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Fields of Gold Chapter 541 – Future Older Sister—in

Liu Huifang jumped off of the donkey cart and jogged over to pull on Xiaocao's hand. The smile on her face was sincere and pretty, "A few days ago, I saw Little Black in the forest so I knew you were going to be back soon. The capital is truly good at nourishing people. Look at how tender and fair your skin is. I always thought I had a pretty good complexion in the village, but when I stand next to you, I look like a piece of charcoal instead!"

"No worries, as long as my older brother doesn't care, what does it matter then?" Sometime, while she was gone, Yu Hang and Older Sister Huifang had ended up seeing eye to eye. When her mother had someone help her write a letter, she had specifically mentioned this detail.

Uncle Shuanzhu was good friends with her father and their whole family was of good moral character. Older Sister Huifang had an open personality and was very hard working. She also had a good relationship with her. Thus, in Yu Xiaocao's mind, she was more than happy to have Huifang become her older sister-in-law in the future. From the letter her family sent her, she could tell that everyone else also liked her quite a bit. If it wasn't for the fact that the two of them were still quite young, Madam Liu would have gone over to Huifang's family to negotiate for a betrothal. She needed to strike early in order to obtain such a good girl for her son.

Liu Huifang's cheeks immediately turned bright red after being teased by her good friend. She glared at her and grumbled, "If you're only going to speak nonsense, I'm going to ignore you!"

"Why do you think I'm speaking nonsense? Aren't people supposed to stick to the truth at this time of year? Sigh, my future older sister-in-law is so hard to get along with, as the younger sister-in-law, it looks like I'll have a difficult time in the future." Yu Xiaocao shook her head and sighed but her eyes glinted with a spark of mischief.

Liu Huifang revealed an embarrassed expression and raised a hand to lightly slap Xiaocao's shoulder. She was halfway there when another hand stopped her. She raised her head and met a pair of eyes that were full of warning. Liu Huifang looked at Xiaocao in a flabbergasted manner and asked, "Who is she ah?"

Wutong hurriedly took her hand out of Qiushi's hand and smiled, "Miss Liu, this is a misunderstanding! Qiushi is in charge of our young miss's safety and was only trying to protect her. Qiushi, Miss Liu is only playing around with our young miss, so there's no need to be too nervous! Dongshan Village's people have either watched our young miss grow up or were friends with her during childhood. No one will

harm her. You two, ah, can just relax a bit!" Now, Wutong was no longer like she was before when she viewed everyone around her as beneath her. She now treated her young miss's friends in a polite and friendly manner.

Qiushi looked at her master. When she saw Xiaocao lightly nod in agreement with Wutong's words, she released Liu Huifang's hand and simply said, "Please forgive me!"

Liu Huifang looked at Chunhua, who was behind Qiushi and Xiaocao. The other girl was standing straight and seemed quite fierce. She lightly elbowed Xiaocao and grinned, "Oh ho! Looks like becoming a royal princess does have some changes in customs. You now have female bodyguards protecting you!"

Xiaocao winked at her and said, "No matter how powerful this royal princess is, my older sister-in-law will still be able to outrank me. An older sister-in-law is like a second mother. I currently need to fawn over you, that way you'll treat me better in the future."

"Speaking nonsense again!" Liu Huifang lightly pinched her small arm. This time, the two bodyguard maids didn't try to stop her.

"Alright ah! Don't be embarrassed and come back home with me. I have things I want to give you!" Like she did in the past, Yu Xiaocao linked her arms with Older Sister Huifang and the two of them laughed and chatted as they headed towards the Yu Family's residence. She had stayed a few days in the prefectural city and Tanggu Town, so it was likely the luggage carts had already gotten to her home.

Liu Shuanzhu cheerfully watched as Xiaocao 'took' his daughter away. After saying a greeting to Madam Liu, he drove the donkey cart home. His wife had seen her daughter and husband leave together but, when only her husband returned, she asked, "Where's Huifang ah?"

"The Yu Family's lass, Xiaocao, is back and called our daughter to her home. She said she has some gifts to give our daughter." Liu Shuanzhu unhitched the animals from the cart and took out some fodder from their shelter for them.

Shuanzhu's wife was currently taking out the laundry and her hands faltered for a moment and a slightly worried look appeared on her face. Liu Shuanzhu noticed that his wife was sighing repeatedly and asked, "Wife, what's wrong? Is that brat Tiedan causing you problems? Just watch me discipline him! Tiedan'er, come out for your father!!"

“Our son is currently practicing his calligraphy, why are you hollering about?” Shuanzhu's wife rolled her eyes at him and continued, “Tiedan'er is very sweet and obedient. He works very hard at school and even the teacher there said that at the start of spring, he can try taking the entrance exam to Rongxuan Academy.”

“The teacher really said that? This boy is truly giving me some face! If he can enter Rongxuan Academy, I can't guarantee anything else but he will definitely be able to become a county-level official. At that time, our family will also have a county-official then!” Liu Shuanzhu broadly smiled and revealed a joyous expression on his face.

“Father, what did you call me for?” Tiedan'er came out of his own room and was still holding a writing brush with ink on it.

Liu Shuanzhu patted his son's shoulder and the smile on his face broadened as he proclaimed, “Nothing at all! Continue to work hard! I don't know if your Older Brother Shitou will come back for the New Years, but if he does you can ask him for some tips for the examination. That way you can work hard to pass the entrance examination to Rongxuan Academy and give our Old Liu Family some glory.”

Tiedan's round little face revealed a smile and he said, “Older Brother Shitou will definitely come back because he goes wherever Older Sister Xiaocao goes. Since Older Sister Xiaocao came back for the New Years, Older Brother Shitou will not let this opportunity go. Father, don't worry, I will definitely work hard and test into Rongxuan Academy!”

“Good son! Go ah and you can continue working on your calligraphy!” Liu Shuanzhu thought that his son's nimble brain resembled his own. However, his family's situation wasn't good enough when he was young to allow him to study. Otherwise, he might be a county official right now!

In the blink of an eye, he noticed that his wife's expression was still a bit worried and he inquired in puzzlement, “Since it wasn't our son that made you unhappy, then why do you have such a long look on your face ah? What's going on ah?”

“I'm worried about our daughter!” Shuanzhu's wife glared at her husband. He was a good man but he was a bit too thick sometimes!

Liu Shuanzhu was even more perplexed now and asked in a puzzled tone, "Our daughter? What's up with our daughter? If it wasn't for her coming up with the idea to raise chickens, do you think our family would be doing so well now? Our daughter is so hard-working, what is there for you to be worried about?"

"I'm talking about Huifang and Xiaosha's thing!" Shuanzhu's wife threw the piece of clothing in her hands into the wooden basin next to her and glared at her husband with an exasperated look.

At that time, the Yu Family's braised food shop's roasted chicken, smoked chicken, and air-dried chicken were very popular in the prefectural city. The Yu Family was honest and would rather spend more time on the road to help their fellow villagers do well. The Liu Family now raised the largest number of chickens in the village, so they sent a bunch of chickens every few days to the prefecture city. Yu Hang often came over to help settle the bill. As time passed on, he and Huifang became familiar with each other. The two families began to work even more closely together as business partners and the two of them naturally began to develop feelings for each other.

Liu Shuanzhu scratched the back of his head and frowned, "What's wrong with our daughter and Xiaosha? Did Xiaosha do something to make our daughter unhappy? I'll go and scold him now and let him know that our daughter isn't someone he can just bully because he wants to!" As he finished, he turned around to head out the gate.

"You come back right now!!" Shuanzhu's wife felt quite helpless at this turn of events. If her husband could accurately guess what she was thinking, then the sun would start rising from the west, "I was trying to say...Xiaocao is a royal princess now and has the same status as the daughter of an imperial prince. Furthermore, for the past two years, the Yu Family's business has continued to expand and become more prosperous. I won't even mention their other businesses but just from the greenhouse grown vegetables alone, I'm pretty sure they'd make at least ten thousand taels in one winter, and that's estimating low, right? Although our family is one of the most prosperous in the village now, the gap between our two families is still too large right?"

"Wife, are you trying to say that when our daughter marries into their family, they'll look down on her? Don't worry about that, Brother Dahai and his wife aren't the type of people to do that! That being said, we've watched Xiaosha grow up under our eyes and we can definitely vouch for his personal character!!"

Liu Shuanzhu thought that his wife was thinking too much. Madam Liu was very satisfied with their daughter and even told them that after the New Years, they should make things official between their

two children. If they decided that this was too early for their daughter, they could wait another two years before they got engaged.

“But...the social gap between our two families is really too big. I heard that Xiaocao not only was titled a royal princess but that the emperor and empress treat her very well, almost as if she was their own daughter. The eldest imperial prince even calls her 'older sister'...” Shuanzhu's wife was quite anxious about this.

Liu Shuanzhu also frowned at this and said, “That lass Xiaocao is a fortunate one indeed. However, Xiaocao is still Xiaocao, Xiaosha is still Xiaosha...Brother Dahai also said that if Little Shitou passes the imperial court's examinations and becomes an official at court, Tanggu's farmstead and the businesses at Dongshan Village would be inherited by Xiaosha. Their roots are in Dongshan Village and the eldest son should keep an eye on their ancestral home. With that, Huifang will also be close to us and we can help her when needed. What's there to be worried about then? That being said, that lass Xiaocao isn't one of those people with her head up high and eyes to the sky. Today, when she saw our daughter, she was very intimate and friendly with her just like before!”

“But I still feel a bit anxious within my heart.” Regardless, Shuanzhu's wife felt a bit better after hearing her husband's analysis of the issue. He was right! The Yu Family was famous in the village for being honest and trustworthy. Furthermore, the head of the Yu Family had pretty much grown up with her husband like true brothers. The Yu Family's wife had a good-natured personality and was very satisfied with her daughter. In addition, Xiaosha was a hard worker and had a trustworthy personality. What did she have to be worried about now?

“Mother, once Older Brother passes the exams and becomes an official, he can give support to Older Sister!” The Liu Family's youngest daughter had originally been sitting in the courtyard, shelling peanuts obediently. When she heard her father and mother talking, she childishly interjected her opinion.

Liu Shuanzhu strode over to his daughter and picked her up, lifting her high. He laughed joyously, “Our Xiaoya'er is right! When your older brother becomes an official, then we'll also find you an official to be your husband!”

Shuanzhu's wife rescued her daughter from her husband and glared at him, “What nonsense are you saying now ah? Are you not afraid you'll lead our daughter down a crooked road?”

Xiaoya'er pinched up a shelled peanut and delivered it into her father's mouth as she mumbled, “I don't want to be the wife of an official ah.”

Liu Shuanzhu chewed on the peanut and guffawed, "Then what type of man does our Ya'er want to marry?"

Xiaoya'er puffed up her bun-like face and frowned for a bit before she stated in a conflicted tone, "I want to find someone who is hardworking, just like...Older Xiaocao! Someone who can do anything! If Older Sister Xiaocao was a man, Ya'er would definitely marry her!"

"Alright! In the future, Father will make sure to find you a hardworking man!!" Liu Shuanzhu had been tickled by his youngest daughter's somewhat childish thoughts on the matter. His wife could only shake her head repeatedly. This child truly knew no shame and was willing to say anything out loud.

While the two of them were at home teasing their children, their oldest daughter was already sitting on the kang bed in Xiaocao's maiden room. Huifang's eyes were wide open in astonishment as she looked at the beautiful and delicate wooden boxes on the bed. She couldn't help but remark in surprise, "This set of 'Blossoming Beauty' skincare products...is for me?"

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"That's right ah! Weren't you complaining earlier that you thought your skin wasn't bright and fair enough? This set is for brightening and hydrating the skin, and it's very efficacious. This set contains a washing lotion, moisturizing toner, whitening essence, and hydrating cream...if you follow the instructions I just told you and use it ever morning and night, after one month, I guarantee that your skin will be fairer by a shade and also look very bright and hydrated. I'm sure my older brother will be so entranced by you then!" Yu Xiaocao revealed a grin.

In the previous dynasty, there were plenty of fifteen and sixteen year old youths and maidens getting married and having children everywhere. Yu Hang and Liu Huifang were experiencing their first awakening of love. Even when their eyes met across the room, they would blush. After being teased by Xiaocao, Liu Huifang's face was so hot that one could fry an egg on top.

Yu Xiaocao saw that Older Sister Huifang had now buried her face into her chest and stopped teasing the other girl before it got too much, "Oh right, during the autumn hunt, Little Black and Little White caught a lot of red and silver foxes, so I have a lot of fox pelts. Bring these back to give to Uncle Shuanzhu and Auntie so they can use them to make a hat and scarf. The old men in the capital often wear fur hats in the winter. However, silver fox pelts aren't something that anyone can buy ah!"

“Since they are that rare, you should leave them for Uncle Yu and Auntie instead ah!” Liu Huifang stroked the silky soft fur on the silver fox pelt. Even if she didn't know what it was, she could tell that it was very valuable and expensive.

“Little Black and Little White are very talented and hardworking. I not only have set aside some for my parents, but my grandfather and godparents also have a share ah! I especially picked out these two pelts to give to Uncle and Auntie Shuanzhu. Ah, this is a box of pastries that I got from my family's pastry shop and I'm sure it'll taste just as good as the pastries I got from Daoxiang Village last year. Bring it back so Tiedan and Younger Sister Ya'er can try some!” Yu Xiaocao was very thoughtful and had prepared gifts for everyone in the Liu Family. She knew that Little Tiedan was currently studying and especially gave a set of brushes and paper for him.

“Isn't...all of this a bit too expensive ah?” Without even mentioning the two fur pelts, just the 'Blossoming Beauty' skincare set was incredibly pricey. She had gone to the prefectural city with her father before and had once overheard a young miss from a wealthy family happily bragging that she had gotten a handmade soap from the capital's famous 'Blossoming Beauty' cosmetic shop. Just one soap cost a few dozen taels. She even said that 'Blossoming Beauty's' prices were sky high and only the noble and wealthy families could afford goods from there. In fact, just registering a card there cost around ten thousand taels. If a tiny piece of soap was that pricey, then this set of skincare items probably cost around at least a few thousand taels.

Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes at her and said, “These gifts I prepared, the furs were from my own hunting, and the cosmetics and pastries I took from my own shops. Other than the few taels I spent on the brushes and paper, which of these are considered expensive for me ah? Older Sister Huifang, when did you become so conservative and maudlin? You're not at all like you were in the past, so open and free. If you don't take them, then I won't recognize you as my older sister-in-law!”

If she continued to refuse, then it would be a bit too impolite. Liu Huifang could only take these gifts with a blush on her face. The two friends were chatting quite happily when they heard a person in the courtyard yell, “Auntie Yu, I heard Younger Sister Xiaocao has come back and I'm here to see her!”

Madam Liu was just in the middle of organizing the storeroom with the four maidservants and raised her head to see the Zheng Family's lass. The smile on her face congealed lightly. Madam Liu truly couldn't find it in her to like that lass Zheng Xiaocui. That lass had too many schemes in her head and was always trying to get something good out of other people's hands and never seemed to realize that no one was as stupid as she thought!

In the past, when Royal Prince Yang went to visit Xiaocao, she would always show up and try to tag along. It was rumored that she even wanted to become a concubine of the royal prince, so Cao'er's other friends didn't even like bringing her along to play anymore. Later on, she wasn't sure just what exactly Royal Prince Yang said, but this lass didn't try to find her youngest daughter for a long time.

Madam Liu had originally thought that the lass had smartened up. However, as the Yu Family became more and more prosperous, apparently this lass now had the idea to cozy up to her own son. As long as Yu Hang came back from Tanggu Town, she would always 'coincidentally' bump into him. Madam Liu had seen a few times just how this lass interacted with her son. She always talked to him in a coy and breathless manner, and her eyes seemed to be glued onto her son's body. Luckily, Hang'er didn't seem to have any good feelings towards the girl and would always greet her politely before making his escape as fast as possible. However, Zheng Xiaocui refused to give up and often used the excuse of looking for Xiaolian to spend half of the day at their residence. She even deliberately pretended to not notice the pointed looks and hints to leave from other people. It really made people feel helpless!

Who knew what little scheme she was cooking this time? Although Madam Liu didn't like her very much, they were both from the same village, so she couldn't just shoo the girl away. She could only squeeze out a smile and say, "Cao'er is in her room talking to Huifang ah..."

"Huifang is also here?" The expression on Zheng Xiaocui's face slightly changed and she couldn't hide the jealousy within her eyes. Her mother had told her that girls had to be subtle when chasing boys. Originally, she thought that as long as she struck first and created more opportunities to meet Yu Hang, that kind and obedient youth would very quickly fall into her hands. However, that fellow was as dense as a block of wood. No matter how much she hinted, he refused to get a clue.

Her mother had told her that some boys matured late. Perhaps Yu Hang just hadn't gotten to the point where he was interested in girls yet. However, how could she know that not long ago, news came out that the Yu Family was intending on engaging their son to the Liu Family's Huifang? Although it wasn't officially set, they had already exchanged a few tokens. Just what part of that wretch, Liu Huifang, was better than herself? She spent all day with the chickens and smelled horrible. She wasn't as pretty as herself, so was that fellow Yu Hang blind? He didn't choose her and chose Huifang instead?!

Zheng Xiaocui was about the same age as Huifang and would be turning sixteen after the New Years. Her older sister had been married off at that same age to a cripple who was older than her by ten years. The reason was because his family was able to give out fifty taels as a betrothal gift. The Zheng Family didn't have a good reputation in Dongshan Village. The men in the family were all lazy and didn't do much work while also only valuing boys and not girls. In her father's eyes, the only point of having daughters was to have them do work around the house and then get some valuable betrothal gifts when they got married off.

Appearance wise, Zheng Xiaocui was considered to be a beauty in the village. Her father had long started to plan just what sort of benefits he could get off of her! Thus, when his daughter shamelessly tried to get closer to the Yu Family's eldest son, he turned a blind eye to this. If his daughter became the eldest daughter-in-law of the Yu Family, wouldn't the Yu Family's large and prosperous businesses become the Zheng Family's? However, when he found out that there wasn't much hope for Yu Hang anymore, he started to ask the matchmaker for other matches. He discovered that there was a local tycoon in town who was looking to take in his twelfth concubine. It was rumored that the tycoon would be giving out two hundred taels as a betrothal gift!

When Zheng Xiaocui found out from her mother that she was about to be sold to an old man to become his twelfth concubine, she almost fainted right then and there. If she had to become a concubine, then at least she should become a concubine to a person like Royal Prince Yang! Royal Prince Yang had a face that was even more beautiful than hers and had a well-sculpted body to match. Furthermore, his status in society was also very appealing. At this time, she had long forgotten the threats that Royal Prince Yang had said to her.

When she found out that Xiaocao was going to come back to celebrate the New Years, she had started counting the days. Xiaocao spent most of her time in the capital and was also quite close to Royal Prince Yang. If she could convince the other girl to bring her to the capital, she would be able to find an opportunity to get closer to the prince and have him see her charms!

This lass truly dared to dream high! Even if Royal Prince Yang didn't have the ability to read her thoughts and see through her schemes, he still wouldn't be interested in her somewhat pretty and bland looks. In fact, even his bodyguards wouldn't be interested in her, let alone someone like the prince who saw glorious beauties all the time.

Zheng Xiaocui saw the pile of New Years gifts in the courtyard that were piled up like a mountain and the jealousy in her heart blazed high. If Yu Hang hadn't been seduced by that slut, Liu Huifang, then all of these delicate silk bolts, gold and silver treasures, precious curiosities, and famous goods from the capital would be considered hers! All hers!!

Zheng Xiaocui deeply inhaled and did her best to move her eyes away from the valuable objects. There was no hope left for Yu Hang, but if she became a concubine of Royal Prince Yang, she would not only have status but also have wealth. Wouldn't that be much better than marrying into a tycoon's family?

For the sake of her goal, she raised her spirits and revealed what she thought was her warmest smile and entered Xiaocao's room, "Xiaocao, when I found out you got back, I especially brought over some of your favorite hickory nuts and hazelnuts. They've all been roasted already, quickly try some!"

Yu Xiaocao stared at the other girl for a long time and then looked over at Older Sister Huifang for help, 'Who is this ah? How come I don't really have an impression of her?' In the past, when she was in Dongshan Village, she was always busy doing something or other and didn't have much time to interact with the other villagers. She only spent time playing with Older Sister Huifang, Shanhu, and Qian Yafang. As for everyone else, she mostly nodded her head and smiled when she saw them.

Zheng Xiaocui almost couldn't keep the smile on her face. What was this all about? Did she become arrogant after becoming a royal princess and no longer deigned to recognize her old playmate? 'Yu Xiaocao, I didn't think you'd become this kind of person!'

Liu Huifang also knew that Zheng Xiaocui had once set her eyes on Yu Hang. However, they were all from one village. Normally, they went along their separate ways but it wasn't good to outright ignore her. After seeing Xiaocao's reaction, she almost burst out into laughter, 'You keep pretending to be very close to her, but she doesn't even remember who you are. Isn't that embarrassing ah?'

However, after thinking about it, she understood why! In the past, every time she had made plans with Xiaocao to go gather seafood or wild nuts in the mountains, Zheng Xiaocui always used her name to tag along. Later on, Xiaocao had gotten busy and they rarely had the time to go together to the mountains or ocean. It had been a few years ago, so it wasn't surprising that Xiaocao couldn't remember Zheng Xiaocui.

"Younger Sister Xiaocao, this is Zheng Xiaocui. Her family lives pretty close to mine. In the past, we had gone out together to pick wild mushrooms!" Liu Huifang gave a short introduction to the other girl.

Yu Xiaocao frowned for a bit and then very soon revealed an expression that showed she remembered. Zheng Xiaocui immediately smiled broadly and pulled at Xiaocao's delicate and soft hand and warmly said, "That's right! It's me! At that time, you used to call me Older Sister Xiaocui. It's been almost two years since you last came back to Dongshan Village. At that time, you were still young, so it's not surprising you can't remember who I am."

Yu Xiaocao now remembered that Royal Prince Yang had warned her in the past that she shouldn't spend too much time with this girl as she had unclean thoughts. Although she didn't think it was a big deal, she never doubted that fellow's abilities. This was the perfect example of someone eyeing a

benefit they could get from you while acting solicitous! It looked like she needed to keep her guard up in order to avoid falling into this person's plans.

“Ah! I remember now! You're the person who Shanhu said who wanted to become the concubine of Royal Prince Yang and got angry and left!” Yu Xiaocao took her hand out of the other girl's and slapped the bed with an expression that showed that she had realized something.

Zheng Xiaocui's face froze, 'This stupid brat. She couldn't remember anything else except that ah?'

Just as she was racking her brains, trying to find a way to change the topic, Yu Xiaocao spoke again, “Xiaocui, where did you hear about becoming a concubine? Our Dongshan Village doesn't have the precedence of selling their daughters to become low-ranked concubines in wealthy people's families.”

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After a short pause, she shook her head again and said, “Besides, a concubine is merely a plaything for her husband in a wealthy family. The mother-in-law can simply punish her with one simple command. The maidservants in the estate will not treat her as one of their masters. Even the child they give birth to cannot address his or her own mother as mother, instead, the child had to refer to her as 'concubine'... I just don't understand why some women are scrambling to become a concubine. Sister Huifang, do you agree?”

Liu Huifang saw that the expression on Zheng Xiaocui's face was becoming more and more unsightly. When she recalled how Zheng Xiaocui had accused her of seducing Yu Hang behind her back in the village, she grinned in agreement, “Isn't that right? Even though you will be poor and tired, you can still live with dignity and freedom if you're married to an ordinary family. I heard that sometimes, a concubine's status cannot even be compared to a maidservant that has some power and influence in the estate. Why would anyone be so desperate to be someone's maidservant?”

Zheng Xiaocui hated that she couldn't shred Liu Huifang's proud face into pieces. She was just blabbering on because it had nothing to do with her. If she managed to snatch Yu Hang back then, Liu Huifang wouldn't have been able to say what she had just said. It was a pity that Yu Hang acted like a piece of wood. He never fell for her charms; it was like she was acting kind in front of a blind person!

However, this was not the time for her to argue with that cheap woman. Zheng Xiaocui forced out a smile and asked curiously, “Xiaocao, what is the capital like? Is it fun? The farthest I've been is to the town. The capital is much bigger than the town, right?”

Xiaocao didn't really want to talk to her and was about to give her a perfunctory reply when she saw the curiosity in Sister Huifang's eyes. She picked a few interesting and exciting stories and told them about the prosperous and lively imperial capital.

Zheng Xiaocui had a fascinated expression on her face when she muttered, "I can die without any regrets in this life if I have the chance to stroll around the streets of the imperial city... Xiaocao, now that you're promoted to a royal princess, will you be moving into a bigger house? Do you need maidservants? Do you think I can be your maidservant?"

In her opinion, even someone as stupid and slow as Erya was bought by Xiaocao's family to be a maidservant. Therefore, she would definitely qualify as a maidservant. After all, she was clever, nimble, and efficient, so she was qualified to be Xiaocao maidservant.

Wutong, who had finished arranging the gifts and the luggage, coincidentally entered the house and overheard their conversation. She sized Zheng Xiaocui up and down, and then sneered, "A person like you wants to work as a maidservant? You're not even qualified to be a maidservant that does rough work around the Yu Estate!"

It was fine if Xiaocao treated her coldly, but how can she stand being ridiculed by a mere maidservant? Zheng Xiaocui felt humiliated, she was so angry that her neck had turned red, "Xiaocao, aren't you going to punish your servant?!"

Yu Xiaocao chided Wutong indifferently since Zheng Xiaocui came from the same village as her, "Xiaocui, Wutong, and Pipa are in charge of all the maidservants in my estate. She took your joke seriously. This maidservant is frank and outspoken, so you shouldn't take what she says to heart."

Wutong regretted her words the moment she said them. After all, everyone who came to the estate was a guest. Although she had never heard her young miss mention this lady before, this lady might still be her young miss's friend since she rushed here the moment her young miss returned to the village. But after she saw how her young miss didn't scold her, and instead, spoke on her behalf, Wutong was relieved. It seemed like her young miss did not like this lady!

Wutong hurriedly apologized and smiled, "I'm sorry, Miss Xiaocui. I took your joke seriously! But this maidservant didn't say anything incorrectly. Anyone with a status in the capital would buy their maidservants from an official intermediary. In the capital, all the ordinary girls who want to become a maidservant have to go through two to three years of training. The maidservants in our estate are all the best of the best. Let me say this as a joke. If you really want to work as a maidservant for our estate,

then you will have to sell yourself to an official intermediary. However, the official intermediaries don't usually buy everyone who goes there to sell themselves. They usually accept younger girls around the age of ten because they would be the perfect age to be a maidservant after two years of training.

Zheng Xiaocui was so angry that she was about to cry. She screamed at Xiaocao angrily, "Yu Xiaocao, it doesn't mean that you can bully other people as you wish just because you are a royal princess! Don't forget that you used to be impoverished too! You weren't able to eat your fill back then too. How can you look down at your childhood friends now that you have money and power? I didn't expect that you would be such a person!!"

"Shut up! Who are you shouting at?" The expression on Wutong's face changed. She was full of dignity as she scolded her sternly, "You were the one who said you wanted to enter our estate as a maidservant, so I kindly informed you about the situation at our estate! If you don't want to listen, then you can come at me. Why are you shouting at our royal princess? Our royal princess is someone who cares about the villagers. Otherwise, you would've been dragged out and beaten by the wooden board for being so rude to our royal princess!"

"Okay! Come at me then! Fight me then! I want all the villagers to see how you, Yu Xiaocao, humiliate and abuse your friends after you become wealthy and influential. It seems like I misjudged you!" Zheng Xiaocui was somewhat scared; she may appear fierce on the outside, but she was cowardly at heart. After she spat out those words, she turned around to leave.

"Stop!!" Yu Xiaocao held a cup of fragrant tea with a calm expression on her face. She took a sip of the tea and gently wiped the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief. Her voice did not waver at all when she said, "Zheng Xiaocui, it's true that I went out digging for wild vegetables and gathering seafood by the sea with you when we were kids. However, I did all of that because of Sister Huifang. In the past, you approached Royal Prince Yang more than you've approached me. So, please stop tutting your own horn by calling me your 'friend'!"

Xiaocao had always been amicable, but when the smile on her face disappeared, she suddenly looked like a stranger. The noble and imposing aura that she exuded made it impossible for people not to admire her. Even Liu Huifang couldn't help but release the breath she was holding while her heart shrank in fear.

The sunlight shone through the glass window and shrouded her body in a golden halo. People were afraid to look directly at Xiaocao because she looked as dazzling as a god with the golden halo shrouded around her body. She had a majestic presence around her, and none of the people present dared to look directly into her eyes. They realized that the girl in front of them was beyond their reach.

“Furthermore, you were the one who offered yourself to become a maidservant of our estate, yet you couldn't even pass a small test. I wouldn't take you in as my maidservant even if the villagers asked me to do so, solely because of your attitude and temper. I need a loyal, obedient, and capable maidservant by my side. I don't need a young lady with an attitude!” In just a few short words, Yu Xiaocao was able to turn Wutong's deliberate mocking words into a test of Zheng Xiaocui's character.

Zheng Xiaocui took a deep breath and summoned up the last strand of courage and said, “Fine, I was wrong! I just didn't like the way the maidservant standing beside you trampled on my dignity as she wished...”

“Dignity? I don't think you understand your place. A servant has no dignity in front of their master. When the master gets off the horse carriage, the servant has to act like a stool, so that their master can step on them when getting off the carriage. If the master's shoes become dirty, the servant will have to kneel on the ground and wipe the shoes clean. If the servant makes a small mistake, then the servant will be stripped of his or her pants and whipped in public... Although these actions that you speak of don't have any dignity to them, they're what a servant is required to do! Zheng Xiaocui, if you want to keep your dignity, then don't talk about offering yourself up to be a maidservant!”

Chunhua had quickly rushed here when she heard some shouting. Yu Xiaocao picked up a hazelnut and casually handed it to Chunhua when she rushed in. Zheng Xiaocui was stunned——the thin and weak looking maid gently pinched the hard hazelnut shell with her hands, and the shell easily cracked under the pressure.

Xiaocao put the hazelnut that Chunhua had peeled for her into her mouth. Her mouth bulged slightly when she popped the hazelnuts into her mouth; she looked like a squirrel with her bulging cheeks. She loved eating delicious and savory nuts, but she hated peeling them herself. When Royal Prince Yang was by her side, he was in charge of peeling the nuts for her.

“I'm thirsty...Wutong, go brew a pot of the Da Hong Tao that was bestowed by the empress, and then bring it here so Sister Huifang can have a taste!” Yu Xiaocao suddenly instructed after she ate a few hazelnuts.

“Yes!” Wutong curtsied obediently and retreated out of the room. She had been a servant for her master for many years, so she immediately understood what her master was planning.

Wutong took out a complete set of Kung Fu Tea. Her movements were elegant, smooth, and natural as she washed the tea, added water to the tea, brewed the tea, closed the lid, poured the tea, and served the tea... The fragrance coming from the tea was extremely fragrant. The scent tickled their noses and made it impossible for people not to enjoy the pleasant scent of the tea.

Qiushi took out a zither and started playing with it with her bare hands in the corner of the room. The elegant and gentle sound from the zither filled the room. Yingchun fetched an incense burner and blended her master's favorite scent, which was a gentle lotus scent...

“Sister Huifang, have a taste of this. This is top-notch Da Hong Pao. It was picked from a century-old tea tree on the steep cliff from Wuyi Mountain. This tea has a strong orchid scent, and the fragrance from the tea is long-lasting. This old tea tree only produces two to three catties of tea leaves in a year. All of the tea leaves will be given as a tribute to the Imperial Palace, so it's very difficult for others to have a taste of this tea!” Yu Xiaocao picked up the teacup with three fingers. She lowered her head and sniffed the fragrance in the cup and sipped the tea slowly, finishing the tea in three sips.

Her beautiful fair hands were as white as jade and her movements were graceful when she lowered her head to drink the tea. Xiaocao's sweet-tempered and charming movements made her fairy-like figure even more beautiful. Liu Huifang stared at her with a blank look on her face. She was so caught up with staring at Xiaocao that she neglected to take the fragrant tea that was offered to her by Wutong.

It was impossible for Zheng Xiaocui to be jealous and resentful towards Yu Xiaocao after seeing her served by four maidservants because she knew that their statuses were very different. She could never reach the status that Yu Xiaocao had reached. Zheng Xiaocui could only stand in admiration and watch the scene from a distance. She didn't dare to have any other thoughts.

Zheng Xiaocui was too embarrassed to ask Xiaocao if she could be her maidservant again. Perhaps this was because she had already secretly acknowledged what Wutong said to her. She was nothing compared to the four maidservants serving Yu Xiaocao. Perhaps she didn't even qualify to even become a maidservant that did rough work around the estate.

The maidservants serving Xiaocao, whether it was their appearance or temperament, were more elegant and graceful than the so-called wealthy young maidens in town. Even with their beautiful appearance and good-natured temperament, they were still willing to serve Xiaocao. They sincerely treated her as their master. By now, she realized that Xiaocao was different from the Xiaocao she knew before!

However, if she didn't fight for an opportunity, then she will be sold to an old man that was older than her grandfather as a concubine. Zheng Xiaocui clenched her hands into fists and made her final attempt to avoid being married off to an old man. She didn't try to act smart or tried to come up with a sly plan. Instead, she directly told Xiaocao about her current situation, hoping that Xiaocao could point her in the right direction.

Zheng Xiaocui had tears when she slowly shook her head and said, "My father only wants to sell me off right now. This way, he can save up some money for my brother to marry a wife and take over the family business. Unless I can raise the equivalent amount of money that they planned to sell me for, then I can only accept my fate and marry an old man who is almost 60 years old. I will have to become his 12th concubine."

She didn't expect Zheng Laojiu to be such a greedy person! Yu Xiaocao frowned lightly, sighed, and said, "There is a limit to how much other people can help you. You can only rely on yourself for this matter."

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"Royal Princess...I beg you, please give me some pointers!" Zheng Xiaocui knew that Yu Xiaocao had a smart mind. She would definitely be able to think of a plan for her to get out of this situation.

"I can offer two suggestions for you. For the first option, I can recommend some work for you. You can either work at the Zhou Family's workshop or work as an assistant for the chefs at Zhenxiu Restaurant. After you choose a job, you will head home and tell your father everything honestly. You will tell him that all the money you earn before the age of eighteen will be handed over to him. Even after you get married, you will continue to honor him by giving him half of your wage. I think your father is smart enough to figure out whether it's better to have a reputation for selling his daughter off or earning more money in the long run!"

Yu Xiaocao paused for a moment as she silently glanced at Zheng Xiaocui's thoughtful expression. She picked up a cup of tea and sipped gently, and continued, "The second option is for you to report this matter to the authorities, have a fallout with your family, and escape to the prefectural city to earn a living. I'm sure you know that Yu's Braised Food Shop is doing very well in the prefectural city. I can ask my oldest aunt to sell you some goods on credit. You can start selling braised food by setting up a stall in the beginning, and when you have the funds, you can rent a small shop... However, after you cut off all your ties, you will be all alone. Even if you're bullied by other people, there will be no one there to support you anymore!"

Even though there was a slim chance that her father would protect and support her when she needed it since he always valued his son over his daughter, her parents had raised her for more than ten years. They should still have some affection for each other because they had the same blood flowing in their

veins. Although Zheng Xiaocui was somewhat snobbish and had her own plans and ideas, she was still reluctant to report her father to the authorities. Even if her father's sole purpose of raising her was to sell her off to save up money for her younger brother's marriage.

"I choose the first option!" Zheng Xiaocui didn't plan on choosing the second option unless she had no other choice.

Xiaocao didn't pay much attention to what happened to Zheng Xiaocui afterward. Perhaps it was because Zheng Xiaocui's filial piety had emotionally moved her father, or perhaps it was thanks to Yu Hai's persuasion that Zheng Laojiu never mentioned selling his daughter to the rich old man anymore.

Before Xiaocao left Dongshan Village, Zheng Xiaocui packed up a small bundle of luggage and came to find Xiaocao. She asked Chunhua to take her appointment tablet to find Head Manager Xiaodou of Zhenxiu Restaurant and ask him to give Zheng Xiaocui a job washing dishes and picking vegetables in the back kitchen.

Sometime later, news arrived informing her that Zheng Xiaocui worked very hard in the back kitchen. Zheng Xiaocui had good eyesight, lively, and she looked pretty, so she was soon transferred to work as a server in the front hall of the restaurant. The people in charge of washing vegetables learned less than a tael of silver in a month, but servers earned nearly two taels of silver a month. Zheng Laojiu settled down after he received more than 20 taels of silver in a year.

Later, when Yu Xiaocao had already been married, she heard from her family members that Zheng Laojiu prevented her daughter from marrying until she was 20 years old because he wanted her salary. Later, Zheng Xiaocui begged Yu Hai, by then, he was already the owner of tens of thousands of acres of farm, to plead on her behalf. After she repeatedly emphasized that she will still give half of her wages to her family after getting married, Zheng Laojiu finally loosen his grasp and allowed her to get married. Zheng Xiaocui married one of the managers of the shop. Her life was plain, but she was very content. But these were all things that happened later.

After the 20th day of the twelfth month, everyone in Dongshan Village became busy. But Yu Xiaocao had nothing to do after she sent the Zhou Family, her eldest granduncle, and several families she had a good relationship within Dongshan Village, a generous and practical New Year gift. The family matters were all managed by her mother and four other maidservants. Erya was also extremely busy, but it was impossible for Xiaocao to intervene and help.

Every day, Yu Xiaocao would either chat with a few good friends or take a stroll around the mountain with two of her stronger maidservants. She hunted some wild game to add more dishes to their meals at home. She was not used to being so idle all of a sudden.

“Cao'er, your eldest granduncle will be killing a pig for New Year's today. Let's head to your eldest granduncle's house at noon to have pork stew. Do you remember the time when you were a child and stuffed yourself with pork stew? You ate so much that you laid motionlessly on the bed because of a stomach ache. Your mother and I were so frightened! When I invited a doctor from town to check on your condition and he told me that you just ate too much. He prescribed a few hawthorn pills and left!” Yu Hai was talking about an incident that occurred before Xiaocao had transmigrated here. The young girl's body was extremely weak, pork stew was a dish that was heavy on the oil. She was lucky that she only had a stomach ache from eating too much.

While the maidservants smiled at his story, Yu Xiaocao calmly said, “At that time, we didn't have much oil at home. I would be a fool if I didn't stuff myself full of that fragrant and savory pork stew! Speaking of which, it's been two years since I last ate our village's signature dish, the pork stew! Wutong and Chunhua, you should learn a little from me. Don't eat anything in the morning, so you can stuff yourself with pork stew with an empty stomach!”

Wutong suppressed her smile and asked, “Young Miss, didn't you say that it's important not to have an uneven diet or overeat to maintain a healthy diet? Are you going to make an exception for today?”

“Of course, today will be an exception! My eldest grandaunt's hometown is from the northeast. The northeast region is most well known for its pork stew. In addition, she makes delicious simmered pig's head, blood sausages, fatty pork with garlic sauce, and sliced pork diaphragm with garlic sauce...no, I can't think about it, otherwise, I can't stop drooling! You haven't seen any of those dishes before, right? Come and gain some experience with me!” Yu Xiaocao headed back to the house and changed into some warm and more light-weight clothes. The four maids were dressed in coarse cotton-padded jackets to blend into the village as they followed their master out the door.

“Hey! Xiaocao, where are you going?” The villagers from the same village always greeted her warmly.

Xiaocao had a bright smile on her face when she replied, “My eldest granduncle had killed a pig for New Years. I'm planning to head over to have some pork stew!”

“Why are you heading over so early? Isn't the pork stew usually prepared in the afternoon?”

Yu Xiaocao laughed mischievously. She had an odd expression on her face when she explained, "These young girls are from the city, so they never saw a pig being killed. I'm taking them there early, so they can see it for themselves. Auntie, you should attend to your business; I'll be heading over there first!"

"Go, go!" When the four servants and their master walked away, the woman smacked her lips and said, "Did you see that? Xiaocao has really matured by now. Those beautiful-looking maidservants that looked like young ladies from a wealthy family are only worthy of being her maidservants! Xiaocao is like those princesses in the plays that I've watched. They would live in a large palace paved from gold bricks, wear satin and silk, eat exotic delicacies, and have gold, silver, and jewels piled up like mountains in her palace..."

Chunhua and Qiushi had excellent hearing. The master and the maidservants were all amused when they were informed about what Chunhua and Qiushi had just overheard. It seemed like Auntie Jinzhen had quite a rich imagination to imagine that she lived in a palace made with gold bricks.

"Huh? Brother Han? Did you just return from patrolling the sea?" Yu Xiaocao looked up and saw a burly figure approaching her. She greeted the healthy and handsome guy first.

Zhao Han heard the news that Xiaocao had returned, so he came to look for her on his first day of vacation. Even though she may already have someone she liked in her heart, he still wanted to see her, listen to her melodious laughter, and see her sweet smile.

"Yes! I just came back yesterday. I heard that you came back from the capital, so I came here to see you!" He greeted her warmly when he saw Xiaocao's brilliant smile similar to that of a sunrise. The emotions hidden deep in his heart were slowly fermenting.

Yu Xiaocao pursed her lips and said with a smile, "Brother Han, did you know that Auntie Zhao has returned to the capital? I visited your house as a guest a few days ago. Grandpa Zhao and Uncle Zhao are both at the border, so Auntie Zhao will be spending the New Year in the capital. Do you guys get a vacation?"

Zhao Han forced himself to look away after he realized that he had been staring at her energetic little face for too long. He shook his head and said, "The sea has not been peaceful recently. The wokou are pretending to be pirates to loot the ships that are passing by. In two days, I will be heading back to the sea to train new soldiers..."

“Then...if you return before New Year, you can come over to my house to celebrate the holiday. Little Shitou wrote a letter informing me that he will be back before the New Year. He is still childish at heart. In his letter, he said he wanted you to take us up the mountain so we can catch a wild rabbit!” If his classmates witnessed how spoiled he acted and the childish ways he talked, would they see this earnest-looking and talent young boy in the way?

“Okay, then it's settled...cough, cough, cough!” Zhao Han suddenly clutched his chest and coughed a few times.

The smile on Yu Xiaocao's face faded as she asked with concern, “What happened? Did you get injured? Did you fight against pirates when you went out to sea this time? What about the medicine I asked someone to give you? Why is it ineffective?”

Xiaocao's worried expression and caring tone warmed Zhao Han's heart. His wound seemed less painful after seeing how much she cared about him. He finally responded after Xiaocao finished asking a series of questions, “We met with a large group of wokou pirates. They outnumbered us by having twice the number of crews. Fortunately, my troops trained very hard regularly and our ships were more advanced compared to the wokou's ships. As a result, we managed to annihilate them and seized a large amount of their property. The medicine you gave me is very effective. If it weren't for the medicine you gave me, I didn't even know if I was able to make it ashore. Your medicine saved many of my brothers that were seriously injured. I want to thank you for that in their stead.”

She originally didn't give him a lot of medicine, and yet he distributed the medicine to other soldiers for their own use. No wonder his injuries had not healed yet! Judging from his complexion, his injury must be quite serious. Yu Xiaocao sighed and said to Wutong, “Go to my medicine chest and bring me the gourd-shaped jade bottle and a few bottles of Wound Balm for me.”

After she finished speaking, she turned to Zhao Han and said, “Didn't the court purchase a lot of Wound Balm? The soldiers should've received some. What happened?”

Zhao Han shook his head and said, “The northwestern border has been unstable recently. Although there were no large-scale wars, there had been a few small-scale battles and skirmishes from time to time. The effects of the Wound Balm produced by your workshop is more effective than other ordinary products. When the purchased medicines are distributed, it is first distributed to the border patrol soldiers. By the time the medicine reaches us, it would be considered good if each soldier can receive one bottle. I heard that the Wokou's country had a severe snow disaster this winter. Many of the

civilians who could no longer survive on their own were fooled into becoming wokou pirates. Soon after winter began, several minor skirmishes and wars broke out. We're almost out of ordinary Wound Balms too."

"Don't worry. Once I return to the capital, I'll have someone bring more Wound Balms over for you. As for this bottle of medicine, you can't tell other people that I was the one who gave it to you. The materials needed to make this are too precious, and I don't have many bottles of these." Yu Xiaocao stuffed all the medicine that Wutong had fetched for her into Zhao Han's hands.

"That's right! You came just at the right time. My eldest granduncle's family is planning on killing a pig today, so why don't you come and enjoy the pork stew together tonight?" Yu Xiaocao invited him over for dinner. In the past, when Zhao Han was still in the village, he often ate pork stew made by her eldest granduncle.

Zhao Han seemed to be reminiscing his memories as he nodded, "Okay! It's been a long time since I've eaten Grandpa Yu's pork stew. Sometimes, I even dream of smelling the pork stew in my dreams! Let's head over now to see if we can help."

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"You still have some wounds on your body...how about, you come to my family's residence to change the dressing on your wounds and also take some pills to heal your inner injuries? In two days, don't you have to go out to sea to patrol ah? Take the time to carefully nurse your wounds in these two days. Otherwise, how will you be able to protect the country well? In my opinion, you should stay at my family's residence and I'll create a special regimen to treat your body and make some medicinal cuisine to nourish you!" Yu Xiaocao was truly worried about Zhao Han's injuries. If more pirates came over like last year, it would be very dangerous for him to fight him with half-healed wounds!

As she talked, she acted as if she was a child again and pulled on Zhao Han's sleeve as they went back up the road. Her four maidservants naturally followed her blindly and grouped around the two people as they headed towards the Yu Residence.

"Eh, why did that lass Xiaocao come back?" A bunch of married matrons were currently congregated at the foot of the wall, sunning themselves as they mended shoes. Their expressions changed when they saw a tall and sturdy man next to Yu Xiaocao.

"It's Hunter Zhao's son...no no, now he is a great general. I heard the Zhao Family's son is also a small official and is in charge of a hundred men now!"

“The Zhao Family's youngster had a good relationship with the Yu Family's children in the past. He used to bring Xiaocao and her younger brother all the time into the mountain to trap hares and wild pheasants. When the Yu Family was in difficulty, if they didn't have the game to supplement their meals, they might not have survived until now!”

“This Zhao Family's youngster will likely become a high-ranking general in the future. He's only a few years older than Xiaocao. A general and a royal princess...these two seem quite fit for each other!”
There was never a lack of gossip in the village.

“Shhh! Luckily, Royal Prince Yang didn't come back this time. If he heard you say that, he would sentence you to twenty planks to shut your mouth! Who in the village doesn't know that Royal Prince Yang treats Xiaocao in a different way. Many people all say that Xiaocao will become Royal Prince Yang's concubine in the future!”

“Stop speaking nonsense! Xiaocao is now a royal princess that the emperor himself titled. How could she possibly become the mere concubine of someone? In my eyes, I'm pretty sure she could become his princess consort!”

“What good is it to marry into a prince's residence? Any of the wealthier men in town, as long as they have a bit of status, have a bunch of concubines in their inner courtyard. Everyday they fight and scheme constantly. Isn't that so exhausting? In my eyes, it's better for her to go for the Zhao Family's son. Their two families are close and they grew up together. The roots are already there. Even if the youth takes in a few concubines in the future, the Zhao Family won't treat Xiaocao unfairly!”

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The group of matrons became more and more exhilarated the more they gossiped. They were now divided into two groups. One group approved of Xiaocao marrying into the prince's estate to become his princess consort, whereas the other group felt that it was better for her to marry into the Zhao Family and live comfortably. Neither side gave way to the other and they all started to quarrel endlessly for a period of time.

When Xiaocao brought Zhao Han home, she found out that it would be hard for him to clean and dress the wounds on his back, so she wanted to help him. However, her maidservants expelled her out. Men and women should not have close contact after the age of seven. Their young miss would be fourteen

after the New Years but she still didn't know how to be even a little bit discreet. Finally, the youngest of the bunch, Yingchun, had been pushed out to treat the wounds on Zhao Han's back.

Almost half of his back had the criss-cross marks of vicious looking wounds and the sight of it scared the slightly bashful Yingchun. He also had another deep wound that was likely caused by the stab of a sharp sword. It was in the area of his lungs. No wonder Young Master Zhao seemed to be breathing with a bit of difficulty earlier. After being around her master, who was skilled at medicine, Yingchun had naturally picked a few things up and knew the basics of treating injuries.

She used her young miss's special 'disinfecting water' to wash Young Master Zhao's wounds and then spread a thick layer of the wound balm that her young miss personally made onto his back. Following that, she wrapped him back up with some clean gauze.

Outside the room, Wutong was currently carefully reminding her mistress, "Young Miss, you've almost reached a marriageable age, so it's best if you keep your distance away from men. Although Young Master Zhao was your childhood playmate, he's still a man..."

"I already know what you speak of! However, there is one thing you need to remember: a doctor must be compassionate. I'm not only a young girl but I'm also a doctor. Even if my patient is a man, I can't just let him suffer and not save him, right?" Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes at the maid and took out a bunch of medicinal ingredients from her medicine box. She wrote down a few prescriptions and gave the ingredients to Wutong and said, "In a moment, you won't have to come along to view the pig slaughter. Help me concoct this medication for Older Brother Han ah."

"Eh? Young Miss, didn't you say earlier that you wanted to bring this servant along to widen my horizons ah? This servant really wants to taste the pig banquet ah!" Wutong revealed a long-suffering expression on her face but still took the medicinal ingredients given to her without any reluctance.

Yu Xiaocao refused to acknowledge her own pettiness and solemnly said, "What's so interesting about watching them kill a whole pig? It's so bloody and I don't want you to get scared! When you're done concocting the medicine and helping Older Brother Han take it, you can come along with him. Don't worry, I'll make sure to save a seat for you." As she spoke, she also gave the maid a look that clearly said, 'How's that? Isn't your master quite clever ah?'

At this time, Zhao Han exited Yu Hang's room with Yingchun following him with the wound balm in hand. Yu Xiaocao came forward and said, "Older Brother Han, it must not be comfortable resting on the

ship, right? Drink this cup of honey water and you can take a nap in my older brother's room. When the pig banquet is just about ready, I'll have someone come over to bring you guys over!"

Zhao Han nodded and took the cup of honey water from Chunhua's hands. He drank it down in one gulp. The honey water had a sweet and mellow flavor, similar to the brilliant smile on the young maiden's face. He glanced at the dimples at the side of Xiaocao's mouth and was spellbound for a second. It distracted him from the warm feeling of the water relieving the pain near his lungs.

As he laid on the mattress that smelled faintly of sun-dried laundry, Zhao Han felt as if he had never been this relaxed before. The wounds on his back felt cool and comfortable after getting their dressings changed. They no longer felt as sharp and painful as before. Even the heavy pressure he had near his lungs had also disappeared—did Xiaocao add some special medicine to heal internal wounds in his honey water earlier?

Before he knew it, Zhao Han's breathing became comfortable and he fell into a deep sleep in the bright early morning light of winter. By the time Wutong woke him up and gave him a bowl full of medicine to drink, Zhao Han felt as if his body was now full of energy and that all of his hurts had been banished away. He knew this medicine was something that Xiaocao herself had personally prescribed for him, so he didn't hesitate as he drank the whole mess of bitter contents down in one gulp.

Xiaocao had gone over to her eldest granduncle's residence to get in on the fun. When she got there, she saw that the large fat pig had pretty much been cleaned and divided. There were plenty of friends and family in the courtyard helping out. Some helped to wash and take the hairs off of the freshly slaughtered pig, while others were cleaning and preparing the pig innards. Yu Hai and his wife didn't go to the farmstead today and instead were in the courtyard working busily.

A group of matrons were with Xiaocao's eldest grandaunt. They were washing and chopping the ingredients in a busy manner. Before long, the pig's head was placed in a heated pot to cook while another pot that was cooking blood sausages bubbled merrily. Madam Liu used her family's secret spice recipe to help braise the pig trotters and offal...

At lunch, everyone who came over to help sat around in the full courtyard. Yu Xiaocao and her servants were sitting with the Yu Family. Even Erya revealed a silly smile as she sat next to Madam Liu, inquisitively regarding the scene around her. Originally, Xiaocao's maidservants were a bit hesitant to sit at the same level as their master. Only after Xiaocao half-jokingly scolded them did they finally reluctantly sit down next to her to partake in the meal.

Everyone said that northern people were very practical. Each plate here was piled high with food for the pig banquet. There was fatty pork with garlic sauce, pork with kidney beans stewed with vermicelli, pickled vegetables with pork blood sausage, simmered pig's head, sliced pork diaphragm with garlic sauce, braised pork bone meat...although all of the dishes looked very fatty and greasy, they tasted incredibly delicious and Xiaocao almost couldn't stop eating.

Xiaocao loved eating the sliced pork diaphragm with garlic sauce and the pickled vegetables with pork blood sausage the most. The four maidservants watched as their master happily ate the black colored blood sausage and gobbled down the braised pork bone meat. Although the food wasn't very elegant, it definitely stimulated their appetites and made them want to eat more too.

Wutong didn't quite understand her master's enthusiasm. She had never seen her young miss eat with such gusto before, even when they were at Zhenxiu Restaurant dining on their finest dishes. The food here looked very crude and greasy, so how could it be so suited to her young miss's tastes? She looked at the other three maids, Yingchun, Chunhua and Qiushi. They all seemed to be eating quite happily too. She couldn't help but pick up her chopsticks and grab a slice of pork diaphragm meat that didn't look too greasy. After placing into her mouth, she carefully chewed a bit—Mm, it was a bit bland and chewy, nothing else.

Yu Jiang's wife, who was sitting next to her, smiled, "Girl, you need to dip this pork diaphragm meat into the garlic sauce to eat. Otherwise, it'll have no flavor at all." As she spoke, she picked up a piece of meat and dipped it into the sauce before placing it in her mouth. She chewed it with gusto.

In the past, the residence's senior servant had instructed her that a good personal maidservant couldn't eat anything that was too heavily flavored. In fact, she should avoid eating too many meat-containing dishes too in order to avoid having any strong smells sticking to her, causing her master to dislike her. In the afternoon, she still needed to take care of her mistress. Was it really alright for her to eat garlic sauce and other foods that had a very distinct smell?

Yu Xiaocao could see the hesitation on Wutong's face and patted her shoulders before personally giving her a piece of pork diaphragm meat that was dipped in garlic sauce, "This afternoon, all of you will get a half day break and there's no need for any of you to stay by my side. Eat whatever you want to eat and don't sit there twiddling your thumbs. It's too awkward that way! This piece of boiled meat may look fatty on the outside but it's not the least bit greasy when you eat it. Try some! Also, my eldest grandaunt makes the best blood sausage in the area. You wouldn't be able to try this anywhere else!"

Xiaocao had noticed that the muscles on Wutong's face involuntarily twitched when she picked up a blood sausage, so she silently laughed at the maid. She deliberately picked the foods that the maid obviously didn't want to try and placed it in Wutong's bowl.

Wutong truly wanted to cry when she saw the evil and mischievous expression on her master's face. However, as the servant, it was a great honor to be awarded food by her master so she needed to eat it even if she wanted to weep. She gathered her courage and placed the pork diaphragm meat with garlic sauce into her mouth. As expected, the combination was much more flavorful together and the more she chewed, the more she liked its unique flavor.

As for the fatty pork with garlic sauce, the fatty slices of meat looked very greasy. Wutong pinched her nose and placed a slice that was about the size of half her palm into her mouth in a manner that clearly showed her reluctance. She forced herself to chew. As she chewed, the expression on her face gradually changed and she no longer looked as reluctant as before. Eh? So odd, it didn't taste greasy at all. Instead, it had a fresh and savory flavor she never tasted before.

As for the blood sausage, Wutong had seen her young miss eat piece after piece. Now that she had complete faith in her master's tastes, she wasn't the least bit hesitant as she tried a blood sausage. In any case, hadn't she eaten braised pig intestines in the past before? What was the point in being squeamish now?

Wutong, who had no misgivings now, started to try all of the foods she had never had the opportunity to eat before and went through all of the dishes. Although each dish looked very crude and simple, their taste was quite unique and surprisingly delicious. Yu Jiang's wife felt her heart relax when she saw this city girl finally eating with gusto and enthusiasm.

For the honest and simple commoners, they felt like they only fulfilled a host's duties when their guests were all able to eat to their fill and enjoy their meal. In Yu Jiang's wife's eyes, despite the fact that Yu Xiaocao now had a prestigious title, she was still a part of the family and a child she had watched herself grow up.

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For one's own family, it was fine no matter how you received them. However, it was rumored that Xiaocao's maidservants had come from the imperial city and their usual conduct was even more elegant than most girls from wealthy families. Yu Jiang's wife had been worried this entire time that these maids would not be used to their crude and simple fare. Now, from the looks of it, her worries were superfluous.

In the farming villages in the northeast, almost every family would slaughter a year end pig. The villagers there all got together to celebrate noisily. From the start of the twelfth month, these villagers ate pig banquet foods non-stop. Dongshan Village originally didn't have this type of custom, but when her eldest grandaunt fled from the northeast, she and her family brought this event over. Now, many of the families here had also started slaughtering pigs for the pig banquet. However, the most authentic pig banquet still came from Eldest Grandaunt's hands!

Yu Xiaocao rubbed her rotund little belly that was stuffed full of food and strolled around the foot of the West Mountain. She also checked the traps and snares that were set earlier to see if she had any game. Zhao Han silently walked along with her and cherished his previous memories they had together in their childhood.

Every snare that Xiaocao set always had a higher than usual chance to catch prey. This lass seemed to have been blessed by a god. Just look, they were clearly in an area where wild animals were not numerous but out of ten traps and snares, around six to seven of them had animals caught in them.

The four maidservants took off their reserved and composed demeanors and revealed their true natures. Every time they found a snare that had prey in it, they all exclaimed in excitement and rushed forward to be the first to grab it. Almost everyone by the end had their hands full with some game. In fact, Zhao Han even carried a dead dumb roe deer back on his shoulders!

The twelfth month seemed to pass faster than other months. In the blink of an eye, they were at the year's end. The farmstead's greenhouse pavilions had stopped business since the twenty-ninth and would only reopen on the fifth of the next year. Little Shitou had braved the winds and snow to go back home on the twenty-eighth and only then was the Yu Family all back together.

At their New Year's Eve family dinner, other than the Yu Family, there were an additional two guests. Zhao Han had been invited by Xiaocao to celebrate the New Years with her family and the other was the orphan Zhuang Xiaomo. At the table, Zhuang Xiaomo exerted quite a bit of effort to be attentive to Xiaolian the entire time. Yu Hai didn't have a good expression to any of his 'sons-in-law' who were trying to steal his daughters from him. He couldn't do much to Royal Prince Yang, but he wouldn't make it easy for the fellow surnamed Zhuang, that big wolf, to steal Xiaolian away.

Xiaolian, who would be turning fourteen at the start of the year, had experienced her first awakening to love. Apparently, she seemed to have a bit of a good impression of the tall and handsome looking Zhuang Xiaomo. As for his attempts to get closer to her, Xiaolian had a red blush on her face and didn't seem to reject them at all.

As for the so-called future mother-in-law, Madam Liu seemed to regard this future son-in-law with increasing appreciation. She had always had a decent impression of this orphaned fellow, who, despite his lack of family, had a sense of self-confidence and ambition to do better for himself. In addition, he had a polite and gentle demeanor, a kind heart, and understood gratitude. If it wasn't for her husband stopping her, Madam Liu would have treated him as if he was her half-son.

During New Years Eve night, Yu Hang took his younger brother Little Shitou, along with Zhao Han and Zhuang Xiaomo, to set off fireworks in the courtyard. In the rooms, Yu Hai took out the account books and went over the past year in detail with his youngest daughter. He also went over his proposed plans for the following year.

“Right now, the corn and winter wheat seeds from our farmstead are selling very well. In addition, we're by the ocean, so it's very convenient to ship our goods around. There are plenty of shipping convoys that are traveling from south to the north that want to buy our seeds to bring it there. However, we have a limited amount of land on our farm, so we're not able to supply all that they want.” Yu Hai felt his heart itch whenever he thought of all of that money in front of him that he couldn't get.

“That being said, we are still employed by the court! Naturally, we have to provide high-yielding seeds to Tanggu Town and the nearby Zhou Prefecture. Based on that, the amount of seeds we can sell elsewhere goes down even more!”

Yu Hai had found out through his older sister that the climate in the northeast was harsh, so their crop yields were very poor. The peasants who lived there had to tighten their belts for half a year. During the harshest time of the year, the people there could only eat one bowl of the cheapest and most common type of coarse grain gruel a day. If a disaster befell them, then they had to pack all of their things and flee from their homes.

Corn had a high harvest yield and wasn't picky about its growing environment. If this crop could be widely planted in the north, then the commoners' lives would improve considerably for they would at least be able to fill their stomachs. Thus, Yu Hai did his best to sell as much corn as he could to those ships going to the north, but his efforts were like trying to put out a forest fire using one cup of water at a time.

Yu Xiaocao bit her lip in thought and then smiled at her father, who was looking at her expectantly, “Father, what are you looking at me for? Are you that certain that I'll be able to come up with an idea?”

Yu Hai chuckled and stated in a somewhat proud manner, "Of course, my daughter is so incredible, so how could such a small problem cause any problems for my Cao'er?"

"In our hearts, Younger Sister, you are the most resourceful of us all, our lucky little immortal girl. Quickly tell us, what do you think about this?" Xiaolian urged Xiaocao on as she ate roasted melon seeds.

"I truly have an idea!" Yu Xiaocao continued under the gleaming and excited looks of her family, "I want to make Tanggu into a giant agricultural center and become the country's largest seed wholesaler!"

Yu Hai nodded his head and said, "In actuality, this is also in line with my thoughts. However, we don't have that much land ah! I've asked around and none of the owners of the land or farms around us are willing to sell. However, in the area between Tanggu Town and the prefecture city, there's a large stretch of fallow, empty land. Unfortunately, in order to transform such fallow land into good farming land, I'm afraid it'd take more than a couple of years to make that happen..."

Yu Xiaocao lightly frowned and said, "Tanggu is a part of Royal Prince Yang's feudal lands. If he is willing to help, it absolutely wouldn't be a problem to get more land. As for that fallow land ah, leaving it just sitting there would be such a pity...I think we can negotiate with Zhu Junyang and have him push out a few land reform policies that encourage people to develop new land. For example, if people want to clear an area for farming, they won't need to pay any taxes for the first three years and the following five to ten years, they could have half taxes and other benefits...right now, most of the arable land is in the hands of a few. Many people end up becoming tenant farmers, renting land in order to make a living. I'm certain that the commoners would be very happy if they had the opportunity to own their own fields."

His youngest daughter had mentioned Royal Prince Yang twice in a short period of time. Yu Hai hesitated for a moment but ultimately couldn't restrain himself from asking, "Cao'er, you and Royal Prince Yang...you're growing up and need to take mind of a few things, don't let other people take advantage of you. That being said, men are fickle creatures and Royal Prince Yang has a high status and power. It'd be hard for him to not change in the future and have his eyes roam around. So..."

"Father, don't worry! Your daughter knows very well! If Zhu Junyang decides to treat me poorly, I would rather be single for the rest of my life than marry myself out to someone who wasn't suitable. He's still in his probation period so he naturally wouldn't dare to do anything to me!" Yu Xiaocao was well aware of her father's worries so she couldn't help but try to comfort him.

Their youngest daughter had been intelligent from a young age and almost all of their businesses their family had undertaken had come from her ideas. Her husband would always go find her whenever he couldn't come up with an idea. Thus, Madam Liu became more confident in her youngest daughter's abilities. However, her daughter would only be fourteen after the New Year and usually didn't spend a lot of time by her side, so she couldn't help but say a few words, "Cao'er, you don't have to set your sights only Royal Prince Yang. If he's unable to pass your tests, then Mother will find you an even better match—in actuality, if Royal Prince Yang didn't make his intentions obvious so early, I think that the fellow Zhao Han is not bad..." After she finished speaking, Madam Liu even glanced out the window.

"Mother," Yu Xiaocao didn't know whether she should laugh or cry, "I only see Older Brother Han as an older brother, so why are you putting us together now? Don't worry ah, I know what I should and should not do!"

Old Yu, who was wearing a bright red traditional-style jacket, was sitting at the head of the kang bed with his legs crossed. He picked up a piece of soft and sticky pastry and addressed his son and son's wife, "You two don't need to fret so much! Royal Prince Yang is a royal prince but our Cao'er is no longer just an ordinary little farmer's girl. Through her own efforts, she's become a royal princess. Have you ever seen a royal princess anywhere have to worry about her marriage ah? There are so many talented men in the capital, as long as their eyes aren't blind, they will be able to see our Cao'er's strengths. Even if there isn't a Royal Prince Yang, there's still a Royal Prince Yin, and Royal Prince Yue!"

"That's right, that's right!" Yu Xiaocao was afraid that her parents would needlessly worry about this. Although her grandfather's comparison was a bit crude, she restrained herself from laughing and said, "Father, Mother, don't worry. Before I turn twenty, I promise I'll get married and I'll do so in a very grand way. Alright ah?"

Madam Liu tapped her head and laughed, "You, ah, don't have the least bit of shame and are willing to say anything. In the future, be more careful. Otherwise other people will laugh at you."

"We're at home ah! It's only in front of us that Cao'er would dare say such things. When those wealthy people from town came to flatter us, our Cao'er's temperament and bearing was even more elegant and imposing than those princesses' in the stories." Yu Hai always thought that everything his youngest daughter did was good!

The whole family chatted about the prospective seed breeding business until it was past midnight. Following that, they cooked some dumplings and ate them together as a midnight snack before heading to their own rooms to rest.

Yu Xiaocao had a leisurely and joyful New Years celebration at Dongshan Village. On the first day of the New Year, she went along with her good friends to say their greetings to everyone in the village. The group of them managed to eat a bunch of special snacks that the other villagers made. On the second day, she went along with her parents to go visit her maternal grandparents and received quite a few thick red packets.

Currently, her maternal grandparents were one of the wealthiest families in their village. They had pushed down their previous house, which was made of sogon grass, and rebuilt it into a spacious and beautiful residence that had bright white walls and a pretty tiled roof. Small greenhouse pavilions had been constructed in the front and back courtyards and they grew some fruits and vegetables inside. Because of their relationship with the Yu Family, the other villagers in their village also reaped the benefits and were now planting high-yielding winter wheat in their fields. Thus, the Liu Family's position and status within the village was second only to the village chief's.

Since she didn't have to worry about the market, Xiaocao's eldest maternal aunt bought a piece of land from the village chief after the Wokou pirates struck and established her own piggery as the original one had been damaged. She began to raise pigs in earnest. Now, she had at least a few hundred pigs every year that were carefully fed and raised until they were ready to send to market. Xiaocao's eldest maternal uncle then took those pigs to the prefectural city using his mule-drawn cart. When the greenhouse pavilions in Tanggu Town had their out of season vegetables ready for sale, Eldest Maternal Uncle and Second Maternal Uncle began to ship those vegetables to the prefectural city together. They were able to earn a few dozen taels from each trip there.

Xiaocao's second maternal uncle bought a few dozen mu of good farming land. In the spring, he planted corn and in the autumn, he planted winter wheat. The crops he harvested were pooled in with the Yu Family's grain business and he could make quite a bit of money every year. Xiaocao's youngest maternal uncle also gave up his bricklaying career and entered the Yu Family's business to help. The salary he earned now was a few times larger than what he used to earn. His wife also began to help Eldest Maternal Aunt with the piggery...

All in all, the Liu Family's lives were getting better and better with each passing year. Even Second Maternal Aunt, who had a sharp tongue and a shrewish temper, had become more pleasant as her life got better. She no longer looked as harsh as before and her tongue had gentled considerably. The Liu Family's patriarch and matriarch now had free and easy lives now.

The days went by quickly. Originally, she was planning on staying in Dongshan Village until the end of the second month, but her plans were very quickly changed. On the sixteenth of the first month, an unexpected guest arrived at Dongshan Village.

“Zhu Junyang, why are you here? You didn't even let us know in advance and just suddenly appeared ah!” Yu Xiaocao had gone up to the mountain to set snares at dawn. When she got home, she saw that there were some new horses in front of the residence. After entering the room, she discovered that Zhu Junyang was there, sitting on the kang bed like he owned it. He was snacking on the nuts she had roasted before the end of the year. There was a small plate next to him that held a tiny pile of peeled walnuts.

Zhu Junyang raised an eyebrow at her as he cracked another walnut in his hand. He carefully picked up the meat inside and placed it into the small plate next to him. Only after he finished this did he say, “This prince only wanted to give you a nice surprise, ah? What? You don't like me here? Is it because you have Older Brother Han to accompany you now so you've long forgotten this prince?”

The royal prince was already feeling a bit unhappy after hearing Little Shitou mention 'Older Brother Han' all the time. If he had known that there was a large wolf roaming around, he would long come back to accompany the little lass in visiting her parents, celebrate the New Years in Dongshan Village, and then go back to the capital together. The little lass had been back home for over a month now. Did that fellow take advantage of when he was not here to especially woo his lass?

“Oh ho! Just who tipped over a vinegar jar in this room? The sour scent of jealousy is so thick here!” Yu Xiaocao took off her silver fox fur cloak and Wutong easily took it from her and hung it on a pear wood clothes hanger.

When he saw how red Xiaocao's face was from getting exposed to the cold, Zhu Junyang moved to allow her space on the warmest part of the kang bed for her. After Xiaocao took off her boots and sat down, he also transferred the small quilt on his legs to cover her legs and feet. Then, he pointed at the walnuts that he had already peeled and stated in a voice held both amusement and grievance, “You truly have no conscience. Did you have so much fun at Dongshan Village that you forgot everything else in the capital? You've been gone for more than a month but you haven't even written a single letter to this prince. You went into the mountains right at dawn today. Were you spending time with that fellow surnamed Zhao ah?”

Yu Xiaocao took a handful of walnuts and began to stuff them in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged with the nuts and her eyes curved up with happiness. She resembled a little squirrel snacking on nuts. When she heard his complaints, she slanted Zhu Junyang a glance and said, “Do you think Older Brother Han is as

idle as you? He's out at sea, drilling his troops. How would he have the spare time to go into the mountains to set snares to catch hares?"

"Older Brother Han eh...you seem to call him in a very intimate manner. How come I never hear you call this prince using 'Older Brother Yang' ah?" A burst of sour jealousy exploded in Zhu Junyang's heart. The lass always called him using his full name and was never polite about it either.

Yu Xiaocao saw that he had stopped cracking the nuts open and hurriedly patted his hand in an attempt to remind him to continue. When she heard his jealous words, she raised her head to look him in the eye and seriously stated, "I call him 'Older Brother Han' because I see him as an older brother. Do you...want me to regard you as an older brother then?"

"No way!" He absolutely did not want that! Zhu Junyang noticed that the peeled nuts in the plate were disappearing at light speed and hurriedly hastened his cracking speed. He grumbled, "However, this prince is not very pleased with the way you call me."

"Then how do you want me to call you? Junyang? Yangyang? Yang Baby??" Each suggestion was more sticky-sweet than the previous and Yu Xiaocao was delighted to discover that Zhu Junyang's ears had turned bright red from her teasing.

Zhu Junyang pretended to cough a couple of times. He lightly cleared his throat and said, "When I was young, I once came up with a nickname for myself, it's 'Ruizhi'. Only the people close to me know about this..."

"Alright ah, then I'll call you Ruizhi then!" Yu Xiaocao easily followed his suggestion and then said, "Zhu Ruizhi, the walnuts are gone, but I still want to eat more!"

"Eat fewer snacks as breakfast is being warmed up for you in the pot ah!" Madam Liu entered the room just in time to hear her youngest daughter blatantly command Royal Prince Yang to help her peel nuts. She couldn't help but level a glare at her daughter.

"If you place the nuts inside the congee, it'll become nut porridge and will also taste quite good!" Yu Xiaocao craftily said as she stealthily reached a small hand towards the nuts that Zhu Junyang had peeled. She swiftly stuffed them into her mouth and truly resembled a little mischievous squirrel stealing food.

Madam Liu couldn't control her, so she spoke to Zhu Junyang, "Royal Prince Yang, don't spoil her! During all of last month and this month, she ate snacks instead of partaking in proper meals! Everyone else gains a few catties during the New Years. She, on the other hand, didn't gain and instead got thinner instead!"

Yu Xiaocao hastily explained when she saw Zhu Junyang looking inquiringly at her, "Who said I got thinner? Look at my face, it's almost as round as a steamed bun. All mothers will say this as they all feel that their children have gotten thinner. All of them try to stuff their children until they become fat little piggies."

"Raising pigs?" Madam Liu tapped Xiaocao's head and took the plate of nuts off the kang bed's table. She motioned to Yingchun to place the congee, steamed buns, and side dishes on the table and said, "If the pigs in a piggery are all like you, I'm pretty sure the owners of said piggery would go out of business very soon!"

"Mother——is there truly a mother like you who scolds her daughter in this way ah? I'm such a beautiful and delicate little girl but you decide to compare me to a stinky and yucky pig. I'm angry now!" Yu Xiaocao seized the opportunity to act spoiled around her mother.

Madam Liu pursed her lips and revealed a smile, "I wasn't the one who started the comparison. You were the one who first brought up the topic of raising pigs, so Mother will not take this fall! Finish everything on the table, otherwise, I won't allow you to eat any more snacks today or tomorrow!"

Yu Xiaocao looked at the two steamed meat buns that were bigger than the size of her fist and the large bowl full of congee. She immediately began to pout and complained, "Mother, let's make a deal. Let me just eat one meat bun, okay?"

"No deal! Last night, you only ate half a small bowl of noodles, so you need to eat more this morning. Do you think you're an immortal and can live off of air ah?!" Madam Liu sternly refused her suggestion, "Eat it now while it's hot. The meat buns were made using the meat from that roe deer you caught, so it's very fresh and tasty!"

Yu Xiaocao's eyes flickered and roved around. She suddenly revealed a bright smile at Zhu Junyang, who had been watching the mother and daughter pair from the side, "Ruizhi——you haven't eaten breakfast, right? Eating together is more enjoyable!"

Madam Liu pushed away the hand that was offering a meat bun towards Zhu Junyang and sternly looked at her daughter, “Royal Prince Yang has already eaten with us, so don't try to make him eat for you. I've already calculated everything. If you eat everything here, you'll just have a slightly rounded belly but you won't be bloated!”

Yu Xiaocao glanced at Zhu Junyang with a pathetic look on her face. However, Zhu Junyang was currently being eyed by his future mother-in-law, so he could only make a helpless gesture at the little lass. As he was sandwiched between his future mother-in-law and future wife, he could only lower his head and pretend to be busy as he continued to peel the nuts.

Yu Xiaocao became resigned to her fate and picked up a steamed meat bun and began to chew on it angrily. She paired the buns with some tasty side dishes and ended up finishing both meat buns. Following that, she poured the nuts Zhu Junyang had peeled into her bowl of congee and then added some raisins and pieces of dried hawthorn cake to it before she gulped the bowl down. Brrp—after letting out a burp, Xiaocao rubbed at her little belly and wondered if she should make a bowl of digestive soup to drink.

Madam Liu noticed that her youngest daughter was now sprawled on the kang bed and glared at her in amusement, “The weather is nice today. You can rest for a bit and then take Royal Prince Yang for a stroll in the village, which will help you digest your food. At noon, I'll make your favorite seafood feast. There will be braised prawns, salt and pepper small yellow croakers, steamed scallops in broth, stir-fried calamari...”

In her previous life, Yu Xiaocao didn't have much opportunity to eat seafood. After transmigrating over, she obtained a deep fondness for eating seafood and her mother also cooked seafood very well. When she heard that there would be a seafood feast, her eyes began to shine with excitement and the saliva pooled in her mouth. In order to make some room in her stomach to eat seafood later, Xiaocao pulled Zhu Junyang along and walked several round trips from the mountain villa to her family's residence. She originally wanted to stroll around the village too, but after encountering too many curious and inquisitive looks from the villagers, she changed the plan.

Since Royal Prince Yang was visiting his feudal lands, it was natural for the officials of the Tanggu area to come see him. He also checked the taxation records while he was here. After the Yu Family's greenhouse growing business began, it also stimulated the growth of other commerce in Tanggu Town. Consequently, the amount of taxes received also increased by almost two times compared to the previous year.

Yu Xiaocao had already told him her idea of transforming the lands around Tanggu into a seed-breeding business and obtained Zhu Junyang's complete favor. As for her proposal in opening up fallow land, he also decided to adopt it. Zhu Junyang directly expropriated farmland from the scholars and landlords who owned them in the nearby area by telling them they would get decreased taxes. This won the approval of everyone involved. Some merchant families thought that this could be quite a profitable endeavor for them and even took out all of their farmsteads to see if the prince wanted them. Naturally, the ones that were too far from the Yu Family's farmstead were summarily rejected.

After the summer harvest and when it was time to plant corn, the Yu Family farmstead had expanded considerably. They now had twenty thousand mu of top-notch farming land alone, and the average and more poor quality land was also around the same number. With a forty thousand mu farmstead, they naturally could increase the amount of crops they harvested every year.

There were some officials at court who regarded this with pure envy and did their best to complain voraciously to the emperor about Yu Xiaocao. They claimed that she wasn't doing her duties to the court properly and was abusing her power to enrich her family members. Consequently, those who were close to Xiaocao defended her just as adamantly. They stated that everything she was doing to help the imperial court in advancing the production of high-yield crops as quickly as she could. Thus, the debates at court stormed for a period of time and the court officials argued furiously over Xiaocao's conduct and actions.

However, Yu Xiaocao didn't take any of the political squabbles to heart. Prior to expanding her base of agricultural operations at Tanggu Town, she had reported to the emperor and gotten his full permission to go ahead. The earlier they could push out more high-yield corn and winter wheat to the people, the earlier that the emperor's people would be able to throw off the shackles of poverty and starvation and walk in the direction of health and happiness.

As long as her 'big boss' was on her side, it didn't matter to her what other people claimed. She wasn't in this for the sake of obtaining a false reputation. In fact, weren't those people accusing her of misconduct only doing so because they were jealous of her ability to make money? She planned on making even more money so that their jealousy could eat them alive!

Yu Hai currently had a bunch of experienced tenant farmers working under him. Although the operations in Tanggu Town were quite massive now, Xiaocao didn't actually need to personally handle much there. Her responsibility was to make sure that all of the seeds they were going to use were appropriately infused with spiritual energy in advance.

This was quite an easy process but it was very necessary. Yu Xiaocao had the little divine stone take its golden kitten form and had it run a few times in the granaries that held their seeds. She instructed it to play around, spit some saliva, or pee a bit—the little divine stone vehemently opposed the last suggestion she had. It claimed that it was a cultured and refined divine stone, so how could it do something so uncouth and crude?

In short, the breeding base for high-yield seeds were now in the capable hands of Yu Hai as the head of the management. With Yu Hang helping and some other stewards working on things, the work on the expanded farmstead was going in good order. In addition, they had Royal Prince Yang as their backer, so they naturally had no issues getting the green light to continue and everything seemed to be going smoothly...

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The days flew by and in a flash, it was time to harvest again. The Yu Family's farmstead in Tanggu once again had a large bumper harvest of winter wheat and the output had increased again. On average, they had gotten around seven hundred and fifty catties of wheat per mu.

Although the yields of the commoners who had bought wheat seeds from the Imperial Plantation and Tanggu weren't as high as the Yu Family's or Imperial Plantation's, they still received on average six hundred catties per mu. Compared to normal wheat yields, this was about an additional fifty percent to double of what was normal. The commoners who lived in the suburbs near the capital, as well as those near Tanggu, all had joyous expressions on their faces.

The villagers near Tanggu were especially happy as they had started planting high yielding corn and wheat earlier than the ones by the capital. Their lives had been much more pleasant these past two years compared to before. They had surplus grain on hand and could even sell it out at a high price. Some people, for the sake of increasing their profits, sold all of the grain they produced and used that money to buy ordinary grain instead to eat.

Since the Yu Family's farmstead originally only had around two thousand mu in land, they were limited in how much improved grain they could plant and harvest. Some of the merchants in the area came up with the idea to buy grain from the nearby villages. However, they soon discovered that the seeds from those people gave yields that were much lower than the ones they got from the Yu Family. Thus, they soon gave up on that idea and did their best to get connections with the Yu Family so that they would be able to buy high-yielding grain as soon as possible.

Seeds for winter wheat were reserved for the grain merchants who sold to the people in the northeast. After carefully inspecting and getting information on all of the eager merchants, Yu Hai decided to cooperate with a grain merchant surnamed Zhen. This man had a pretty good reputation in the

northeast districts and didn't cheat the people there, so the people liked him. After signing an agreement where the merchant agreed not to inflate prices on the grain, they filled two of his cargo ships with winter wheat seeds and they set off from the harbor to go to the northeast.

After a light refreshing rain, it was time to start the autumn planting on the expanded Yu Family's farmstead in Tanggu. Once this season of corn was harvested, then they would be able to supply more than half of the commoners in the northeast with seeds to plant.

Yu Xiaocao, who was currently in the capital, wondered if she should find some time to go back to Tanggu to take a look. It didn't seem very honest of her to throw all of the responsibility onto her father and older brother while she stayed away, acting as an idle manager.

When He Wanning, who represented everyone who was interested in whether there would be a second 'picking peaches picnic', heard her tentative plan, she immediately became interested, "Xiaocao, if I'm remembering correctly, you once said that your hometown is by the mountains and the sea. One can hunt in the autumn and winter and gather seafood in the summer and spring. How about you organize a 'seaside feast' and invite us over to see your hometown? What do you think of this idea?"

Yu Xiaocao looked at her helplessly and replied in a tone that didn't have much hope, "Older Sister He, you forgot that when I first came to the capital, many people mocked me for being a 'crude villager' or 'muddy peasant'. Not everyone is like you and is interested in how life goes in a small fishing village!"

He Wanning had a confident expression on her face as she said, "Don't worry, I'll help you find out what everyone else thinks. Those who want to come are welcome to come, whereas those who aren't don't need to! If no one else is interested, then the two of us can go. It'll definitely be more relaxing that way!"

After He Wanning left Xiaocao's residence, she directly went to visit her good friend, Yuan Xueyan. She enthusiastically described Yu Xiaocao's farmstead as if she had personally been there and then slapped the table and stared at Yuan Xueyan, who showed zero reaction the entire time, with wide open eyes and asked, "Are you going to go or not?"

"When will you be able to change that rascally temperament of yours? Younger Sister Xiaocao has made it such that you look gentle and tender on the outside and no longer resemble a tomboyish urchin. But as soon as you open your mouth, that image is ruined!" Yuan Xueyan put down her book of lyrical poems and faintly glanced at He Wanning.

“Xueyan, are you still my best friend or not? This is an idea that I came up with. If you don't agree with it, then what sort of face will I have in front of Younger Sister Xiaocao now?” He Wanning pulled at Yuan Xueyan's hands and swayed back and forth until she started to feel dizzy.

Yuan Xueyan let out an audible sigh and took her hands out. She calmly said, “Alright ah! Since you're trying so hard right now, then I'll agree to your proposal. As a matter of fact, I also wanted to see my grandfather and younger brother, so it'll be the perfect timing to stop by too...”

“Then we're all set then! I'm going to go visit Minglan and see if she's interested or not. In actuality, I feel like just the three of us going without any extraneous people following is more relaxing and enjoyable.” He Wanning recalled that with Royal Princess Minglan's fiery temperament, if she didn't invite her on a fun outing, then the other girl would likely get revenge later.

Royal Princess Minglan had a similar personality to He Wanning and also wasn't one to be patient. When she heard He Wanning's proposal, her eyes lit up and she excitedly said, “I heard that Younger Sister Xiaocao is very skilled at swimming and she knows how to dive deep to gather seafood. She also has a dolphin friend that helped her discover the Wokou pirates early! Do you think we'd be lucky enough to see her dolphin friend?”

He Wanning also became excited at the thought. She strolled back and forth a few times as she complained, “That lass Xiaocao is truly some friend. Her hometown has so many fun things to do but she never thinks of us, her good friends! If I didn't have a moment of impulse and blurt out a sentence, that lass would have secretly ran back to Dongshan Village by herself! That's not okay, I need to make her pay this time! She needs to provide us with an authentic seafood feast!”

After she got in touch with her two best friends, He Wanning ran back to the Yu Residence and made sure to confirm the date that they were leaving on. Then, she went home and exhilaratingly began to pack for her trip!

Having one sheep come along was no different than having two sheep. Since she already had three extraneous people tagging along with her to Tanggu, there was no real difference if she added a few more. Thus, she sent out invitations to Yu Wanqing and Li Mengru and her sister. After thinking a bit, she also went to Imperial Prince Jing's estate to visit to find out if that fellow Zhu Junyang had time to spare. This was to avoid her petty man from becoming jealous and sulky that she invited other people but not him.

When she entered the prince's estate, she found out that Zhu Junyang had been summoned by the emperor to enter the palace and it sounded like the emperor had some sort of task in mind for him. See, it wasn't that she didn't want to bring him along; it was that he was unfortunate enough to have other duties stopping him from coming. She spent some time chatting idly with Princess Consort Jing and ended up being invited over for lunch. At the table, she encountered Wu Junling, who had come to pay her respects to Princess Consort Jing.

Perhaps it was related to the fact that Wu Junling now burned incense and spent her days in Buddhist prayer, but her personality seemed to have changed tremendously compared to before. In the past, she was charmingly beautiful but was like a delicate pretty flower vase without a soul. She had no inner substance and every movement she made was tainted slightly with a tacky secular element.

Now, it was obvious that her soul and mind had calmed down. She no longer seemed to be frivolous and had completely removed all hints of fickleness and impatience from her demeanor. She was graceful and peaceful. With that added onto her natural good looks, it even made Xiaocao, who once didn't see eye to eye with her, unable to feel disgusted by her.

Wu Junling was only a bit startled after she saw Xiaocao sitting closely to Princess Consort Jing in an intimate manner. Apparently, she didn't expect to see Xiaocao there. After that, she smiled faintly at her while she absentmindedly stroked the Buddhist prayer beads on her left wrist. This bracelet was only obtained after her mother kowtowed at Huguo Temple for ninety-one consecutive days and moved Grandmaster Yuanhui by her sincerity. Only then was he willing to create this prayer bracelet for Wu Junling. Ever since she started wearing it, the nightmares and ghosts that plagued her previously never appeared again.

When Grandmaster Yuanhui gave these prayer beads to her, he gave her a piece of advice, "Chasing stubbornly after your desires may not lead to your desired outcome. You need to open your heart and see that the world is much more vast than you previously thought. One cannot force fate or destiny!"

After being frightened by her older cousin, Wu Junling didn't have any desire to get closer to that alluring and devilishly handsome face again. Ever since she got back from Huguo Temple, she stayed in her own courtyard and set up a small Buddhist shrine there. Every day she would burn incense and chant scriptures as she sincerely prayed there. It felt like her entire body had lightened up and relaxed more.

Yu Xiaocao was a bit flabbergasted by the complete change in Wu Junling. The little white lotus, who once tried to grasp Zhu Junyang, had unexpectedly mended her ways. It was truly inconceivable. Xiaocao

returned the other girl's smile with a tranquil smile of her own and continued to chat with Princess Consort Jing on the previous topic of conversation.

"I don't know whether that mountain ravine has any other precious and beautiful camellias. Xiaocao, when you go, help me keep an eye out...however, I doubt your ability to appreciate flowers, so don't just bring any old plant back to fool me!" From the tone of Princess Consort Jing's voice to the expression on her face, Wu Junling realized that aunt regarded Yu Xiaocao quite highly. In fact, the degree of how much her aunt liked the other girl frightened her. It made her realize that her aunt had always been courteous to her, but never that intimate.

Yu Xiaocao smiled bashfully at the princess consort's comments. She knew she wasn't an elegant person and she was never truly interested in the different types of flora. Other than the difference in colors or species, she never paid much attention to them. As for identifying what sort of subspecies or shapes, she was out of her knowledge sphere—she had no clue where to start.

She glanced at Meixiang, who was standing behind Princess Consort Jing muffling her laughter, and said, "Isn't there an easy solution to this? Older Sister Meixiang's knowledge of camellias were taught by Your Highness. If you simply let me borrow her for a few days, wouldn't that solve the problem?"

"You lass, I knew you were trying to come up with some idea to steal my maidservant away from me! Alright ah, in order to make that lady surnamed Feng truly accept her defeat at the next flower admiring banquet, then I will lend my precious maidservant to you temporarily." For the past few years, Princess Consort Jing had roundly defeated Lady Feng using her improved collection of camellias, so she was in quite a good mood about it!

Yu Xiaocao teased, "Don't worry, Your Highness, I'll return her to you with nary a hair out of place!"

Meixiang pretended to be astonished and stated, "Then this servant won't even dare to brush my hair every morning. If I'm not careful and lose a hair, then Miss Yu will find it very hard to report back to Her Highness ah!"

Yu Xiaocao also revealed an alarmed expression and then frowned to remark in a concerned manner, "Then what should be done? Your Highness, how about...I send my most capable personal maidservant—Wutong, to compensate you?"

Wutong, who had just been mentioned, also began to play in this act and put on a distressed expression on her face, “Young Miss, please don't send this servant away to another person. In the future, this servant will eat half a bowl less rice. I swear I'm easy to provide for!”

Princess Consort Jing couldn't take it anymore and covered her mouth with a handkerchief as laughter spilled out of her, “No need to compensate me, no need! I can still afford to send out a maid!”

“Your Highness, in the future, this servant will also eat a half bowl less rice at each meal. Please don't send me to serve Miss Yu.” Meixiang also copied Wutong's expression and phrases, which made Princess Consort Jing laugh harder in amusement.

Wu Junling couldn't help but feel envious when she saw them interact with their servants in such a relaxed and teasing manner. However, it was only envy and nothing else. She had engraved the words that the grandmaster in charge of the temple had told her: 'It is useless to force anything. Everything has its own karma and fate.'

Fields of Gold Chapter 549

By the time lunch was ready at Imperial Prince Jing's Estate, Zhu Junyang still hadn't come back. Princess Consort Jing and Xiaocao both thought that Zhu Junyang would be taking lunch with the emperor in the palace. Since Wu Junling was here as a guest, the prince's estate split the lunch table into two tables with a screen in-between. The table on the outside only sat Imperial Prince Jing and his heir.

By the time they were about half finished with lunch, Zhu Junyang hurriedly came in. As soon as he entered the residence, a servant told him that Miss Yu had come to visit. When he entered the reception pavilion, he discovered that only his father and elder brother were at the table, eating silently. He hesitated for a moment and then heard the clear and sweet voice of the little lass behind the screen. He was just about to go behind it when his father stopped him, “There are female guests inside. If you haven't eaten yet, then sit out here and eat ah.”

Zhu Junyang rather unwillingly sat down and picked up the chopsticks that one of the servants handed to him. He slanted his ears towards the screen to attentively listen to the voices beyond the screen. He knew that his little lass never visited without a reason. He wasn't sure whether she was here for his lady mother or for himself this time.

“Lord Father, when Xiaocao came over today, did she say what she was here for?” Zhu Junyang eavesdropped for a bit and didn't get the answer he was looking for, so he couldn't help but ask Imperial Prince Jing, who had gotten home before him.

Normally the whole family sat together to have a scrumptious and lively meal together. His beloved wife would even from time to time personally serve him some foods that he liked to eat. Now, he had to sit on the outside and stare at these two brats. Even his appetite was affected by this. Thus, Imperial Prince Jing was in a bad mood so he replied with a bit of heat, "I, your father, also just got back. How would I know what they're talking about?"

"Then...when Xiaocao gave her greeting to you, did she look happy or a bit worried?" Zhu Junyang was afraid that his lass had encountered some difficulties. It was hard for him to concentrate on eating.

Imperial Prince Jing glared at his youngest son and replied in a displeased manner, "Are there any people who would show a long face when giving their greetings to other people? That lass Xiaocao is very sensible. Even if she was worried about something, she wouldn't show it on her face to make other people worried too. By asking this, aren't you deliberately trying to make things difficult for me?"

Princess Consort Jing said in a voice full of mirth from behind the screen, "Lass Xiaocao, quickly say what you're here to find Yang'er for. Otherwise, he's going to have a stomachache from eating and fretting at the same time!" When Zhu Junyang found out that the little lass was here to find him, he craned his neck as if he was afraid he'd miss a single word. He could only hear the little lass giggle a bit and then her sweet voice said, "In actuality, it's nothing important. In two days, I was going to organize an outing and I wasn't sure if this busy person had time to participate."

The little lass had finally taken his grumblings to heart. It wasn't like the last time when she invited others over for an outing to pick fruit and didn't think of him. However, he was only happy for a brief second before a frown took over his face. The little lass had finally sent him an invitation but he now had a task that the emperor assigned him and had to leave the capital for some time. The emperor was truly too much. He couldn't give him this task earlier or later and instead had to give it on the day the little lass gave him an invitation for an outing. He didn't know how disappointed his lass would be when she found out that he wouldn't be able to accompany her (Author's note: Zhu Junyang, you're overthinking this!).

"Next month is Princess Consort Duan's fiftieth birthday celebration. Since she loves precious pearls, the emperor wanted to give her a coronet that has large precious pearls embedded in it. However, superior grade pearls are only things that you can come across and not easily buy, so it'd be hard to find one, let alone the nine needed to make this coronet. We could only find one superior grade pearl in the internal storeroom...so, this morning at court, I received the emperor's command to go search for superior grade pearls." Zhu Junyang was afraid that his little lass would be unhappy about his refusal, so he explained in great detail what was going on and hoped that she could sympathize with his plight.

When Yu Xiaocao heard this, she immediately became interested. If large superior grade pearls were that easy to come across, the emperor would not have sent someone as talented as Zhu Junyang to do this task. All of the experienced pearl hunters by the ocean already had their regular customers, so even if you visited them, they would likely have none in stock. As for the merchants who bought and sold pearls, if they had a superior grade pearl on hand, wouldn't they hide it in their treasure boxes or search for a customer who they can sell it to at a sky high price? Why would they wait for you to find them and then sell it? As for those who were able to afford superior grade pearls, they either were incredibly wealthy or powerful, so why would they be willing to step aside for you? Even if the person who came along was the envoy of the emperor, it was not like they could forcefully take it from the owner.

Therefore...Yu Xiaocao's eyes flickered around as she asked, "Princess Consort Duan's grand birthday celebration is next month and you're still missing eight top-notch pearls, so time is of the essence. Do you have any ideas right now?"

Zhu Junyang's mind was also blank at this point. As soon as he left the palace, he rushed back to the residence and didn't have the time to convene with his advisors to come up with a working plan. However, he could hear the undertone of excitement within her voice, as if she had something to say. This lass always had odd-ball ideas floating around in her head, so perhaps she could lead him down the right direction.

"Do you have any thoughts on this? This prince has no clue where to start! It'd be difficult to find one superior grade pearl, let alone eight. The emperor is deliberately giving out this hard task to make it difficult on me!" Zhu Junyang deliberately pretended to be out of sorts and sighed ponderously.

"Third Son! As an official, since the emperor gave you instructions, just do what you need to do. What's the point in complaining so much? The emperor gave you such an important task because he believed in your ability, so you should be doing your best to relieve his worries!" Imperial Prince Jing took into consideration that there was an outsider here and glared at his youngest son as he pompously spewed out a few words.

Zhu Junyang winked at his father and then let out another long sigh as he somewhat helplessly said, "Wasn't I just worried that I don't have any good ideas ah? You don't even let me grumble a little ah!"

"I do have a somewhat immature idea right now, but I don't know if it'll be of much help!" After all, this was a task that the emperor had given Royal Prince Yang, who had a reputation of being omnipotent. If

even he couldn't come up with something, then making it sound like she had everything all set was a bit too much.

“Eh? What sort of idea? Quickly tell me...” Zhu Junyang couldn't sit still in his chair anymore and wished desperately he could pull that screen away and snatch the lass over to get her thoughts on this.

“Ahem, ahem!!” Imperial Prince Jing lightly cleared his throat and gave a slight warning, “The mealtime is not the time to talk, nor is it proper to talk during bedtime. When we're eating, it's best not to discuss official matters. After we finish, we can talk about these things in the study!”

Imperial Prince Jing had his own concerns right now. Although the Wu Family's lass seemed to have changed for the better, that mother of hers, as well as her previous conduct, made the prince feel wary around her. One needed to be careful in regards to the task set by the emperor. Otherwise, it was possible that some malicious people would try to interfere and cause them to fail. Recently, his youngest son had been rising prominently in court and he had made quite a few political enemies who were looking for an excuse to trip him over.

The rest of the meal closely adhered to the etiquette of 'the mealtime is not the time to talk, nor is it proper to talk during bedtime'. However, it was obvious that everyone's speed of eating had increased sharply. Wu Junling perceptively knew that she would not be permitted to participate in the following conversation, so she didn't even stay to partake in the after meal tea before she said her farewells.

Princess Consort Jing watched as the young maiden left and remarked with a sigh, “That lass Ling'er has truly changed a lot compared to before from what I can tell. If she didn't have that mother of hers, she would truly be a good girl.”

Zhu Junyang glanced at Wu Junling with the eyes of a stranger. In his eyes, she was someone who was completely irrelevant to him. Thus, did it matter that she changed or not? As long as she didn't cling onto him stubbornly, he wouldn't stop her from coming over to visit his lady mother and chatting a bit.

Zhu Junyang led Xiaocao to the outer study. His advisors, who had gotten the summons, were already congregating there. They had already heard of the task that the emperor had given their master and were currently enthusiastically discussing it. However, the group of them didn't seem to come to a good idea by the time their master was done with lunch.

After the advisors greeted the prince, they discovered that behind him was a little lass. There were all sorts of rumors in the capital about their master and they had heard a lot of them. Some said that their master was a pedophile, others said that their master had bad taste to fall in love with rural countryside lass. Some said that the master had struck first to tyrannically claim Miss Yu as his own...however, rumors, after all, were just rumors. It couldn't compare to seeing things first hand.

Was this short, delicate-looking, with a bit of childish demeanor girl in front of them the center of all of these rumors? She looked like she was only around ten years old. Did the master truly like them that young?

“Cao'er, didn't you say earlier you had an idea in regards to the pearls? Quickly say it now for us to hear!” Not only Zhu Junyang turned to look at her expectantly but everyone else in the room, as well as Imperial Prince Jing, who had entered this meeting without an invitation, also turned around to gaze at her. The looks in other people's eyes betrayed their hesitation and speculation.

A few of the advisors who were older men with white beards, such as Sir Shen, had obvious expressions of disdain of their faces. They had already debated this topic for almost half a day but no one here dared to say they had a good idea. How could a silly little girl come up with anything good?

One of the younger advisors of the bunch, Lu Wenxuan, held more curiosity in his eyes. If one had to choose the person who had caused the most waves in the capital recently, other than his own master, then it had to be this young maiden in front of him. She looked very sweet and delicate. The only thing that seemed out of the ordinary for her was that her skin seemed more exquisite and her eyes slightly larger than other girls. Otherwise, there wasn't much difference between her and the other nobly-born maidens in the capital.

However, there was the saying that 'you shouldn't judge a book by its cover'. This young maiden had used her own abilities to obtain spectacular glory and honor for her family. Furthermore, she also made herself and her family incredibly wealthy in the process. Greenhouse grown vegetables, 'Blossoming Beauty' beauty and health salon, The Yu Family's Pharmaceutical Workshop...he heard that even the master's 'Celestial World' entertainment facility was also the product of this young lady's ideas.

He recalled the daily income of the entertainment facility and thought that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the place was a gold-manufacturing machine. The area that was most profitable had to be the racehorse tracks that allowed betting. Every single race was filled to the brim with excited gamblers and was the most fashionable place for entertainment in the capital currently. Just what type of ideas did this young maiden have hidden in her little mind? He was quite curious about her.

In front of all of those inquiring, doubtful, and speculative gazes, Yu Xiaocao didn't seem the least bit perturbed or intimidated at all. She explained her thoughts in a very natural confident manner, "My idea is not completely fleshed out so please remember that when listening. Right now, the temperatures outside are perfect for pearl diving. So, why don't we set up a large pearl gathering competition? We can advertise this competition throughout the coasts where fishing villages are and use a big reward and the chance for glory to attract all of the experienced pearl divers to compete. The competition can go on until the middle of next month. As long as we're able to gather the superior quality pearls we need before Princess Consort Duan's birthday celebration at the end of next month, then wouldn't you be able to finish your task without any hiccups, Ruizhi?"

Yu Xiaocao's proposal had been thought up on the spot so it wasn't completely perfect. However, in the advisors' minds, it was the best idea that had come up so far and a treasure to behold. The doubts they had in their hearts had completely disappeared and they could finally see the light.

Fields of Gold Chapter 550

There was just a little over a month. Searching for a top-quality pearl in the Great Ming Empire was like looking for a needle in the haystack. However, if Miss Yu's 'pearl hunting competition' was promoted well and was able to attract all the pearl collectors from all over the Great Ming Empire, wouldn't the chance of obtaining high-quality pearls be much higher?

The aides felt that it was quite feasible and immediately entered discussion mode. The general direction had already been established, but they still needed to discuss the method of implementation in detail. There was only less than two months, so the most important task was to maximize the impact of the pearl collection gathering.

Seeing that she was no longer needed, Yu Xiaocao excused herself. When Zhu Junyang sent her out, he asked with concern, "Where are you guys planning to go on this trip? Who's going? Is it safe?"

Upon knowing that she was going to Dongshan Village with a group of pampered girls, he couldn't help but frown, "Only a few inexperienced and undaunted girls? It's hard for this prince not to worry... Why don't I have Head Steward Liu follow along? My assignment isn't dangerous this time anyways. Give me an invitation card and I'll ask if that fellow Lu Hao can take several days off. Let him protect you girls on the road."

Yu Xiaocao knew that he was worried about her and felt very happy about it, but she rolled her eyes at him, saying, "We're travelling on the official road and we also have a bunch of servants and guards with

us. What dangers can there be? Young Master Lu is working in the Yulin Division, so how can he leave so easily? You ah, you're just worrying over nothing.”

Zhu Junyang pondered for a moment and then said, “Let's talk about Lu Hao's matter later! When are you guys leaving? Why don't I have Head Steward Liu report to the Yu Residence today?”

“We're leaving in three days, and we'll have to trouble Head Steward Liu at that time! Quickly go back. The aides are still waiting for you!” Yu Xiaocao got on the carriage and went to 'Blossoming Beauty' first. She took a fragrant flower petal bath before returning home.

Originally, they had planned on taking a vacation by the sea with a few girls. However, the news was leaked through an unknown source. The Ning Brothers of Duke Rongguo's Household, Royal Princess Minglan's thirteen year old younger brother, Li Mengru's two younger brothers, and Yu Wanning's older brother, who had come along because he was worried about her, all found out about this trip... When they set off, there were five to six more youths in the group. With the addition of the servants, their group was quite big.

When they got out of the capital, they noticed that Lu Hao was waiting there with a team of imperial guards. Seeing Yu Xiaocao's slightly surprised face, Lu Hao beamed with pride, “That fellow Zhu Junyang was worried about your safety on the trip, so he sent me and my brothers to escort you guys. What do you think? Looks quite impressive, right?”

Yu Xiaocao looked at the imperial guards behind him, chuckled, and said, “I'm not going to shoulder this favor! You guys have an assignment on hand and are just escorting us on the way. What? Did Zhu Junyang send you guys to take the lead in Tanggu Town?”

“A young maiden shouldn't be too clever because it will discourage men from approaching—but you don't have to worry. That fellow Zhu Junyang nearly wants to carry you on top of his head.” Lu Hao gestured to her to go ahead with a toothy grin as he said, “Please, may this little one have the honor of escorting you ladies.”

He Wanning glared at him and snapped the whip in her hands as she stated in a valiant manner, “Do we need you to escort us? Let alone that it's a time of peace and order, even if there are robbers and bandits, I'll sure that they won't be able go back alive!”

Lu Hao raised his eyebrow and smiled roguishly, “Oh! Charcoal He, you shouldn't boast and make unrealistic vows. With your measly martial arts skill, if you really got attacked, then you will be captured within two rounds!”

“Who are you calling a 'charcoal'? Are you blind? Let everyone be the judge. Which one of us looks more like a charcoal?” Since she used the whitening and moisturizing skincare products that Xiaocao gave her, He Wanning was now unprecedentedly confident in herself.

Lu Hao was seriously so annoying. He had naturally fair skin, so when they were children, he gave her various nicknames, like 'Little Charcoal', 'Dark Beauty', and 'Black Ball'. Every time, He Wanning was provoked until she got into a rage. She would yell and chase after him with a small whip. She wanted to teach him a lesson by whipping him a few times. However, despite his chubby figure, that fellow was very nimble. Thus, she was never able to succeed.

She acknowledged that she used to have a dark complexion, but she now had ruddy, fair skin. She looked very young and beautiful, yet he still called her 'Little Charcoal. What kind of eyes did he have? Lu Hao, on the other hand, often practiced martial arts and was also dispatched to work under the sun after he joined the Yulin Division. Hence, his skin had gotten much tanner. However, he was still considered fairly pale compared with the imperial guards behind him, who had healthy-looking bronze skin.

Lu Hao carefully examined her for a moment and admitted, “I must say Younger Sister Xiaocao's products have the power to make the ugly beautiful. They were actually able to turn a little black ball into a beautiful woman with fair complexion. Tsk tsk...it's so incredible ah!”

“Humph! You have a good eye, admitting that this maiden is a beautiful woman! This maiden is originally a natural beauty. It's just that you should have gone to see a doctor for your eyes in the past!” Whenever He Wanning saw him, they would definitely quarrel. So this trip was going to be very lively.

“Natural beauty?” Lu Hao looked as if he couldn't hold back his laughter as he said, “I reckon that you're a natural charcoal.”

“Lu Hao! I dare you to say that again!!” He Wanning raised the whip in her hands in a murderous manner. A beautiful lady had turned into an angry beast.

Lu Hao wasn't afraid of her. He made a funny face at her and said, "Little Charcoal, Little Charcoal! Don't think that you can get rid of your childhood nickname just because you have gotten whiter. Don't forget that I still have your portrait!!"

He Wanning was even more angry when he mentioned the portrait. That guy Lu Hao deliberately splashed ink on the paper and insisted that it was a portrait of her. This caused her to be laughed at by her stupid friends for a long time. She couldn't tolerate this any longer!! He Wanning forcefully squeezed the horse's belly and charged fiercely towards Lu Hao. Without holding back, she snapped the whip in her hands at his fair, plump, and annoying-looking face.

Lu Hao, who had been trained by Zhu Junyang for so many years, had continued to fight despite setbacks, so how could he let a young girl hit him so easily? He controlled his mount and deliberately kept a distance of a horse between them. He wanted to let her think that she could hit him, but, in actuality, she wouldn't be able to reach him. From time to time, he would also intentionally provoke her with words.

Looking at how the two interacted, the two words 'bickering couple' appeared within Yu Xiaocao's mind. So Older Sister He liked this type of guy ah...

Seeing that they had ran far away during the chase, Yu Xiaocao said to the guests, who were either invited by her or came uninvited, "It's getting late, so let's quickly set off. Big brothers, please take care of us along the way. When we reach Tanggu Town, I'll treat everyone to drink alcohol and eat seafood!"

A young man, who looked like a leader among the imperial guards, smiled brightly as he replied, "Miss Yu is being courteous! It's not important whether we get to eat seafood, but on behalf of everyone, let me say this—it's good as long as there's enough alcohol!!"

In addition to fruit wine, the distillery in the outskirts of the capital had added a high-quality liquor called 'Five Grains Liquid', which had a mellow taste and wasn't too strong. Even if one was dead drunk, one would still feel refreshed and energetic the next day. There wouldn't be any symptoms of a splitting headache, and it wouldn't cause one to delay their tasks on the next day. Therefore, it was very popular among soldiers.

However, due to the scale of the distillery, not a lot of Five Grains Liquid were produced every month. Moreover, it was very expensive and wasn't affordable for ordinary soldiers like them. Now that the owner of the distillery was in front of them, it would be foolish of them to not try to get some advantages!

As soon as Yu Xiaocao heard this, she knew what these guys wanted. She wasn't a petty person, so with a wave of her hand, she said, "Rest assured! When we get back from Tanggu, I'll give each of you a jar of Five Grains Liquid. A ten catties jar!!"

The imperial bodyguards were immediately in a state of uproar, and they couldn't believe the sudden arrival of happiness. One should know that, on the market, a small one catty jar cost forty-eight taels per each. Furthermore, it was sold out as soon as it was put on the market and had been out of stock for a long time. Wouldn't a ten catties jar of Five Grains Liquid cost nearly five hundred taels? That was several years of salary for these soldiers who came from ordinary families, okay? Miss Yu was indeed the same as the rumors—generous!!

"Five Grains Liquid? Ten catties? Do I get one too?" Lu Hao just happened to hear his brothers discussing this topic enthusiastically when he returned from running a lap on his horse with He Wanning chasing after him. He leaned over to shamelessly ask as he avoided her whip.

It was hard to say whether it was due to being angered or she was tired from whipping, but He Wanning's face was completely red. She still had a murderous look on her face as she shouted at Yu Xiaocao, "Younger Sister Xiaocao, if you give him the Five Grains Liquid, then you're no longer my younger sister!!"

Yu Xiaocao suppressed her laughter and looked at Lu Hao with a helpless expression. Lu Hao yelled at He Wanning, "These are separate matters. Tomboy, you dared to threaten Younger Sister Xiaocao. Be careful that I'll report it to the cold-faced death god!"

Tsk, in such a short period of time, 'Little Black' had turned into 'Tomboy'! He Wanning roared at him with an arrogant and indifferent tone, "Go report it ah! So what if he's a cold-faced death god? Isn't he as docile as Little Black in front of Younger Sister Xiaocao? He appears like Little White in front of people but acts like Little Black in private. He's a prime example of a double-faced man!!"

Lu Hao looked at her with a 'you win' expression, but he still needed to strive for a chance to get the Five Grains Liquid, "Little Lady, I'll apologize to you, okay? Please be magnanimous and don't lower yourself to my level. We've known each other for over a decade, so you should know how I am. I just have a rotten mouth. You shouldn't take my words to heart!"

“Weren't you very happy calling me 'Tomboy' earlier? Now that you need a favor from me, you changed it to 'Little Lady'? Humph! Let me tell you, this little lady is in a bad mood. Let's talk about the liquor when you make me happy again!” He Wanning thought that she had gotten a hold of Lu Hao's weakness and had the same complacent expression on her face that Lu Hao had earlier.

Lu Hao couldn't stand her smug expression. He sneered and said, “Forget it then! I'll just ask Zhu Junyang for it later. I doubt you can interfere with Younger Sister Xiaocao sending alcohol to Prince Jing's Estate.”

He Wanning had a stunned expression on her face and she was even more angry. She ran after the irritating fellow with the small whip in her hands. Along the way, these situations kept repeating. The group was amused by their banter, and thus didn't feel that the journey was tiring.