At this time, they were probably already back at the West Mountain, playing around.

Speaking of time passing, it had been a long time since Xiaocao had visited the braised food shop in the prefectural city. Her eldest maternal aunt's family had bought a residence in the prefectural city to make it easier for them to keep an eye on things and they had moved over. The braised food store and pickled vegetable store continued to grow and grow. They even bought all of the shops in the nearby area to expand and create a giant workshop. The two stores were now a wholesale business run by her maternal aunt's family.

“Right now ah, we have hired around thirty or so women to help out with our stores. However, the most vital areas involving the recipes and manufacture of our goods are being taken care of by the servants that we have bought off of the market. Other than Huang Xiaomei and her family, we also bought another dozen servants. Five of the new ones are also from one family.” Liu Xiaoyan noticed that Xiaocao seemed very interested in this and pulled her into the back courtyard to view the kitchens.

About a dozen or so back courtyards of the previous small shops had been renovated into one large area. The place was split into the braised food kitchen, the smoking kitchen, the roasted duck and chicken kitchen...the braised food kitchen was the largest out of them all as that was the most popular product they sold.

“Mother and Father spend all day managing this business. In order to understand the account books better, my parents have both learned quite a few words. My father also learned how to use the abacus recently and is quite skilled at it now! Since my parents have never undergone formal learning before, they find it a little hard. Younger Brother, on the other hand, was sent to a school to learn how to read when he reached the age of six. As for myself and my older brother, we hired a tutor over and we spend two hours each night learning how to read and write. Sometimes, my parents will also sit in on the lessons!”

Liu Xiaoyan brought Xiaocao into the braised food cooking room and there were a dozen large stoves all roaring with warmth. On top of the stoves were large cauldrons that simmered with large puffs of steam coming out. The entire room was filled with the dense fragrant smell of braised food. The workers inside all were wearing snow-white smocks paired with light green aprons. They also all wore white caps on their heads. Although the room was a bit chaotic inside, it was still very clean and hygienic.

“Xiaocao, you always emphasized the importance of having a clean and tidy kitchen. Even though the scope of our business has gotten larger, we have not relaxed our restrictions on cleanliness. Every day,

I'm in charge of making sure each worker is following all of our cleaning procedures. As soon as I discover that someone has broken the rules, I fine them with three days' salary. If they end up violating the rules three times, then they are sentenced to wash pig intestines and do the most dirty and tiring work in the business." Liu Xiaoyan was quite satisfied with the way she handled things here. At least she didn't make her younger cousin lose any face.

Yu Xiaocao nodded her head in satisfaction and then turned to see a familiar face. Xiaomei's mother was no longer the cowardly and timid woman as she first was. Now, she ordered the people below her with a practiced ease as she monitored the people in charge of mixing the spices and adding them to the bubbling cauldrons. When she saw Yu Xiaocao and her cousin enter, she revealed a warm smile and came up to greet her masters.

Liu Xiaoyan excused her from greeting them in a manner that really bespoke of a head manager. The two of them exited the braised food area and she smiled, "For the past two years, it wasn't just my family who has improved and matured. In the past, Xiaomei's mother would turn red even from speaking to someone. Now, she's a bustling and energetic woman and very suited to being the head manager of the braised food operations."

She paused for a bit and then continued, "My mother listened to your advice and delegated all of the normal working responsibilities to other people. It's like you said, there's no point in making a lot of money if you're exhausted every day and you harm your body from working too hard. The pickled vegetable store is now under the control of Huang Xiaomei. She's pretty much learned all of the techniques and recipes you came up for the pickled vegetables. Furthermore, she's very proficient at them. In a moment, I'll take you to the neighboring pickled vegetable store. Do you want to try her handiwork?"

"The braised food kitchen is under Xiaomei's mother's management. As for the smoked food kitchen, that's under the family we bought later and is managed by Lanying, who is the wife of the man of that family. Their whole family had migrated from Sichuan province and the people living there are all good at smoking foods. Thus, she was able to quickly get accustomed to things here."

"Since we ration the number of sales of roasted chickens and ducks every day, we don't need to make too many. Thus, I usually manage that kitchen. The two people I have under me are also quite nimble and agile, so I'm sure before long I won't need to be there in person anymore. Then I can focus on handling the day-to-day money management!" Liu Xiaoyan liked the feeling of exchanging so much money that her hand cramped. Thus, no matter how busy their sales were every day, she was still very happy.

“At the moment, many of the braised food shops in the prefectural city get their goods from us. Not only that, but there are also quite a few wholesale buyers from the nearby Zhou Prefecture who come here to buy large quantities of braised food and pickled vegetables. Although we sell wholesale items at a slightly lower price, the increased quantity that is sold more than makes up for it ah!” Whenever she got started about the booming business, Liu Xiaoyan could talk all day. In fact, if you gave her three days to talk about it, she'd likely be able to fill your ears without stopping without repeating a single thing.

“It's around mid-morning right now, so there shouldn't be too many people at the retail store. However, there are plenty of customers at the wholesale business. Let's go and take a look!” Liu Xiaoyan pulled Xiaocao to walk to the west. There was already a long line of people already waiting there.

“The wholesale business opens at the crack of dawn until the end of midmorning, when most of the customers are gone. At that time, that's when the retail stores become more busy. Fortunately, we have hired enough people and they are all good hands at work.” This was all said in a slight boasting tone. Was she trying to fish for compliments?

Yu Xiaocao was quite surprised by the booming braised food and pickled vegetable business in the prefectural city. Two years ago, she would have never dreamed to have it expand to this state. Although the stores were under the 'Yu Family' in name, the management had pretty much been taken over by her eldest paternal aunt's family.

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Currently, the Yu's Braised Food Store was considered a collaboration between the two families. She provided the capital and ingredients, while her eldest paternal aunt's family was in charge of management. At the end of the year, they split the dividends forty-sixty.

Last year, at the year's end, Xiaocao was quite surprised by the amount of money she had received when her older cousin Liu Junping came over to split the money. She had even asked him about it as she was afraid that her eldest paternal aunt's family had given her a larger share than they had agreed on. Now, after personally seeing the booming business, she was able to believe her older cousin's assurances. From how well things were going, it was likely that her split of the money at the end of this year would be even more generous!

Yu Xiaocao and Liu Xiaoyan both revealed satisfied smiles when they saw the long and orderly line of people waiting to buy goods wholesale. Suddenly, within the line, they saw a familiar figure. This person had peppered white hair, an aged looking face, drooping eyes that looked a bit cruel, and deep lines around her mouth. All of this combined made her look even more harsh and mean—wasn't this Xiaocao's step-grandmother, Madam Zhang?

Madam Zhang hadn't appeared in Xiaocao's vicinity for more than two years now and Xiaocao had almost forgotten that this particular person still existed. After two years had passed, Madam Zhang looked a lot more old compared to before. Her previously straight back was now bent over and there were a lot more wrinkles on her face. Furthermore, more than half of her head of hair had already turned white.

Seeing her reminded Xiaocao of her own grandfather. Old Yu had been eating the medicinal cuisine that Xiaocao had personally prepared for him and had also been consuming mystic-stone water. His previously weak body had become healthy again. Her older brother had written a letter to her talking about the farm and the letter mentioned that their paternal grandfather's energy in the fields were higher than some younger people's. Perhaps it was because he had plumped up a bit, but the wrinkles on his face also seemed to recede recently. If he stood next to Madam Zhang now, despite Madam Zhang being younger than him by seven to eight years, it would look like he was standing next to his older sister!

Liu Xiaoyan lightly sighed and said, "Ever since she moved out of Dongshan Village, Madam Zhang has been buying wholesale from us so she could sell it at one of the vegetable markets to the south of the city. In the past, all she had to do was order people around. Now, for the sake of earning money for Younger Uncle's studies and keeping their family afloat, even if it's stormy out, she still opens up her stall to sell goods. Luckily, our braised food is quite popular. I heard Mother mention that, in her youth, Madam Zhang also wasn't a lazy person, so her stall is doing quite well. It's rumored that she's already rented quite a few small stalls in the vegetable market. Other than selling braised food, she also buys vegetables from neighboring farmers to sell as well.

"What about Younger Uncle? I heard that he passed the county level examinations. So it doesn't look like she's labored in vain, right?" When she thought back to how it was for her family when she first transmigrated over, where everyone had been used up until they didn't even resemble humans any more, Yu Xiaocao couldn't feel one iota of sympathy for the old woman.

Liu Xiaoyan nodded her head, "Although Mother truly hates Madam Zhang for being so cruel, she can't seem to bring it upon herself to also hate Younger Uncle who is related to us through Grandfather. Every few days or so, she'll go to Younger Uncle's academy and bring some food for him to eat. Maternal Grandfather will also give him some pocket money from time to time.

Liu Xiaoyan paused for a moment before she continued, "Ever since everyone found out about the crime that Madam Zhang committed and she moved out of Dongshan Village, it seems like Younger Uncle has also matured quite a bit. His past selfishness and desire to cut corners have all been thrown away. Now,

he spends all of his time at the academy, studying his heart out. After working hard for two to three years, he finally passed the county level exams and became a county official. However, his results were lackluster as he was only in the back of the pack. Not like our Little Shitou, who was able to score high and become a granary official and receive the government's annual stipend of grain. My mother spoke to one of the teachers at the academy and he said based off of my younger uncle's talents, being able to pass the prefectural level exams would be the best outcome he could manage. As for passing the imperial exams, that likely can't be done by him!"

If their younger uncle could pass the prefectural level exams, he would get a grain stipend every year from the government and could also decrease the amount of taxes his family had to pay. Should Madam Zhang continue to do business for a few more years and save some money, they could probably buy some land to farm. Even if she couldn't tend the land herself, she could still get an income from renting it out to others. That way, wouldn't her grandfather no longer have to worry about his youngest son anymore?

At this time, Madam Zhang had spotted Xiaocao and the expression on her face immediately changed and she looked away from Xiaocao to avoid her eyes. She scurried her thin and scrawny body to hide behind another person in line.

The news that Xiaocao had been entitled a royal princess had also spread to the prefectural city. Her eldest paternal aunt and uncle thought that it was a great honor, so they not only bought the longest string of fireworks that could be found but also promoted three days of twenty percent off of all of their goods at the stores. The previous prefectural magistrate of Jinwei prefecture had already finished his term of service there and moved back to the capital. Now, the Yu's Braised Food Store had an even larger backer. Other than Royal Prince Yang, they also had a royal princess that the emperor himself had titled backing them. This was also the reason why no one ever tried to cause trouble for this business even though it became more and more popular with every passing day.

At that time, Madam Zhang had been in the crowd waiting to buy goods wholesale. When she saw the proud and joyful expression on Xiaocao's eldest paternal aunt's face, she felt so regretful that her face turned green. If she had treated Xiaocao's family better in the past and hadn't been so biased, she might be the one in front basking in the glory. Perhaps, she could still be with the old man and become the noble matriarch of the family. In fact, she might have been able to head to the capital and live in a large compound with a group of maidservants and underlings catering to her every whim, living a life of luxury and glory...

Unfortunately, it was too late for regrets. Ever since the news that she had murdered Xiaocao's biological grandmother came to light, the Yu Family became estranged from her and regarded her with

loathing. Madam Zhang avoided Xiaocao's line of sight as she was afraid the now royal princess would recall her crimes and send people to pull her into prison.

She was already an old woman, so spending time in jail or even getting the capital punishment wasn't a big deal. However, she was anxious about her youngest son's prospects and whether he'd be affected by her issues. Even if the Yu Family remembered familial ties and let her youngest son go, without her around providing for the family, how could her son be able to study without any worries?

Madam Zhang made the decision to keep her distance away from the Yu Family when she spotted them in the future. If she couldn't avoid them, then she would keep her head lowered with a smile on her face. As long as they didn't pursue her past crimes against her, she was even willing to kneel in front of them and beg for forgiveness and mercy.

She still had a petty person's way of looking at things. Before she had appeared again, Xiaocao had pretty much forgotten to think about her. That being said, Madam Zhang was an old woman in her sixties doing hard labor every day in order to keep herself and her youngest son's family afloat. In Xiaocao's eyes, having to work so hard in life at such an advanced age was already the best punishment and torture for her.

Xiaocao stayed in the prefectural city for two days and, during that time, she gave the recipes for Jiangsu style crystal pork trotters, pork trotter sausages, and sweet and spicy Hezhou black duck as well as numbing and spicy Hezhou black duck to her eldest paternal aunt and her older cousin, Xiaoyan. There were about twenty or so days until the New Years, so it'd be good to have new products on the market to increase the sales even further.

After leaving the prefectural city, she spent two days at Tanggu Town. Tanggu's greenhouse grown vegetables and fruits had been entirely dominated by the Yu Family. In the past two years, the Yu Family had expanded their farmstead to over three thousand mu and they were now the largest privately owned farmstead in the Tanggu area. Two thousand mu were currently planted with high-yielding winter wheat and the remaining a thousand mu had greenhouse pavilions on them since the start of autumn. All of the nearby vegetable merchants in the vicinity as well as the restaurants all got their supplies of vegetables and fruits from the Yu Family.

The prices of these greenhouse grown vegetables and fruits were all at least ten times as much as they were during the regular growing season. Thus, it was obvious that they were making quite a big profit from all of this. Naturally, there were other people who wanted to reproduce their success and use greenhouses too. However, only the imperial court's Ministry of Works had the technology to

manufacture the plastic film used in these greenhouses and they didn't produce very much. Not just anyone could get their hands on it!

The influential officials in the capital naturally envied the imperial family's dominance over the greenhouse growing market. However, only those who were stupid would try to compete with the imperial family. There were those who were more shrewd and flexible and tried to reproduce their success in the more faraway Zhou Prefecture. However, without Xiaocao's mystic-stone water on hand as well as a lack of experience in farming, their vegetables and fruits had poor outputs and didn't look very good. They weren't even going to necessarily make up for the amount of money they poured in. When these people failed, the other wealthy and noble families, who had started to get ideas, also decided to let this go. Thus, the greenhouse growing market was still dominated by only one family.

Right now, they were right in the middle of a very popular time for the vegetables and fruits. Other than Yu Xiaolian, who was back at Dongshan Village managing the pharmaceutical workshop, the rest of the family were all busy working on the farmstead. Even Old Yu, who seemed to be more youthful now, was also in the fields picking and weighing vegetables like a busy bee. Even though the family had hired enough workers to keep up with everything, Old Yu couldn't stay idle and had a lot of energy in his body. When the family saw him happily working every day, they allowed him to continue to keep up his spirits.

“Father, Mother! Your Cao'er is back ah!!” Yu Xiaocao hollered loudly from the distance when she saw her parents going over the account books in front of the granary.

Yu Hai and his wife thought that they were imagining things when they first heard their younger daughter's voice. Zhuang Xiaomo keenly spotted in the distance that there was a small figure riding on a red horse. He revealed a smile and hurriedly spoke to Yu Hai and Madam Liu, “Uncle Yu, Auntie, Xiaocao is back! You two should quickly go greet her. I'm not in a hurry right now!”

Ever since the Wokou pirate disaster, Zhuang Xiaomo had moved to Dongshan Village. As the years went by, he slowly grew up and became more certain that he wanted to marry the hardworking Xiaolian. However, as he saw the Yu Family's fortunes go up and up, he started to feel a bit of pressure.

Uncle Yu and Auntie Yu treated him like their own son and often sent him food. In fact, most of his clothes and shoes were personally made by Auntie Yu. However, he had just reached the age of seventeen and knew in his heart that using his sincere character alone was not enough to marry Yu Xiaolian. He also needed to make sure that his situation was better to ensure that her living situation would be smooth and steady in the future.

Consequently, when Xiaoaco came back last year to establish the greenhouse grown vegetables business and mentioned the booming vegetable and fruit stalls in the capital, Zhuang Xiaomo had an idea. He decided to also start a stall that only sold the expensive greenhouse grown vegetables and fruits in Tanggu.

He didn't have a lot of money on hand and had originally planned on renting a stall in the regular food market for this. As he started on his plans, Uncle Yu found out and enthusiastically supported his idea. However, Uncle Yu advised him against renting a stall at the regular market. After listening to Uncle Yu's reasoning, Zhuang Xiaomo was enlightened. The vast majority of people who went to shop at the regular marketplace were the commoners, but whom among them could afford the expensive out-of-season fruits and vegetables?

In the end, Uncle Yu gave him some 'business capital' and he rented two stores in the western rich area of Tanggu Town to open Tanggu's first specialty vegetable and fruit stores. Naturally, this money was a loan and he gradually paid it back through the money he had earned.

Last autumn, Zhuang Xiaomo's vegetable and fruit stores made a bunch of money. The Yu Family's greenhouse business only gave him wholesale pricing on their goods and introduced him to a few old customers. Tanggu never lacked for the rich and wealthy. Thus, Zhuang Xiaomo's vegetable and fruit stores exploded in popularity.

In order to make it easier on himself to stock the stores, he bought a donkey cart. Every day, before the sun rose, he would drive the cart to bring the goods over. He spent the morning busily selling his stock. Sometimes, when business was especially good, he would have to go get another set of goods to replenish for the afternoon. He was quite busy every day.

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At the start of spring, Zhuang Xiaomo went to look at his account books and the results stunned him completely. In one winter, he not only made back all of the money that Uncle Yu had lent him as well as the money he spent to buy the donkey cart, but he also made three hundred taels to spare.

He was only idle for a few days, fixing up the store, when the Yu Family's early ripening watermelons were ready to go on the market. Thus, a new episode of business began for him. The watermelons could be sold until the end of summer. Furthermore, when that time came, the surplus grapes, pears and apples that the Yu Family couldn't eat also came on the market. Following that, it was the start of the busy season for the greenhouse grown vegetables and fruits again.

They were currently right in the middle of the busy season for the greenhouse grown vegetables and fruits. Every day, a whole cart full of vegetables and fruits would be sold out before noon. Furthermore, he always had a list of customers who reserved more goods to be delivered in the afternoon. Thus, Zhuang Xiaomo took advantage of the noon period, when no one was in the store, to drive his little black donkey and cart to get replenishments. He wasn't expecting that Xiaocao would appear at this time.

It had almost been half a year since Yu Hai last saw his youngest daughter and he missed her dearly and worried about her. At the end of autumn, someone from the capital had especially come over to give some good news to them. They said that his youngest daughter had saved the eldest imperial prince during the autumn hunt and had been titled a royal princess as a reward. Everyone else only saw the glory and honor that his youngest daughter brought to their family but how could they understand a father's worried heart?

There were many skilled experts protecting the eldest imperial prince. If Cao'er was the one to save him, then how dangerous of a situation must have it been at the time? His youngest daughter had no skills at fighting so he didn't know whether she had gotten frightened or injured from that time. She always only gave them the good news and not bad. As her parents, how could they not fret over her?

For the past few months, Yu Hai and Madam Liu tossed and turned at night on their bed. If it wasn't for the fact that they were so busy with the greenhouse business, the two of them would have long packed their luggage and visited the capital to take a look. Fortunately, their youngest daughter understood their anxious hearts and very quickly set a letter over telling them that she would be back in the twelfth month to visit. She was planning on staying to happily celebrate the New Years with them. Only then did the two of them restrain themselves from visiting the capital. They impatiently waited for the twelfth month to arrive.

When they heard the faint yet clear sound of his youngest daughter's voice and raised their heads to see her tiny figure in the distance, the two of them could no longer restrain their worries. Yu Hai smiled apologetically at Zhuang Xiaomo and couldn't be bothered to take off his gloves or arm guards before he started running towards his youngest daughter, who was already at the entrance of the farmstead. In order not to delay the business for their customers, Madam Liu called her father-in-law and eldest son over to take over. One of them could weigh while the other one dealt with the money and records. Only then did she follow her husband from behind and run towards her youngest daughter.

"Father!" Yu Xiaocao jumped off her horse and threw herself at her father's arms like a bird coming back to nest.

“Be careful, be careful!” Yu Hai watched in alarm as his youngest daughter leapt off the back of that high horse. He hurried over to catch his youngest daughter's delicate body.

He felt his youngest daughter's icy cold face and looked at her nose which had turned bright red from the cold. Yu Hai remarked worriedly, “It's the middle of winter, why did you ride a horse home? What's wrong with sitting in a nice and comfortable carriage...”

“Carriages go too slow and I wanted to get back earlier to see Father and Mother ah!” Yu Xiaocao saw her mother huffing and puffing as she ran over and threw herself at her. She fiercely hugged her mother's soft body and couldn't help but rub up against her mother in a spoiled manner.

Madam Liu tapped her head and remarked in a scolding tone, “You ah! It's not as if Mother and Father will run away. What's the difference between getting back a day or two later? If you got sick from the cold, however, then we would feel really bad ah—aiya, your tiny hands are like ice cubes. Quickly, come with Mother to go inside and warm up. The kang bed has had fuel burning this entire time!”

Madam Liu pulled on her youngest daughter's hands and continuously blew hot air on them. Yu Hai took off his gloves and used his large, warm hands to envelop them and rub them to add heat. Before long, Xiaocao's hands had thawed.

The largest courtyard in the farmstead was the one occupied by the Yu Family. It was a simply crafted four-sided courtyard with a main structure that had three rooms and two side rooms on the left and right. Yu Hai and his wife took their youngest daughter into their own room and had her sit on the bed after taking off her boots. They noticed that her four maidservants had also been frozen until their faces turned red and their lips turned blue. Madam Liu stated, “We don't have that many customs in the countryside. The four of you should also sit on the kang bed to warm up ah.”

Wutong and Yingchun had previously experienced sitting on the same kang bed as their master before, so they readily went up. Chunhua and Qiushi, on the other hand, had been scrupulously trained and they refused to go on the bed. Instead, they would only compromise on sitting a small stool next to the kang bed.

Wutong noticed the stubborn looks on their faces and persuaded them, “This room doesn't have a heated floor or heated walls. Only the kang bed provides warmth here. If you two get sick from the cold and can't take care of our master, you'll end up making our master worried. If Royal Prince Yang was also here, he wouldn't say anything either about you sitting on the kang bed.”

Yu Xiaocao held onto her comfortable hand warmer and deliberately pretended to be angry as she raised her eyes, "Chunhua, Qiushi! If you want to keep me as your master, then sit down! Otherwise, at the start of spring when we're back at the capital, you should go back to the hidden ranks ah! I absolutely cannot keep servants who do not listen to my orders!"

When Chunhua and Qiushi heard this, they hurriedly knelt down in alarm to apologize. Hidden soldiers who had been sent back had either committed an unforgivable crime or had some sort of other fault. It was obvious what their fate would be then.

Madam Liu came with two bowls of ginger-sugar soup and saw the two maidservants kneeling on the icy cold floor. She hurriedly said, "Cao'er, even if they made a mistake, we shouldn't let these people kneel for this long ah! Quickly let them get up in order to avoid harming their knees."

"Return back to the ranks or listen to my orders unconditionally. You two can choose one!" Yu Xiaocao took the bowl of ginger-sugar soup from her mother's hands and drank it in one gulp. The warm and toasty liquid warmed up her insides and pushed away the cold from her body.

Chunhua and Qiushi both vowed that they would listen to her orders. Yu Xiaocao pointed at the free space on the kang bed, "That's good, then you two should sit there. You won't refuse this time, right?"

The two maidservants exchanged looks and obediently pulled themselves onto the kang bed. They sat at the very edge of the kang bed with their legs tucked under them. Yu Xiaocao revealed a faint smile and said, "Erya, give the bowl of ginger-sugar soup to these two older sisters. It's best to drink it while warm so it can drive away the cold!"

Wutong suppressed the smile coming on her lips as she watched the two maidservants obediently take the crude bowl of porcelain over and drink the soup in a few sips. She also drank down her own ginger-sugar soup and said, "We don't need to worry about your loyalties. However, you two really need to understand your true position here. Are you Royal Prince Yang's maidservants or our young miss's? If you're with our young miss, you naturally should listen to her orders. Our young miss has a kind and generous heart and is not very strict about the customs. As long as you do your own work properly, there's no need to walk on eggshells around her."

Chunhua and Qiushi both nodded their heads and thanked her for her advice. Before long, Madam Liu came over with two plates of pastries and placed it on the small table on the kang bed and said, "It must

have been tiring to travel so quickly here. Eat some pastries for now. The pot is stewing a small wild pheasant. Tonight, we'll eat dinner early and rest early. Tomorrow, we'll go with you back to Dongshan Village.”

Yingchun saw that her mistress's mother was going back to the kitchen and perceptively jumped down. She put on her thick fur-lined boots and chased after the older woman, “Although my skills are not as good as yours, Madam, I can still be of great help in the kitchen.”

Madam Liu shook her head at her and pushed the maid back towards the room, “No need, we don't have so many customs in our family. Go back to the room and warm up completely first!”

“Then...this servant will help the madam manage the fire! The stove is much warmer than being on the kang bed. This servant will be gaining a favor from this!” Yingchun said all of this with a cheerful smile on her face, making Madam Liu unable to rebuff her offer.

Yu Xiaocao had the protection of the little divine stone on this journey so she didn't feel like she had gotten exposed to the cold. In addition, she had also added some mystic-stone water to the water that her maidservants drank every day. Thus, they weren't harmed from exposure either. Before long, they all warmed up. When they saw that the madam was in the kitchen cooking for them, the maidservants couldn't sit still anymore. Unfortunately, not a single one of them had any talent at cooking. They could only enter the kitchen to do chores like washing vegetables and cutting them. Madam Liu thought that they were in the way and sent them all out.

Yu Xiaocao rolled up her own sleeves and began to cook. She made Sichuan poached fish in chili sauce, spicy chicken pieces, and spicy congee. Eating spicy food in this type of weather warmed a person's belly up. The four maidservants were quite frightened by the fact that they had let their master cook food for them to eat. It was truly disgraceful of them. When they got back to the capital, all of them worked hard to learn how to cook. Although their food wasn't as tasty as the food made by cook maids, they were still edible. But this was in the future.

After living on the farmstead for a few days, Xiaocao realized that the scope of the greenhouse business here in Tanggu was not in any way smaller than the one in the capital. Just from wholesale alone, they sold tens of thousands of catties of vegetables and fruits every day. This basically meant that they made a few thousand taels in income every day. It was likely that Yu Xiaocao no longer knew just how much wealth her own family had at this point.

During those days, Yu Xiaocao brought her four maidservants along to also help on the farm. Chunhua and Qiushi clearly had martial arts skills as both of them had much more strength than the average person. Containers holding over a hundred catties of vegetables were easily moved around by them like it was no big deal. The male workers on the farmstead were all so shocked that their eyes nearly fell out of their heads when they saw those two maids working. As for Wutong and Yingchun, they stayed with her. One of them worked the scale, while the other worked on the books. They cooperated quite nicely together and helped save Yu Hai and his family quite a bit of work.

As New Years got closer and closer, Madam Liu finally was able to hand her work to Yingchun and have some time to herself. She took her daughter and her remaining three maids to spend lots of time perusing the markets to buy items for the New Years celebrations. It wasn't easy for her daughter to make it back for the holiday to celebrate together. Thus, she needed to make sure they bought everything they needed.

In reality, the family had their own supply of fruits and vegetables and it was very easy for their family to buy any chickens, ducks, and seafood they needed in the village. Thus, there wasn't much they needed to buy. However, shopping was a woman's pleasure. Every day, they left with empty baskets but would always come back with packages, large and small, with them. Chunhua and Qiushi had become their bag holders and ended up with all sorts of shopping bags hanging off of them every day.

On the twentieth day of the twelfth month, Madam Liu took her daughter with her back to Dongshan Village with a giant donkey cart filled to the brim with goods.

This time, when Yu Xiaocao came back, she didn't bring any of the ceremonious gear that was befitting of a feudal princess or royal princess rank. Thus, the villagers were much more welcoming and casual when they saw her. Seeing their familiar faces with their warm smiles, hearing their familiar voices with the hard to forget village accent, Yu Xiaocao sometimes thought that this sort of simple and honest life was what she really wanted. No matter how much glory, splendor, gold, silver, and treasures one had, one couldn't buy sincerity or the warmth of true friendship. It couldn't buy a simple honest life. Homesickness suddenly struck her...

"Xiaocao!" Liu Huifang had already transformed into a slender and pretty young maiden. She had just accompanied her father to deliver a cart full of chicken eggs and didn't expect to see her childhood friend at the mouth of the village. Now, Liu Shuanzhu's entire family were occupied with their chicken-raising business. They now had almost a thousand chickens at home. Although the hens didn't like to lay eggs as much in the winter, they still had some eggs every few days or so. Selling those eggs to the Zhou Family's factories was also a good source of income.