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As soon as they entered Tanggu Town, Lu Hao led his team of imperial guards and parted ways with Yu Xiaocao and the others. After all, he had work on hand, and official business was still his priority.

At noon, Yu Xiaocao took the group of tired and hungry youths to the entrance of Zhenxiu Restaurant. Zhenxiu Restaurant had already opened several branches in the capital. This group of noble young masters and misses from the capital naturally knew that they wouldn't be able to taste the delicacies in Zhenxiu Restaurant without booking several days in advance.

Although they really wanted to sit down in Zhenxiu Restaurant and have a good meal, the group of noble young masters and misses knew clearly in their hearts that it was just their wishful thinking. When they smelled the strong aroma of the roasted duck wafting out from the restaurant, the group felt that their hunger was even more unbearable.

Ning Donghuan covered his rumbling stomach that was protesting for food and looked pitifully at Yu Xiaocao, "I say, Xiaocao, you clearly know that we're dying of hunger, but you're deliberately tempting us with food. Can we still happily play together? You aren't that naïve to think that there's still vacant seats for us in Zhenxiu Restaurant at this time, right?"

Shi Donglin, Royal Princess Minglan's younger brother, watched as customers went in and out of the entrance of Zhenxiu Restaurant, and said dispiritedly, "I took a look, and it seemed like the main hall was already full. There's no point in asking. Wasn't there a 'Fulin Restaurant' earlier? It also seems like a famous, long-established restaurant. Why don't we just eat there and fill our stomachs first?"

Yuan Xueyan was the only one among them who knew about the relationship between Zhenxiu Restaurant and Yu Xiaocao. This was something that she had heard from her grandfather, Great Scholar Yuan. Xiaocao was considered half of a boss of Zhenxiu Restaurant, so she never had to make reservations when eating there!

Yu Xiaocao smiled playfully at Shi Donglin, who was around the same age as her younger brother, and said, "It's okay. Maybe we'll be very lucky and encounter a sudden cancellation? You guys wait here, while I go ask. It won't take much time!"

Ning Donghuan still wanted to say something, but he was stopped by his refined second brother. He asked with confusion, "Second Brother, why are you stopping me? Are we just going to let Xiaocao get rebuffed? That guy with a goatee just came out with a face full of disappointment. It's obvious that there are no tables left ah!"

Ning Donglan watched as Xiaocao entered Zhenxiu Restaurant, and then shook his head at his brainless third brother, saying, "When have you ever seen Xiaocao fight a battle unprepared? Although she said that she was going to try her luck, she had an air of confidence. Don't worry about it. Just wait to go in and have a good meal."

Inside Zhenxiu Restaurant, Qian Xiaoduo, who was busily greeting the customers, saw Yu Xiaocao coming in from outside. He went forward with an even warmer smile and said, "Miss Yu, you...did you just return from the capital? Quickly go upstairs. This little one will have someone bring you a basin of water so you can wash up!"

Yu Xiaocao looked strangely at Qian Xiaoduo's beard and curiously asked, "Manager Qian, why did you suddenly grow out a beard? It makes you look several years older."

Qian Xiaoduo touched his beard, which had just grown out a little, and chuckled, "People often say that young people can't be trusted with important tasks. So I want to make myself look more dignified!"

After he said that, he looked outside and continued, "Are those people outside your friends from the capital? Is this a trip to the seaside? It's not a bad idea to let the noble young masters and misses in the capital see our newly built harbor in Tanggu, as well as the ships that are coming and going! Erzhu'zi, go and invite those guests outside to the third floor. Miss Yu, do you want to head up first?"

Yu Xiaocao waved her hands at him and said, "They're my friends so there's no need to be so polite. I'll call them over myself. I brought spring tea that I stir-fried—have someone brew a pot and bring it upstairs!"

Wutong took out a jar of tea leaves from her bag. Qian Xiaoduo's eyes suddenly brightened up and he quickly took it over with both hands. As if he was holding a treasure, he went to the tea room to find the person who was most skilled in making tea. Who didn't know that the wild camellia tea that Miss Yu made had an even more fragrant and mellow taste than top-grade Yunwu tea?

Since the current master of the Zhou Family tasted the tea, he always thought about it whenever he returned to the old residence in Tanggu Town. After serving Miss Yu's friends, there should still be a lot of tea leaves left in the jar. Miss Yu was a generous person, so she definitely wouldn't take back the remaining tea leaves. It seemed like he had gotten another chance to show his face in front of the old master again thanks to Miss Yu!

Yu Xiaocao didn't care about Manager Qian's thoughts and turned to walk out of Zhenxiu Restaurant. She beckoned her friends and showed a crafty smile as she said, "It seems like we're really lucky today. There's a private room on the third floor that's vacant."

Ning Donghuan exclaimed in surprise with an incredible expression on his face, "Really? There's an empty spot as soon as you go ask. I clearly saw several waves of people coming out with a disappointed look. Oh...I know. Do you have a long-term reservation of a private room in Zhenxiu Restaurant so that you can come eat the delicacies at the restaurant at any time?"

Yu Xiaocao looked at him with a contemptuous gaze and said, "If I'm going to make a reservation, I would have done it in the Zhenxiu Restaurant in the capital. These two years, I can only return to Tanggu Town a limited number of times. If I made a reservation, wouldn't it be empty most of the time and only be used less than twice a year? Do I have that much money to waste?"

Ning Donghuan pouted and grumbled, "You do have a lot of money ah! The beauty salon, pharmaceutical workshops, and wine distillery are all money-making businesses. If calculated seriously, you can be considered one of the wealthiest ladies in the capital! What's the big deal about reserving a private room in Zhenxiu Restaurant?"

Ning Donglan was embarrassed by his younger brother's stupidity. He glared at him and said, "There are so many branches of Zhenxiu Restaurant in the capital. Have you ever heard of them letting outsiders reserve a private room? If it was possible, with so many rich and influential families in the capital, wouldn't all the private rooms already be taken? Can't you use your brain before speaking?"

With a puzzled expression, Ning Donghuan scratched the back of his head and asked in confusion, "Then how did she get a private room? Could it be that she used her beauty...Ouch!!"

Ning Donglan retrieved his fan and didn't want to pay attention to him anymore. Ning Donghuan continued to murmur. Even when they had sat down in the private room on the third floor and was drinking the fragrant tea, he still pestered Xiaocao to ask her how she managed to get such a high-class private room.

Yuan Xueyan reminded him in an indifferent tone, "Has anyone ever seen Zhenxiu Restaurant open the third floor to outsiders?"

Indeed! Yuan Xueyan's words enlightened everyone present. The third floor of Zhenxiu Restaurant had always been very mysterious, and it was said that it was specially used to entertain close friends and relatives. Could it be...

Ning Donghuan looked at Yu Xiaocao with bright eyes, as if he was a puppy begging for a bone, "Xiaocao, are you the illegitimate daughter of the Zhou Family...Aiya, Second Brother, why did you hit me again?"

Ning Donglan shook his head in disappointment and said, "I told you to use your brain before speaking, but it seems like that was a rather difficult request because you don't have one at all!"

Seeing that everyone had looked over curiously, Yu Xiaocao quickly smiled and explained, "I found a tattered recipe book by chance, and made several dishes according to the book. The third young master of the Zhou Family took a fancy to the dishes and bought several of the recipes at a high price. Third Young Master Zhou, who is generous and treats me like a friend, gave me the rights to use the private rooms on the third floor..."

Hearing this, Yu Wanqing looked at Xiaocao with admiration and exclaimed, "Older Sister Xiaocao, you're so amazing! You're good at everything!"

Ning Donglan, on the other hand, had a thoughtful look on his face and said after a long time, "This Zhenxiu Restaurant was originally just a common restaurant in Tanggu Town. I heard that it barely managed to survive the competition of other famous, long-established restaurants. Later, the restaurant released oyster sauce dishes, roasted chicken, roasted duck... Only then did it gradually gain a firm foothold. Allegedly, these dishes were recipes given to them by a mysterious person. This mysterious person wouldn't just happen to be Xiaocao, right?"

Yu Xiaocao hadn't expected that Ning Donglan knew all these things, but the history of the establishment of Zhenxiu Restaurant wasn't a secret. Anyone who wanted to inquire about it could find out. She replied humbly, "It just so happened that those dishes were in the book. At that time, my family was in a situation where we didn't have enough food to eat and warm clothes to wear, so we sold the recipes in order to improve our living conditions."

Ning Donghuan beat his chest and lamented, “Aiya! What a pity! Isn't that the same as selling a chicken that lays golden eggs? If you still had them now, we could cooperate to open a restaurant with these signature dishes. It will definitely be better than Zhenxiu Restaurant!”

Yu Xiaocao had endless recipes in her hands, so opening a restaurant wasn't a problem for her. However, in the past two years, she had been in the limelight enough in the capital. She didn't want to attract more attention so as to not attract the jealousy of others and bring disaster to herself.

After the group casually washed up, they had a good meal at Zhenxiu Restaurant and a short rest before they rushed to Dongshan Village. The villagers of Dongshan Village were stunned by the sight of the group of over a dozen people, who were all dressed in brocade robes and accompanied by fine horses and myriads of servants.

Who said Yu Xiaocao couldn't succeed because she had no roots in the capital? Look at how she was accompanied by a royal princess and noble young masters and misses. They were truly the children of wealthy and influential families. Those who boasted about being noble young misses in town were far inferior to these people!

As for their accommodation, Zhu Junyang had already thought it over for Xiaocao. The Yu Family's old residence was built to appear spacious and grand. However, it might be too crowded to entertain over a dozen children of noble families, and dozens of servants and guards. Fortunately, Prince Jing household's mountain manor on the West Mountains was currently vacant. After Zhu Junyang got permission from his lady mother, he had servants clean up the empty rooms in the manor to entertain the group of noble young maidens and masters.

The problem of their lodging had been resolved, and there was no need to worry about food. Those who lived on the mountain lived off the mountain, while those who lived near the sea lived off the sea. If they wanted to eat game, then they should go hunt for some in the mountains. If they wanted to eat seafood, then they should go fishing. Would they starve with Xiaocao around?

For the next several days, the young masters and maidens who had never been to the sea played like crazy. Every morning, they followed Xiaocao to set traps in the mountains. When the tide was low, they went to gather seafood at the beach with the half-grown children in the village.

The young masters, who thought that they were good at swimming, had even borrowed Yu Hai's and Yu Hang's sharkskin diving suits. They swam around in the sea, and then dived into the shallow water to catch some small fish and shrimps. At dusk, they went back to the mountains to retrieve the pheasants and wild hares that were caught in the traps. Then, in the evening, they filled their stomachs with the delicacies from the mountain and sea.

Sometimes the young maidens also envied Ning Donghuan and the others for being able to experience the joy of playing the water, but they could only watch and sigh because they had poor swimming skills. Although they couldn't swim, Xiaocao knew how to swim ah! Thus, He Wanning pestered Xiaocao to teach her how to swim.

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When the girls were swimming and diving, they naturally had to find a secluded area and have many guards around them. After all, they were all grown maidens. After putting on the tight-fitting diving suits, their delicate figures become somewhat more apparent.

The reef beside the cliff, where Yu Xiaocao used to gather seafood, was the most secluded area. Every time she went to the sea, she would choose to get into the waters here. Xiaocao, who had put on a black sharkskin diving suit, jumped into the waters from the reef like a nimble little dolphin.

Little dolphin? The noble maidens on the reef seemed to have thought of something. Yu Wanqing eagerly asked, "Older Sister Yu, will your little dolphin friend come today? I have never seen a dolphin before ah!"

The others subsequently nodded to express that they wanted to see the little dolphin that was full of spirits. Of course, Yu Xiaocao wouldn't let them down. She called out towards the depths of the ocean, "Xiaobu—"

Yu Wanqing looked at the surface of the sea in the distance. Her eyes were full of expectation as she asked from time to time, "Older Sister Yu, the sea is so big, can the little dolphin hear your voice? Is the little dolphin big enough to carry a person while swimming? What does the sea floor look like? Is it the same as the Dragon Palace in the legends, with shrimp soldiers and crab generals and shell palace maids?"

The others were amused by her childish words. He Wanning, who had changed into a diving suit, took a deep breath and dived into the waters. When she came out, she pretended to be surprised and exclaimed, "Wow! I saw a tortoise prime minister!"

“Where is it? Where is it??” Only Yu Wanqing, the naïve fellow, was fooled and hastily rushed over. She didn't even care that her embroidered shoes got wet and only cared about seeing what the tortoise prime minister looked like.

He Wanning couldn't hold back anymore. She laughed and said, “I lied to you! How can there be any shrimp soldiers, crab generals, Dragon King and dragon maidens? Those are all mythological characters, so how can we see them in real life?”

Her words led to fits of laughter. Yu Wanqing pouted and stamped her feet, “Older Sister He is so mean. I'm not playing with you—Ah! Dolphin, is that a dolphin? There are so many!!”

Everyone looked towards the direction that she pointed at. Sure enough, a group of sea elves jumped out of the water from time to time. They had pointed mouths and backs with graceful lines. What elegant and cute creatures!

“Older Sister Yu, that's Older Sister Yu, right?!” Yu Wanqing saw a head surrounded by the dolphins and screamed out in surprise. It turned out that, at some point, Xiaocao had swam far away and met up with the pod of dolphins!

Among the dolphins, Xiaobu had already grown into 'Big Bu'. Xiaobu was very excited because it hadn't seen its good friend, Xiaocao, in a long time. It swam around her, jumped out of the water beside her from time to time, and let her head rest on top of its head.

Xiaocao dripped a drop of mystic-stone water into its wide opened mouth. Seeing Yu Wanqing Li Mengqi desperately waving their hands at her, she climbed up onto the dolphin's back and had it carry her towards the group of people, like when she was younger.

Xiaobu often played with Xiaocao, so it wasn't scared of humans. It obediently swam to the shore, and soon the crowd on the reef were able to clearly see its appearance: blue back, sharp dorsal fin, shiny 'skin', and a pair of bright, black eyes that shined with life.

“So pretty!” Yu Wanqing couldn't help but exclaim. The others were also mesmerized by the cute appearance of the little dolphin.

He Wanning tried to get closer to Xiaobu with her measly dog paddle swimming skills. Xiaobu tilted its head and looked at her curiously with a friendly and gentle expression.

“Dolphins are kind creatures that are lively and playful. As long as you don't have any ill intentions, it will be happy to accept you as a friend!” Yu Xiaocao introduced her little dolphin friend to her close friends.

He Wanning slowly stretched out her hands, trying to feel Xiaobu's shiny bald head. Suddenly, she felt something in the water push against her waist. She was so scared that her face turned pale and she forgot how to dog paddle. Her limbs flapped in confusion and she seemed to be sinking into the sea. The girls on the shore screamed repeatedly, feeling worried for her.

After drinking two mouthfuls of salty sea water, He Wanning suddenly felt herself being lifted. She thought that it was Xiaocao who saved her. She pitifully squeezed out a grateful smile at her, but she found out that Xiaocao was two arm's length away from her. 'Huh? Then who saved me?'

Xiaocao motioned her to look in the sea. It turned out that Xiaobu was pushing her with its head, letting her body surface above the waters. Xiaocao said with a smile, “The legend of dolphins saving people is widely known around the seaside. Fishermen will never hunt these mystical little creatures because they will probably have to rely on the dolphins to save them when they encounter dangers at sea. Haha, so it was you, this little guy, who was causing trouble ah!”

Yu Xiaocao plunged into the sea and saw a little dolphin that was even smaller than the Xiaobu that she first met. It swam around He Wanning, and from time to time, it would curiously push her with its rostrum. It was because of this little guy that He Wanning had nearly drowned in fear earlier.

Seeing Yu Xiaocao swim over, the little fellow wasn't scared. It hovered around Xiaobu and looked at her curiously with a shy expression of wanting to approach but was embarrassed to do so.

Yu Xiaocao swam closer to it, stroked its smooth back, and bribed it with a drop of mystic-stone water. The little fellow finally got close to her and swam around her. It rubbed its small head against her and didn't even struggle when Xiaocao held onto it.

Xiaocao carried the little guy to the surface of the sea and grinned at He Wanning, who had already climbed ashore, saying, “Older Sister He, you're so timid. You're afraid of such a small baby dolphin!”

“Wow—it's adorable! Can I touch it?” Yu Wanqing excitedly screamed as she rushed in front of the others.

The water level near the reef was too shallow for adult dolphins to swim over, but it was different for the mini dolphin that Yu Xiaocao was holding. After Xiaocao let it go, it didn't swim away and swam around in the shallow waters while flapping its tail.

Just like how the young maidens onshore were curious about it, it was also full of curiosity since it was its first time meeting human girls. Seeing Yu Wanqing put her hands into the sea water and called it warmly, the little fellow swam over in a silly manner and put its head on her palm, asking to be stroked.

“So cute. The little dolphin is so cute. I really want to take it home to raise as a pet!” If it wasn't for the fact that she knew that dolphins couldn't leave the water like fishes, Yu Wanqing would hold it in her arms and kiss it.

Royal Princess Minglan disproved her, “The little dolphin needs to live in the water. Do you have seawater at home? Moreover, even if your family has the financial ability to transport seawater back every day, would the dolphin be happy after leaving its friends in the ocean? It's like...you're suddenly able to breathe underwater. The little dolphins made you stay in the ocean and won't let you back go ashore. Would you be willing?”

“Of course not!” Yu Wanqing immediately retorted.

“See? The little dolphin doesn't want to go home with you. The ocean is their paradise!” Royal Princess Minglan squatted down, and the little dolphin swam towards her, which accidentally led to a tragedy—it ran aground on the reef.

Xiaocao hastily carried it back to the deep sea, and the little fellow, who got frightened, immediately swam back to Xiaobu to be consoled. Xiaocao, who had an alert mind, pointed at the little guy and asked Xiaobu, “Xiaobu, this little fellow wouldn't be your child, right? You're a mother now?”

As if it could understand Xiaocao's words, Xiaobu nodded its head that had come up on the surface of the water. It caressed the back of the little dolphin with its fin, and a sense of affection could be seen within its black eyes.

“Then let's call him Little Xiaobu. Little Xiaobu looks actually the same as when you were younger, and it's also just as bold!” Yu Xiaocao remembered the Xiaobu from a few years ago. It was slightly bigger than Little Xiaobu now, yet it dared to approach her. They swam freely in the sea, and even dared to tease those big sharks.

Under the guidance of Xiaocao, He Wanning swam for a while and learned to dive. She picked up a small crab in the shallow sea and was so excited that she nearly drowned again. After she played for a while, she went ashore to dig mussels and pry barnacles with Yuan Xueyan and the others.

“Watch me catch a few large lobsters as dinner for you guys!” It had been a long time since Yu Xiaocao swam in the bottom of the sea to her heart's content. Seeing that her friends were playing happily on shore, she called out to them and plunged into the water, diving into the azure blue sea.

With the little divine stone's escort and Xiaobu's guidance, she soon arrived at the deep sea. The gorgeous corals, which she had not seen in a long time, rippled with the waves in various forms. The colorful school of fishes formed a net as they swam, frolicking. A big sea turtle slowly swam past Xiaocao and looked curiously at her...

The treasures of the seabed appeared in front of Xiaocao. She grabbed huge lobsters one after another; picked up lazily squirming sea cucumbers one after another; dug out fist-sized abalones one after another...

She had gained a full harvest at the bottom of the sea. The people on the shore became anxious when they saw that she hadn't floated up for a long time. Even the indifferent-looking Yuan Xueyan had a worried expression on her face, “Xiaolian, I heard that there are many undercurrents and dangerous shoals under the sea. Xiaocao has gone down for so long. Did something happen?”

Upon hearing her words, Xiaolian, who was helping her younger sister entertain the pampered guests from the capital, shook her head and said with a smile, “It's okay. Younger Sister has come back safe after diving for an even longer time than now. You guys can rest assured!”

“Don't you think it's strange that she hasn't come up to breathe for so long?” Royal Princess Minglan tried to hold her breath on the shore and couldn't hold it for a long time.

Xiaolian, who was born in a fishing village, had heard many stories about pearl divers. She told them that some people were born with the talents for diving and could hold their breath underwater for more than twenty minutes without a change in their faces. If Xiaocao was here, she would definitely recall that, in her previous life, the record holder of the Guinness World Records held his breath for twenty-two minutes!

As they spoke, they saw a head appear in the distant sea. She waved at them, and then dived down again. Yu Xiaocao quickly gathered a bag of seafood. She found an extremely bright red coral, which was as dazzling as the red clouds in the sky. It looked lustrous and transparent. Hence, she was attracted to go over.

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At this time, red corals were already regarded as an auspicious and fortunate item that represented nobility and power, so it was also called 'Lucky Gem'. It was the symbol of happiness and eternity. Xiaocao heard from her godmother that when the princess of the previous dynasty got married, the imperial family included a red coral that was even taller than a person in her dowry. It was extremely valuable, and thus attracted the envy of countless noble maidens. Corals with such a bright and dazzling red color like this should be considered top grade, right?

With the little divine stone's help, Yu Xiaocao picked the beautiful red coral and slowly pulled back to the shore. Fortunately, there was buoyancy in the sea and she also had the help of the little dolphin. Otherwise, she wasn't sure if she could bring this coral that was nearly the same size as her back.

The coral was dragged ashore with the help of her friends. The group of young maidens were amazed because they had never seen such a coral that was so big and red.

He Wanning was pleasantly surprised as she walked around the coral twice and said, "Younger Sister Xiaocao, you're really lucky to actually find such a top-notch quality red coral. How did you drag it up with that small and thin body of yours?"

Li Mengqi also knew about the value of red coral. The matriarch of her family had a red coral in her dowry. It was only a little more than half a meter tall, but she treated it like a treasure and hid it for fear that it would be damaged by others.

Yu Wanqing showed the string of red coral beads on her wrist to the others and said with a smile, "My mother gave a red coral beads bracelet on my birthday. The color isn't as beautiful as this one, yet I heard it cost several thousand taels! Older Sister Yu, you can grind out so many beads from this coral ah!!"

He Wanqing smacked the back of her head. She disregarded her wronged expression and rebuked, “Do you know how rare a colony of coral is? If it's divided into pieces like you suggested, then that's recklessly wasting god's gift! Xiaocao, you can't be muddle-headed and suffer big losses for the sake of small gains ah!”

Yuan Xueyan, on the other hand, thought more profoundly and asked, “Younger Sister Xiaocao, this coral is very valuable. Have you figured out what to do with it?” People often say that 'one's only crime was to carry a jade'. Such a precious item would likely attract thieves.

Yu Xiaocao understood what she meant, so she answered without any hesitation, “At the end of next month, isn't it the emperor's imperial mother, Princess Consort Duan's, birthday? The emperor and empress treat me so well, and I have nothing to repay them with. So I'll give this coral as a birthday present to Princess Consort Duan.”

He Wanning felt very regretful about it. In her opinion, Xiaocao had been granted the title of a feudal princess, but to be a match with Royal Prince Yang, who was a real member of the imperial family, there was still a gap between their statuses. If she had such a valuable item in her dowry when she got married, those nosy people probably wouldn't be able to say anything, right? However, Xiaocao wanted to give it to someone else. Her heart ached for her, alright?

Royal Princess Minglan sourly said, “No wonder the emperor and empress like you so much. You, this lass, really know how to flatter others. You're giving away such a precious thing just like that! But you need to be prepared. You're giving such a valuable birthday present that will make others pale in comparison, so it will inevitably cause certain people to feel displeased. You're inadvertently offending people by doing this!”

Yu Xiaocao thought about it and felt that she was right. She quickly ran over to hug Royal Princess Minglan and said, “Older Sister Minglan, thank you for reminding me. Otherwise, I would have really done something stupid and caused trouble for myself!!”

“Go, go away! Stay away from me. Ah——my clothes are wet because of you. It was so hard to get Modiste Jiang to personally make this set of clothes ah!! Look, it's all dirty because of you!” Royal Princess Minglan was exasperated after Xiaocao rubbed seawater all over her body. What did she do?! If she knew this would happen, she wouldn't have reminded that lass!!

Yu Xiaocao chuckled and avoided her little hand that was about to smack her. She said with a cheeky grin, "Older Sister Minglan, I'll go back and wash it for you. If it's ruined, then I'll get you a new set as compensation! I just had a set of clothes made this year that I haven't worn..."

"With that tiny body of yours? Am I going to wear it so that others can laugh at me?" While Xiaocao wasn't paying attention, Royal Princess Minglan pushed her off the reef. Looking at the splashing water, her sulky mood was somewhat relieved.

Yu Xiaocao moved her limbs and leisurely swam backstroke in the sea water, but she also didn't forget to provoke Royal Princess Minglan. Royal Princess Minglan appeared to have a bad temper, but in fact, after she got a better understanding of her, she realized that Royal Princess Minglan was just a paper tiger that could be easily broken with a single poke!

When the night sky filled the entire beach, the group of young maidens happily returned to the village with a rich harvest. The red coral, which was the height of a person, was carried back to the mountain manor by Chunhua and Qiushi.

On the way back, they encountered the Ning brothers, who were worried since they hadn't returned for so long, and three half-grown youths. Seeing the red coral under the moonlight, Ning Donghuan's eyes nearly popped out. Such a big coral? That lass Xiaocao was going to make a fortune!!

Before he had figured out how to buy the coral from Xiaocao, Xiaocao had already sent someone to call Lu Hao over. The task of transporting the red coral back to the capital was handed to this team of imperial guards of the Yulin Division. She decided to quietly give the coral to the emperor. Whatever he decided to do with it had nothing to do with her.

These young masters and maidens spent a few days in Dongshan Village and had a great time. They ate all kinds of delicacies from the land and sea. Madam Liu's authentic seafood cooking skills conquered their taste buds. Garlic lobster, sea cucumber and chicken soup, crispy abalone with salt and pepper, soy sauce scallops, spicy Mantis shrimps... They ate so contentedly that they didn't want to leave this wonderful place, Dongshan Village.

However, no matter how good Dongshan Village was, they still eventually needed to return to the capital. Just as they prepared to go home, the news of a pearl hunting competition suddenly spread throughout Tanggu. It was said that in addition to the hefty reward, the first place would also be granted an official post. Although it was only a sinecure seventh-ranked position, it was a great temptation for fishermen and pearl divers.

One must admit that Royal Prince Yang had done a great job with the promotion. There were even some people from small fishing villages hundreds of kilometers away coming to sign up for participation. Anyway, the registration was free, so even if they couldn't get ranked in the competition, it wasn't a big loss for them. By giving it a try, perhaps the God of Luck would help them, right?

Many fishermen with good diving skills had signed up for the competition, let alone those who had many years of experience in pearl hunting! Surprisingly, there were also quite a lot of women who had also signed up. Sure enough, the legendary profession of female pearl divers really existed.

The most skilled swimmer in Dongshan Village was Yu Hai. However, he was now rich and had a position of an official. Thus, he wasn't interested in this event. Several fearless youths had signed up without informing their families. Xiaocao had only found out on the day of the competition that Zhuang Xiaomo had also secretly signed up to participate.

Zhuang Xiaomo had even better diving skills than Xiaocao's father, Yu Hai. Allegedly, the old man who adopted him was a famous pearl diver when he was young. Later, due to problems with his health, he stopped working in this profession and became an ordinary fisherman.

Although he didn't want this adopted grandson to take the same disastrous road, he also didn't want his over a decade of precious experience in pearl diving to be forgotten. In the midst of his hesitation, he gradually passed on his experience to Zhuang Xiaomo. Zhuang Xiaomo had also listened to his grandfather and didn't embark on the dangerous road of being a pearl diver. However, he believed that his diving and pearl hunting skills were much better than ordinary pearl divers.

Zhuang Xiaomo, who liked Xiaolian, had always felt inferior. He was afraid his status wasn't worthy of her and that she would fall in love with someone better than him. Therefore, Zhuang Xiaomo always had a knot in his heart. He hoped that he could rely on his own efforts to obtain a status that was a good match for Xiaolian.

This was a once-in-lifetime opportunity for him. If he really got first place and won the hefty reward, he would be able to buy a house in the capital for Xiaolian. Although it wouldn't be as good as the one bought by Xiaocao, they would at least have a place to stay in the capital.

Although a small seventh-ranked official didn't have any real power, he would be able to get rid of the identity of a bumpkin and become someone from the highest class among scholars, farmers, artisans,

and merchants. When he proposed a marriage to the Yu Family, he could stand up straight with confidence. When he promised to give Xiaolian happiness, he could say it in a bold and confident manner.

On the first day of the pearl hunting competition, Xiaolian, who had come to join in the fun with her younger sister, noticed a familiar figure among the crowd, and suddenly felt flustered. Since she had always lived by the sea, she had naturally heard the older generation talk about pearl divers.

The profession of picking pearls may sound like a good career to make money, but who really knew about the difficulties in the profession? Who would know that in order to obtain each round and translucent pearl, the pearl divers had to risk their own health and even lives?

On the surface, the vast expanse of water was calm and without waves. However, the mysterious seabed was full of ravines, dense reefs, turbulent undercurrents, and ceaseless whirlpools. There were far more dangers than that. There were poisonous sea serpents lurking in the crevices of reefs, poisonous jellyfish floating in the sea, and fierce sharks patrolling their territory in groups.

In order to obtain pearl oysters that lived more than ten meters, or even tens of meters, under the sea, pearl divers not only had to withstand the huge pressure of the sea water, face the risk of being swept away by the undercurrent and engulfed by the whirlpool, but they also had to be on guard against the attacks of various dangerous marine organisms.

Therefore, when Zhuang Xiaomo called Older Brother Jiang and the others to get on the boat, Yu Xiaolian rushed over and indiscriminately yelled, "Zhuang Xiaomo, who told you to sign up for this? Do you know how dangerous pearl hunting is? Why are you getting yourself in danger? Are you really that short of money? For the sake of money, you're even disregarding your life?"

"Hey! Little girl, can't you say something good?" Before Zhuang Xiaomo could reply, a tanned and burly man on the next boat had voiced his displeasure. For people in this profession, it was taboo for others to say that it was dangerous and life-risking! Wasn't that cursing them?

Zhuang Xiaomo smiled apologetically at him. Then he turned to Xiaolian and said, "It's alright. I'm just going to try it out with Older Brother Jiang and the others. I won't go too far off and just wander around nearby. Anyway, it doesn't cost much to sign up for such a grand event, so I'll just treat it as an experience. Don't worry. I value my life more than you, so I won't easily take risks!"

His inner monologue was, 'If I died in the sea, wouldn't that just benefit those stinky brats who are looking at you with covetous eyes?'

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Yu Xiaolian still felt uneasy. With her lips pursed, she didn't speak for a long time. Seeing that other people were setting off, she reluctantly asked, "Can you not go? Isn't your vegetables and fruit shop doing pretty good? We don't lack money, so why do you have to join in the fun?"

"I have already signed up to participate, and Royal Prince Yang is looking over this event. If I go back on my words and give up halfway, what would others think? Alright, I promise you that I will prioritize my safety, okay?" Zhuang Xiaomo coaxed her for a long time before Xiaolian finally agreed to let him go.

"You...must be careful and don't try to act brave. I'll wait for you to come back safe and sound!!" Yu Xiaolian's eyes were full of worry and reluctance.

Xiaolian's concern made Zhuang Xiaomo feel a sweet feeling as if he had eaten honey. He looked deeply at her, pushed his own pearl hunting boat, and sailed towards the deep sea with the equipment that he had prepared.

The pearl hunting boat was a special wooden boat that was powered by sails. The bow and stern of the boat were round, and the hull was relatively wide, like a huge oval wooden basin. Zhuang Xiaomo checked his equipment again: thick ropes, ceramic jar, straw mat, wooden bucket, bamboo basket, pearl picking knife, and so on.

Yu Xiaolian watched as Zhuang Xiaomo's pearl hunting boat sailed further and further away. In the end, there was only a small figure at the horizon. The worry in her heart slightly deepened. Yu Xiaocao noticed that Xiaolian seemed absent-minded when they got home. She almost cut her fingers several times when cutting vegetables. Xiaocao thought about it, and then said, "If you're worried, let's have Eldest Brother row a boat to catch up to him. With my swimming skills, if he encountered any danger, I can help out a bit!"

"I want to go too. Can you take me along too? I've never been out to the sea before!" He Wanning overheard the conversation between the sisters and jumped out to express her desire.

"Me too!"

“Older Sister Yu, I want to go too!”

“Me, me, me...”

Before Yu Xiaocao could reply, a group of troublesome fellows jumped into the kitchen. Yu Xiaocao felt a slight headache. If she had known that this would happen, she would have sent these people back several days before the pearl hunting competition was announced!

Just when she didn't know how to reject them, Dong Dali, Royal Prince Yang's trusted bodyguard, came over, “Miss Yu, my master is going out to the sea. He told this subordinate to ask if you're interested in coming along.”

“Interested! Of course, she's interested!!” Before Xiaocao could speak, more than a dozen mouths had answered for her. As a result, there were an extra dozen excitedly chirping and curious figures on Royal Prince Yang's big ship.

Royal Prince Yang's ship wasn't the only one going out to patrol the sea. After all, Princess Consort Duan's birthday celebration was a happy event. If something happened to these pearl divers, then it would ruin the happy occasion! Thus, Royal Prince Yang sent out a fleet of a dozen or so ships to patrol the deep sea. If they encountered someone asking for help, they would be able to assist them in a timely manner.

Zhu Junyang had originally planned to take his little lass on a romantic trip to the sea, but he hadn't expected that there would be an addition of more than a dozen giant lightbulbs on the ship, ruining his plan. Looking at the group of noisy brats, he really wanted to lift each of them by their legs and throw them into the sea!

Yu Xiaocao quietly stood at the front of the ship with a telescope in her hands, looking for Zhuang Xiaomo's boat. This kind of telescope was brought back from the west by Zhu Junyang when he was on a voyage to the western hemisphere. It was called a 'thousand miles eye'.

“How is it? Did you find him yet?” Yu Xiaolian, who was beside her, asked anxiously.

“Wait a moment, there are so many pearl hunting boats out today, so how can I find him so quickly...wait, I think I found that fellow Zhuang Xiaomo. Why don't you take a look and see if it's him?” Yu Xiaocao handed the telescope to Xiaolian and pointed towards a direction.

Xiaolian looked around carefully and finally saw Zhuang Xiaomo's figure. However, at this time, Zhuang Xiaomo's pearl hunting boat didn't seem to be in a good situation. They had encountered a relatively large whirlpool, and if they weren't careful, there was the danger of them dying along with the wrecked boat.

But, of course, this little problem wasn't difficult for him. Zhuang Xiaomo directed the people on the boat to throw the straw mats into the whirlpool. When the whirlpool was blocked by the straw mats and slowed down, Zhuang Xiaomo slowly steered the pearl hunting boat through.

“Ruizhi, let's sail that way, but don't get too close. It's fine as long as you can observe the situation with the telescope!” Yu Xiaocao felt that Xiaolian would only be at ease if Zhuang Xiaomo was within their line of sight.

Seeing that the lass was focused on another person, Zhu Junyang was unhappy, “Humph! It turns out that you had an ulterior motive when you agreed so readily ah! It seems like you completely disregarded this prince's sincere heart.”

This guy was jealous again. Yu Xiaocao quickly pacified him, “Aren't I doing this for my older sister? If I let her brood on it at home, then I don't know what would happen! You ah, why are you getting jealous over everyone?”

For the sake of his future sister-in-law's matter, he tolerated it! Zhu Junyang knew that she had extraordinary diving skills. He pointed to the cabin and asked, “You're not going to experience such an interesting activity like pearl hunting?”

Yu Xiaocao touched her own ears and had to admit that Zhu Junyang knew her quite well. She had secretly brought her diving suit with her, but she hadn't expected him to find out.

“Actually, I just want to try my luck. After all, we're strangers to pearl hunting and have no experience at all.” Yu Xiaocao smiled awkwardly.

Zhu Junyang tapped her little head and said with a smile, "Go, this prince will swim around with you. Where's your little dolphin friend? Is it still around?"

"Yes, Xiaobu gave birth to a baby dolphin that looks exactly like her. It's so cute! I'll go down to change first. I'll call it over later and show you!" Yu Xiaocao excused herself with the excited bunch on the ship, and then went down to the cabin to change into her diving suit.

Zhu Junyang also changed into his own tailor-made diving suit. Xiaocao was stunned to see his bulging muscles under the tight-fitting suit, his strong and slender thighs, and his thin waist that didn't have any extra fat. This guy had a really good figure!

Zhu Junyang couldn't help but feel proud when he saw the little lass's admiring eyes. Looking at the lass's tight-fitting diving suit, he couldn't help frowning slightly. The little lass had begun to develop in the past two years. Although she was far from having a voluminous figure, the curves of her figure had become apparent after all. In addition, with her slender waist, the diving suit perfectly outlined her fine figure. No way, this was a benefit only for him! He couldn't let others see it! Zhu Junyang covered the young girl's body with his outer jacket and told her to take it off when she got into the water.

Yu Xiaocao looked at the expensive fabric of the clothing and curled up her lips. Since the owner of the clothes didn't mind, she had nothing to worry about. However, the clothes would definitely be ruined after being soaked in the sea. This guy seriously didn't know how to be frugal!

From the side of the ship, Yu Xiaocao jumped into the sea with a perfect diving posture. The noble young masters and maidens all watched in admiration. After Zhu Junyang entered the water, he swam to Xiaocao's side, and the two, like a pair of attached fish, swam far away in the sea. Of course, Xiaocao, intentionally or unintentionally, swam towards the direction of Zhuang Xiaomo's pearl hunting boat.

The pearl hunting competition was quite long, lasting twenty days. For the pearl hunters, the first few days were used to explore the area that the pearl oysters lived in, which they called pearl bed. However, this step could be omitted for Zhuang Xiaomo, a native who was familiar with the nearby seas.

When he arrived at the sea area that he had already looked into, the two groups, which they had divided into, on the boat began to work. He was a good swimmer and diver, so he was responsible for diving into the sea to gather pearl oysters. Older Brother Jiang and others were responsible for sailing the boat and reinforcement.

Zhuang Xiaomo, who had put on a sharkskin diving suit, tied a long rope around his waist. He held a sharply polished pearl picking knife in one hand and a bamboo basket in the other. He took a deep breath, and then dived to the bottom of the sea while holding his breath. In the sea, he must open his eyes to find pearl oysters.

The area that he chose was quite good. He had found the pearl oysters shortly after diving into the sea. He swam to a palm-sized pearl oyster and put it into the basket. In this way, he picked up several oysters of similar size, but he wasn't satisfied with any of them.

Suddenly, he discovered a pearl oyster among the reefs, which was about the size of a plate. Based on his experience, there was a high chance that there would be pearls in this pearl oyster. With a push of his legs, he swam towards the reefs. A long and slender shadow came in front of him rapidly, so he instinctively waved his pearl picking knife. The dark shadow, which was cut into two pieces, turned out to be a kelp. It was a false alarm.

He approached the pearl oyster. When he used his hand to pick up the pearl oyster, he found that the oyster was attached to the reef with extremely strong byssus threads. He pulled it several times, but still wasn't able to get it off. He used the pearl picking knife to cut off the byssus, and then placed the oyster into his basket. The air in his lungs was almost exhausted, so Zhuang Xiaomo pulled on the rope around his waist. Older Brother Jiang and the other men were keeping an eye on the rope, so when they received the signal to pull him up, they quickly pulled the rope and lifted him out of the water. Zhuang Xiaomo took in deep breaths of fresh air and smiled at Older Brother Jiang, who took over the basket of pearl oysters. He poured the pearl oysters into a jar filled with sea water to temporarily raise them.

“How are you feeling? Do you need to rest for a while?” Jiang Sanshan asked with concern. Zhuang Xiaomo shook his head. He took a deep breath and jumped into the sea again, disappearing in an instant.

Things were going relatively smoothly. The life of a real pearl diver might not always be so smooth. Sometimes the reinforcement on the boat might not receive the pearl diver's signal to pull him up, but see blood gradually appearing on the surface of the sea instead. This meant that the pearl diver had probably encountered danger. It was likely that he had been attacked by a shark.

At this time, when they pulled the pearl diver up in a hurry, his limbs would probably be broken and there would be numerous wounds on his body. He would probably be badly mutilated. Even if he narrowly escaped death, he would become a disabled man. Sometimes, it was just the broken limbs of the pearl diver that was pulled up, which was a terrible sight to see.

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Now that people wore swimsuits, it was better. In the past, pearl divers usually swam in the ocean pretty much naked. If they were bitten by a venomous sea snake and couldn't be rescued in time, they often lost their lives. Venomous jellyfish often floated in the seas as well. If a diver got injured by their tentacles, there weren't any good medications to be had to treat their injuries. The wound would then fester and rot and cause extreme pain to the victim. Those who were unlucky and had more severe wounds could also die.

In addition, the pearl divers who were in the water needed to have good cooperation with the people remaining on the boat. That way, as soon as they shook the rope tethering them to the boat, the people aboard would respond. If the people on the boat were too slow to react, the divers may end up dead in the water from suffocation.

These weren't the only dangers that the divers had to look out for. Sometimes, the people on the boat would reel in the rope and find it severed without a person on the end. This usually meant that the pearl diver had already been swept away by the underwater currents or perhaps had disappeared into an underwater whirlpool...

It was no wonder that Yu Xiaolian was so worried that Zhuang Xiaomo had insisted on participating in this pearl diving competition!

As of now, Zhuang Xiaomo's luck wasn't too bad. He had dove down and come back up multiple times, picking up quite a few nice-looking pearl oysters in the process. At lunchtime, he had pretty much gathered all of the pearl oysters in this 'pearl pond'. In the afternoon, his group went to a different location and they also had a decent small haul in the end.

When they went back to shore, the vast majority of pearl diving boats came back completely empty. Many of the pearl divers from other areas who had come to participate didn't even finish exploring the waters while Zhuang Xiaomo and his group had already gotten to the step of opening up their pearl oysters.

The pearls obtained from the pearl oysters could either be taken home to be submitted later or given right there for the competition. Zhu Junyang wasn't afraid that anyone might try to commit fraud. As long as the competition was able to produce superior grade pearls, he didn't care about the cash reward or tiny official position.

When it was time to open up the pearl oysters, Yu Xiaocao and her cohort of friends all gathered around until Zhuang Xiaomo and his group were surrounded by three layers of people. The probability of finding a pearl in a wild pearl oyster was about the same odds of winning a large raffle. The first few that were opened were all empty. Thus, those young ladies and young masters from the capital started off very excited and then ended up leaving in disappointment with their lips curled.

Yu Xiaocao, on the other hand, continued to squat next to the pile of pearl oysters and casually ran her hand through them. Yu Wanqing took a small stool and sat next to her as she watched Zhuang Xiaomo continuously open the oysters and be disappointed by them. This 'little fangirl' of Yu Xiaocao's anxiously said, "Older Brother Xiaomo, you should have Older Sister Xiaocao open a few and see. Her luck has always been very good!"

This young maiden also began to call Zhuang Xiaomo as "Older Brother Xiaomo" after following Xiaolian's and Xiaocao's examples. She didn't have the least bit of airs or arrogance of a young miss from the capital. In fact, she seemed to admire Zhuang Xiaomo's pearl diving abilities quite a bit.

Yu Xiaocao was startled by her unexpected suggestion and blanked out for a bit before she replied in good humor, "What does this have to do with luck? Do you think I'd be able to magically make an oyster have a pearl if I opened one versus another person?"

Yu Wanqing remarked in a righteous manner, "I'm sure there must be some pearls in this pile of oysters. Other people may not be selecting the right ones, but Older Sister Yu's luck has always been good. I'm sure the one that you pick will have a pearl in it!"

At this time, the little divine stone had come out of hibernation and used its powers to scan the pile of pearl oysters. It remarked in a voice with a hint of disdain, [This fellow surnamed Zhuang is pretty unlucky. He picked up a bunch of trash and there are only a few oysters here that have an inkling of spiritual energy.]

In the eyes of those who cultivated, jewels and pearls were considered treasures of the earth and sky. Consequently, they could feel a bit of energy coming off of these precious items. The more energy they felt, the larger the item was, and the more valuable it was.

In a corner that was out of sight of everyone else, the little divine stone materialized into its glimmering golden kitten form that was no larger than the palm of a person's hand. It sauntered over to Xiaocao in an arrogant and graceful manner. Yu Xiaocao picked it up and held it as she searched through the pearl

oysters. Following the little divine stone's prompts, she reached her hand out to a small and wretched looking pearl oyster under the expectant and ridiculing gazes of the others.

Yu Wanqing became anxious for her, "Older Sister Yu, you should pick the largest one! Aren't the older pearl oysters more likely to produce pearls? The one you picked is so small. Even if it had a pearl in it, it wouldn't be very big."

Xiaocao also didn't quite understand the choice, so she could sympathize with Yu Wanqing's feelings. However, the little divine stone was very adamant that this pearl oyster was emitting the strongest aura of energy. She had never doubted the little divine stone's judgements.

She threw the oyster to Zhuang Xiaomo, hinting that he should open it. Everyone saw that she looked calm and confident and immediately transferred their excited gazes over to Zhuang Xiaomo and the oyster in his hand.

The pearl oyster was very quickly pried open and it revealed a shimmering pearl, about the size of the joint on the pinky finger, conspicuously cradled in the middle. Under the fading light of the evening, it glittered gently and emitted a small glow.

"Wow! There really is a pearl! Xiaocao, you're too awesome. You just casually picked up a pearl oyster but it had a pearl inside!! How did you do it?" He Wanning rushed over and clasped the oyster that had just been opened, inspecting the round and beautiful pearl inside. Apparently pearls could be found in these tiny and ugly pearl oysters!

She had asked the question that everyone else had thought. Under the shining gazes of the others, Yu Xiaocao hesitated for a long time before she finally said, "It's nothing, just my intuition that's all!"

"Psht! Xiaocao, you're really so boring!!" Most people were unsatisfied with that explanation.

Yu Xiaocao opened her hands and said, "Alright ah! In my recesses of my mind, there seemed to be someone guiding me and allowed me to spot this unassuming-looking oyster out of the giant pile. My hand unconsciously stretched forward to that pearl oyster and the voice within my head repeatedly told me, 'this one has a pearl, this one has a pearl...'"

“Tsk tsk! You should change your career to become a storyteller!” A few of the young men in the group had evident disdainful expressions. The young maidens in the group were stifling their giggles. Obviously, no one believed a single word she had just said. Yu Xiaocao merely shrugged. She wasn't lying; the little divine stone did truly tell her mind-to-mind which oyster had a pearl in it. No one was willing to believe the truth anymore!

The little divine stone roasted her, [It's because you made the truth sound too fake so of course no one would believe you!]

In a pique of temper, Yu Xiaocao opened up six oysters in a row, and all of them contained pearls that were neither too big nor small. Then, under the stunned looks of everyone in the area, she flounced away. The remaining dozen or so pearl oysters didn't have a single pearl in them. Everyone all thought that they were dreaming. Was Xiaocao's intuition really that spot on that she didn't miss a single one?

“Quickly tell me! Are you a little immortal girl who has descended down to earth?” He Wanning gazed at Xiaocao with a different look in her eye as she scuttled over. She asked in a lowered tone as if she was afraid other people would overhear her.

Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes at the other girl and patiently said, “Older Sister He, have you read too many fairy tales ah? An immortal girl descending to earth? I can also turn ordinary rocks into gold at the touch of a hand! Dongshan Village is next to a giant mountain and borders the ocean. Why don't you suspect me for being a mountain spirit disguised as a human? Or the daughter of the Dragon King coming up to shore to play?”

She didn't say this very loudly but Yu Wanqing and the others heard her. The young men in the crowd all suppressed their smiles while the young maidens giggled and began to tease He Wanning for having an overactive imagination.

Yu Wanqing, on the other hand, blinked her large eyes and solemnly nodded her head, “It's entirely possible ah! Older Sister Xiaocao is very good at swimming and is able to hold her breath for a very long time underwater. She was also able to become friends with the little dolphin. Older Sister Yu, I think in your past life you were probably the daughter of the Dragon King ah!”

Yu Xiaocao laughed in disbelief and pinched the other young maiden's cheek as she chuckled, “If you say so then! Who knows what happened in my past life! Perhaps, my Younger Sister Wanqing was a very beautiful little immortal girl in her past life and the Jade Emperor's daughter was extremely jealous of your looks. Thus, in this life, she spitefully made pimples and lesions grow all over the face so you would

be lonely for more than a decade. Only after you encountered me, the reincarnation of the Dragon King's daughter, were you able to lift the curse on you and become rebirthed!"

"That's right ah! It's very possible that this is true! Older Sister Yu, do you have any memories from your past life? What does the palace of the Dragon King look like?" Yu Wanqing was a pure and naive young maiden and had unexpectedly believed her story. It made the other older maidens in the group not know what to do.

For the next few days, Zhuang Xiaomo had a haul every day. However, the pearls that he obtained never surpassed the pearl that was the size of the pinky finger joint that he obtained that first day. However, he wasn't downhearted by this. He went out early and returned late every day to continue his quest to find pearls.

More and more pearl divers from outside areas came over. Although they came a bit late, they still had more than a dozen days left until the competition ended. Diving for pearls relied on two things: skill and luck. As long as they had the opportunity to participate, it was possible that they might hit the jackpot!

The pearl diving competition continued. Although there were a few dangerous situations that occurred in the middle, the experienced pearl divers all managed to weather it with ease.

Although the competition hadn't finished yet, the families of the noble young maidens and masters had already written several letters over urging them to come home. It was especially true for Yu Wanqing as she was the youngest out of all of them. Although her eldest brother had come along, Lady Yu still wasn't relieved with her gone so long and sent people over several times to urge them to come home.

The young maidens, who had wanted to extend their stay until the competition was over, had been gently reminded several times by servants sent over that they should go home. They really had no excuse to not go home now after all this time. Although they didn't want to leave, they still reluctantly turned to take the journey back home. The two Ning Family brothers also had to go back because of the same reason.

When Xiaocao saw them off, He Wanning and Ning Donghuan repeatedly reminded her to write letters to them once the competition was over. They wanted to know the outcome.

After the dozen or so people left, Dongshan Village finally quieted down again. Ever since the young masters and ladies from the capital had visited here, the villagers were all very careful whenever they spoke as they were afraid that they might inadvertently offend one of these people with their words or actions. In the hearts of the common people, the children of high-ranking officials and nobles were all arrogant and hard to get along with.

Every time the raucous group of people entered and left Dongshan Village, the villagers only dared to stand far away and watch them. Even Yu Xiaocao's good childhood friends in the village very rarely came by to visit her. Her friend, Zhou Shanhu, who was the most carefree out of all of them, did go visit Xiaocao's residence a few times. Although she didn't converse much with these noble maidens, she thought that they weren't as difficult or temperamental as the other villagers said they were.

Peace came back to Dongshan Village after the bright and raucous group of high-spirited young nobles had left. Other than a few villagers occasionally bringing them up to discuss their confident and unrestrained ways, they were like a cool breeze. After they blew over, there was no other news.

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Yu Xiaocao, who didn't have to corral a bunch of people anymore, finally could watch the competition with her full attention. There were only about a dozen or so short days left in the pearl diving competition. Zhuang Xiaomo was no longer able to stay calm in the face of his poor hauls. Nowadays, he seemed to have a perpetual look of worry on his face. For the past few days, Yu Xiaocao could see that Zhuang Xiaomo seemed to be taking this competition quite seriously and it was probably related to Xiaolian. The reason she thought so was because he often seemed to glance at Xiaolian with a lonely look in his eyes and then sink into deep contemplation afterwards. Yu Xiaocao decided to secretly lend Zhuang Xiaomo a helping hand.

Because there were more pearl divers in the area, it was hard to find and occupy a good spot in the waters now. Thus, Zhuang Xiaomo's pearl diving boat went out further and further into the deep ocean. With the help of Xiaobu, Yu Xiaocao also followed them every day from afar. In a way, this was her way of keeping an eye out for him. Although Zhu Junyang had already done a lot to make this pearl diving competition safer, there was always the possibility of something out of the ordinary happening. She didn't want something to happen to Zhuang Xiaomo and end up leaving a shadow in Xiaolian's heart.

Other than protecting Zhuang Xiaomo's pearl diving boat from afar, Yu Xiaocao had managed to gather many good quality pearls under the guidance of the little divine stone. The vast majority of them were larger than the first segment of a person's thumb. Although they couldn't be considered superior grade pearls, they were still considered above average quality. She was planning on using these pearls to make her mother a pearl necklace. As for the remaining pearls, she was thinking of embedding them into hair jewelry and hoped to get enough to make a full set of head ornaments. Her mother had always been frugal and even now couldn't bear to spend the money to get a presentable set of hair ornaments.

As it got closer and closer to the last day of the competition, Yu Xiaocao continued to increase her collection of gathered pearls. In fact, in her collection, she had managed to get some pink and deep purple pearls! Every pearl she had gathered was worth quite a bit and she didn't even need to bring pearl oysters up to shore to get them. That way, none of the pearl oysters she got the pearls from had to needlessly die to give up their contents.

The seafloor was the home of pearl oysters. The vast majority of pearl oysters in the deep waters of the ocean usually were opened, lazily 'sunning' their tender inner flesh. Thus, it was easy to see in a glance whether or not they had any pearls in them. However, these creatures were quite sensitive and would immediately close if they sensed any movement in the nearby waters to protect themselves.

However, didn't Yu Xiaocao have the little divine stone as her cheat item on hand? Even if the pearl oysters shut themselves tightly, she was easily able to use a drop of mystic-stone water to bait them into enthusiastically opening and welcoming this 'guest who offered presents'. Using a drop of mystic-stone to exchange for a pretty good quality pearl was a business transaction that was satisfactory to both participants.

During the competition, Zhuang Xiaomo had a pretty smooth time. Although he didn't get any pearls that he was hoping for so far, he hadn't encountered any dangerous situations that he couldn't resolve. The most thrilling time was when he had a brief encounter with a group of sharks. Luckily, those sharks hadn't sensed him. Otherwise, it was likely that Older Brother Jiang would end up pulling up a savaged body later on.

In actuality, what had actually happened was that Yu Xiaocao had lured away that school of sharks using mystic-stone water. Sharks were animals that had a keen sense of smell. If only one lone shark had missed Zhuang Xiaomo that could easily be believed. However, if a whole school of large sharks had missed him, it would only be possible if they were all blind and had lost their sense of smell. Compared to the lure of the mystic-stone water, Zhuang Xiaomo was a much less interesting target for those sharks.

As for Zhuang Xiaomo, who didn't know what had actually happened, he thought that he was incredibly lucky and rejoiced for a long time. However, there were many dangers in the sea that the pearl divers had to look for. There were underwater whirlpools, dangerous currents, sea snakes, jellyfish, and fierce sharks. In addition, some giant pearl oysters could also end up becoming the downfall for a pearl diver.

On the final day of the pearl diving competition, Zhuang Xiaomo had almost lost his life because of a particular pearl oyster.

Zhuang Xiaomo had managed to find a very good stretch of pearl oysters on the last day. After taking a few round trips to and fro, he had managed to get a decent haul. Jiang Sanshan grinned during one of those interludes and said, "Our haul today is quite good. Perhaps we'll get first place in the competition from a pearl found in one of these oysters!"

His previous poor luck in finding good pearls had given a blow in his confidence. Now, Zhuang Xiaomo only thought about bringing up more pearl oysters in order to increase his chances of finding a good pearl. Thus, he continued to dive and dive again into the ocean to grab more. He didn't waste his time trying to gather the normal oysters and instead slowly swam around the reef to find the target he was looking for.

Suddenly, there was a faint sparkle of light in the dim seafloor. A shot of happiness ran through Zhuang Xiaomo. His grandfather had once said that superior grade pearls emitted their own light. Perhaps the heavens had heard his prayer and gave him the opportunity to obtain his wish?

He slowly swam in the direction of that light. In the depths of the coral reef, there was a gargantuan pearl oyster quietly resting on the seabed. Its shell opened out and a massive pearl appeared, resting inside the oyster. Zhuang Xiaomo felt his heart start to race and it felt like he had used up almost all of the air in his lungs. Although he was very reluctant to leave at the moment, he remembered the most important thing: a treasure was only worth it if you were alive to take it. He forcefully tugged on the rope around and was quickly towed back up.

When Jiang Sanshan saw that he didn't have a single pearl oyster in his basket, he was a bit puzzled. He didn't have enough time to ask what happened before Zhuang Xiaomo filled his lungs with fresh air and dove deep again. Using his above-average memory, he once again approached that giant pearl oyster.

The pearl, which was larger than a pigeon's egg, emitted an attractive light inside the oyster. It was as if a witch had set a spell on it, making a person unable to take their eyes off of it.

With his current arm strength and physique, it was obvious he'd be unable to move that pearl oyster one inch. However, he also couldn't bear to let go of the chance to get first place in the competition. Before he knew it, he was stretching his hand out to grab the huge pearl that was lying within the oyster... The pearl oyster, sensing that an intruder had come, suddenly closed its shell on Zhuang Xiaomo's arm, keeping it tightly within. Zhuang Xiaomo felt like his arm was being held down by a giant

vice. Now that he was back to his senses, he silently realized that he was not in a good situation. He struggled desperately to pull his arm out. The more he pulled, however, the tighter the oyster clamped down.

As the precious seconds passed by, he felt the air within his chest was disappearing. Zhuang Xiaomo knew that if it continued on, he would end up suffocating from lack of oxygen in the deep ocean. He did his best to pull on the rope, hoping beyond hope that the people on the boat combined with his own strength would be able to pull him and this pearl oyster up.

When Jiang Sanshan received the signal from the rope, he and three other strong and vigorous youths began to tug on the rope with all their might. In the past, the person below was very quickly drawn up to the surface. However, this time, no matter how hard the four of them pulled, it was as if the rope was rooted to the seafloor and didn't budge an inch.

"This is bad! Xiaomo was probably not careful and accidentally got stuck in a crack on the reef and can't pull his foot out. Continue to pull hard with all of your might, I'm going to dive down to take a look!" Jiang Sanshan took off his outer garment, revealing the swimsuit beneath it. He jumped over the ship with a leap. Although his diving abilities were not as comparable as Zhuang Xiaomo's, he was still considered quite good within the fishermen. He followed the rope down and very quickly approached Zhuang Xiaomo. The sight that appeared before his eyes startled him. Zhuang Xiaomo hadn't gotten his foot stuck in a crack on the reef like he thought. Instead, his arm had been thoroughly trapped by a pearl oyster that was larger than a bathtub.

He swam over and pulled on Zhuang Xiaomo's hand. The two of them used their strength to try to pull the youth's arm away from the pearl oyster. Unfortunately, no matter how hard they pulled, they were unable to free Xiaomo's wrist from the stubborn creature. Jiang Sanshan then changed his target and began to try to pry open the oyster's shell. However, the oyster's shell was like a rock door that had been tightly closed and there was no way for the man to pull it open.

Zhuang Xiaomo transferred the pearl hunting knife he used into Jiang Sanshan's hand. The man raised the knife up high and forced it down in an attempt to cut the shell open. However, the outside hull was as hard as steel. The knife only left a small white mark on the outer shell. What was to be done? The two of them were underwater with no solutions at hand.

At this time, Jiang Sanshan was unable to come up with a good idea and swam back up to get another breath of fresh air. He went back down to transfer the air in his mouth to Zhuang Xiaomo, whose face had already turned red in an effort to hold his breath. After a few roundtrips back and forth, Zhuang Xiaomo was temporarily no longer in danger of drowning in the deep sea. However, they still hadn't

resolved the biggest problem: his wrist was still trapped by the pearl oyster. The two of them tried a multitude of methods but ultimately they failed in getting rid of this 'shackle'.

“Saving one's life is the most important thing, how about...we chop this hand off?” Jiang Sanshan mimed using the knife to sever the limb but Zhuang Xiaomo vehemently shook his head in refusal.

In terms of status, he was already way behind Xiaolian. If he lost his hand as well, how would he have the face to go to the Yu Family to ask for her hand in marriage? How would he be able to give Xiaolian a happy and stable life then? Even if Xiaolian deigned to marry down, he would feel inferior and insufficient for the rest of his life...but, if he had to renounce Xiaolian and had to watch her marry another man with his own two eyes he...would rather let his life go and rest in these dark and ice-cold waters then!

Jiang Sanshan argued silently a bit with him and saw that the youth would rather die than sever his wrist. He swam up to see if there was another way. After discussing briefly with the other three fellows, he decided to go to the other ships to ask for help. He prayed that he'd be able to find more people such that they could use their strength together to pull Xiaomo and the pearl oyster back up.

However, the ocean was vast and endless. In order to find more pearl oysters, most of the pearl diving ships were far from the others. Furthermore, the patrolling government ship had just passed by not long ago. He had no idea when it would come back again! Jiang Sanshan was full of anxiety at this point and hollered out to the sea, “Help us ah! Someone, please help us!!”

Unfortunately, the only reply he got was the sound of seagulls cawing in the air as well as the sound of the sea breeze blowing around them. Jiang Sanshan and the others had all been neighbors that Zhuang Xiaomo had saved during the Wokou pirate disaster. If Zhuang Xiaomo hadn't persisted in convincing them and bringing them to the West Mountain to hide, later bringing them to the hidden Dongshan Villagers, it was entirely possible that they and their families would have the same fate as the other villagers in their old village: dying grievously under the ravages of the pirates. These lucky few families now treated each other like blood-relatives, so they naturally had a close bond with each other. Despair and sorrow settled within these men. Were the heavens so cruel to take another family member away from them now?

Splash! A small head suddenly popped up from the water and a pair of jet-black large eyes glittered as they looked at the small group, “What's wrong? What's going on? I thought I heard someone crying for help earlier!”

Like an ocean spirit, Yu Xiaocao suddenly appeared in front of Jiang Sanshan and immediately became his last grasp at hope.

“Miss Yu! Quickly, quickly! Zhuang Xiaomo has been trapped by a giant pearl oyster on the seabed. If we're any later, I don't know if he'll still be alive!!” Jiang Sanshan was a big, strapping, hulk of a man but he was now so worried that he was almost in tears.

Yu Xiaocao slightly frowned and stated, “You guys should continue asking for help in the surrounding area. I'm going to have Xiaobu bring me down to take a look! Don't fret, perhaps it's not as bad as you think it is!”

By the time Yu Xiaocao swam down, Zhuang Xiaomo, who had already given up, was unconscious from lack of air. Yu Xiaocao had the little divine stone create a bubble of air around Zhuang Xiaomo's head and then forcefully made him cough up the seawater he had inhaled. Following that, she had the little divine stone imbue him with some spiritual energy to make him breathe normally again.

Although she could use mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to also do the same, this fellow was going to be her future older brother-in-law. In this ancient and feudal society, using one's mouth to help a person breathe was too shocking and out of the norm. Since she had another method on hand, she decided to give up on the method that she wasn't that good at anyway.

Zhuang Xiaomo was breathing again but hadn't regained consciousness. Yu Xiaocao fed a drop of mystic-stone water to him and then ignored him for the more pressing matter at hand. She now gave her full attention to that gargantuan pearl oyster that was trapping the youth. Since Zhuang Xiaomo had risked his life to insert his hand in the creature, there must be a pearl of immense value and size inside!

Yu Xiaocao ended up using three drops of mystic-stone water to finally open up that crafty pearl oyster. Inside was a giant pearl. Even she felt her heart waver when she saw it. No wonder Zhuang Xiaomo would take such a risk. She retrieved the round and large pearl from the oyster and then patted the creature's shell before she swam back to Zhuang Xiaomo.

She thought for a bit and then stuffed that giant pearl into his hand and then placed a purple pearl she had just gathered into his other one. Colored pearls were quite rare and purple was an auspicious and precious color. With those two added together, he should have no problems getting first place, right? After finishing this, she pulled on the rope that tethered Zhuang Xiaomo to the boat.

“Older Brother Jiang, Older Brother Jiang!! The rope is moving again!” A young man who was a few years older than Zhuang Xiaomo had been watching the rope like a hawk this entire time. At this time, he was quite agitated from excitement.

Jiang Sanshan had been yelling for a bit and his voice was quite hoarse now. When he saw this, he hollered at the younger man, “What are you waiting for ah? Quickly pull it up!”

The four men used all of their might to pull——it moved! Pure joy flowed through Jiang Sanshan and he yelled loudly, “Faster, faster ah!! Perhaps we can still save Xiaomo!!”

They very quickly pulled the rope onto the boat and the four of them all reached out to carry Zhuang Xiaomo onto the vessel. Jiang Sanshan immediately placed a hand underneath the unconscious youth's nose and could feel him breathing. He then crouched down to listen to Xiaomo's chest and everything seemed normal.

This was quite odd. Although he had transferred some air to Zhuang Xiaomo prior to surfacing, that bit of air should have been all used up by now. Also, didn't people normally breathe in water when they became unconscious underwater? Quite a few questions circled around Jiang Sanshan's mind.

Immediately following the rescue, Yu Xiaocao had been delivered back to the surface with the help of Xiaobu. Although Jiang Sanshan had no idea how she managed to open that giant pearl oyster, he still sincerely thanked her for her help.

Yu Xiaocao waved a hand dismissively, “In actuality, I wasn't that much help. By the time I swam down, Older Brother Xiaomo was already unconscious and that giant oyster was already slowly opening itself back up. I only waited a bit. Once the oyster was completely open, I helped him to pull on the rope that's all...eh? Older Brother Xiaomo seems to have something in his hand, right?”

Jiang Sanshan and the other three people immediately turned their attention to Zhuang Xiaomo's hand. They used a bit of force to pry open his hand and were instantly stunned by what they saw——it was a giant pearl and it had to be larger than a pigeon's egg!!

Just as they were sighing over the specimen, Zhuang Xiaomo's hand twitched and he slowly woke up. Jiang Sanshan shook him emotionally and his voice trembled as he said, “Xiaomo, you're finally awake!! Look, look, you did it!! You finally got a superior grade large pearl!!”

Zhuang Xiaomo felt like his mind was in a fog and, for a moment, he had no idea where he was right now. He...wasn't dreaming ah? He didn't die? Also, wasn't the pearl in Older Brother Jiang's hands the pearl that he had seen in that giant pearl oyster that had trapped him? What happened? Did Older Brother Jiang bring someone over to save him and also bring the pearl up with them?

After Jiang Sanshan emotionally described the series of events that had just passed, Zhuang Xiaomo was even more confused. Logically, that pearl oyster would not have easily opened and allowed his hand to come out. How could it just randomly allow him to escape after just a short period of time? This...was truly out of the norm!

Eh? What did he have in his left hand? Zhuang Xiaomo discovered that there was something in his other hand and slowly opened it up. The fright on his face deepened a few fractions. A purple pearl? He only remembered that the giant pearl oyster seemed to have a big white pearl that was larger than a pigeon egg. Now, where did this purple pearl come from? Everyone else stared at the other pearl, spellbound.

“Wow! Xiaomo, you are truly too skilled. You even came across a purple pearl. Those noble and wealthy people really love purple colored items. This pearl must be worth a lot of money, right?” One of the younger men grabbed the purple pearl and carefully appreciated it. His eyes shone with a fascinated light.

Another young man nodded his head in agreement, “I heard the older generation say that many years ago, there was another pearl diver named Grandpa Lu, who was just as skilled as your grandpa, Xiaomo. He came across a purple pearl that was much smaller than this but sold it for around eight thousand taels ah. His whole family moved to the prefectural city and they bought a store to do business. They're doing quite well now. Xiaomo, you've hit the jackpot this time!”

Jiang Sanshan waited until that pearl had made a round through everyone on the boat before carefully giving it back to Zhuang Xiaomo. He suddenly thought of something and said, “Earlier, Miss Xiaocao had swam over along with her dolphin friend, Xiaobu. She was the one who dove down and discovered that the oyster had let you go and pulled the rope for you to allow us to bring you back up. Eh? How come I don't see Miss Xiaocao around anymore?”

The young man, who mentioned that Zhuang Xiaomo had hit it big, chuckled and said, “She has a dolphin bring her around, so who knows how far they've swam by now! Miss Xiaocao's swimming abilities are even better than Xiaomo's. There's no need for us to worry needlessly about her.”

“It's getting late, so let's go back to the port ah! Xiaomo, you should have your body checked out by a doctor when we're back on land to make sure you haven't harmed anything during the interlude.” Jiang Sanshan had asked for Zhuang Xiaomo's opinion before making a decision. The group of five directed their ship back home.

Zhuang Xiaomo vaguely knew within his heart that the purple pearl in his hand definitely was related to Xiaocao in some way. Since she chose such a surreptitious method to help him, it was likely she didn't want anyone else to know about her involvement. Then...he should just pretend nothing had happened, right?

Ever since he moved to Dongshan Village, Uncle and Auntie Yu treated him like he was their own biological son. From the conversations he had with Xiaolian and the other family members, he discovered that everyone in the family had an unspoken trust in Xiaocao. Furthermore, this type of trust wasn't reliant on her actions and abilities and instead seemed like a blind trust. Even if Xiaocao had somehow plucked the moon from the sky, they wouldn't seem the least bit surprised.

Furthermore, from his observations, all of Xiaocao's abilities and skills seemed to have come from nowhere. For example, the recipes for her cooking. She claimed that she had picked up an old book and learned from it. However, no one in the Yu Family had ever seen this book. Another example would be the greenhouse-grown vegetables that Xiaocao came up with. No one in the Great Ming Dynasty had ever heard of such an idea, so where did she learn how to do this? In addition, it seemed like that no matter what the Yu Family grew, they always seemed to get a higher yield than other people and their products also tasted better. Even the most ordinary cabbage that they grew was more fresh and tasty compared to the other cabbages on the market. From what the Yu Family mentioned, he knew that it seemed to have some sort of connection to Xiaocao as well. Xiaocao was like a little immortal girl who had come down to earth. No matter what sort of problem there was, she never seemed to have an issue resolving it.

Then, wasn't the reason why he was able to escape with his life today related to her? Also, there was that purple pearl...it must have been that she could tell that he desperately wanted to win, so she decided to give a rare pearl that she had found herself to him.

Sigh...originally he had thought that he could rely on his own efforts to let the Yu Family regard him better. In the end, he still had to rely on the Yu Family. In fact, his own life had been saved by a member from the Yu Family. Zhuang Xiaomo silently vowed that if he had the fortune to be able to marry Xiaolian as his wife, he would definitely treat her as a precious treasure. He absolutely wouldn't let her suffer one little bit!

Yu Xiaocao, who had no idea of the complicated thoughts that were going through Zhuang Xiaomo's mind, was currently swimming freely on the quiet ocean floor, hunting for pearls. With the little divine stone's air bubble protection plus its sensing abilities, she was able to find pearls quite easily. In fact, pearls that were smaller than the first segment of a thumb were deemed too small for her to get.

There were countless pearl oysters available that had their shells lazily opened, waiting to see if she was willing to take their treasures or not. It was as if she was perusing a glittering and fantastical jewelry shop that allowed her to carefully pick and choose what she wanted. In addition, this shop also didn't require you to pay anything.

"Are there still any more pink pearls around?" Yu Xiaocao gazed into her pouch full of pearls and greedily asked the little divine stone.

The little divine stone morphed into its kitten form and paddled its four tiny legs in the water. It looked incredibly adorable as it swam through the ocean. It rolled its eyes at its master, who was getting pickier and pickier with time, and then swam over to a large pearl oyster that was about the size of a wash basin and waved a paw at it. The pearl oyster obligingly opened and inside, hiding, was a sparkling pale pink pearl that now revealed itself to Xiaocao. The pearl seemed to float up, as if it was being towed by an invisible hand, and headed towards Xiaocao.

"Little Glutinous Dumpling, that's a great one! I still need two more and I'll have enough to make a bracelet. Then, Xiaolian and I will both have one. These types of pink pearls are the best color for young maidens our age." Yu Xiaocao moved the pearl next to her arm to show off how good it looked against her skin. The pale pink color of the jewel contrasted beautifully with the color of her skin.

The two of them, along with the dolphin, continued to swim leisurely through the water, going deeper into the ocean to search for more pearls. As they swam, Xiaocao suddenly hit a transparent glass-like barrier and bounced off.

"What is this?" Yu Xiaocao squinted her eyes to look at the water in front of her. She couldn't see anything. She carefully stretched out a hand to feel the space in front of her and found out that there truly was a transparent material there that didn't allow her to pass through.

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The little divine stone had found another black pearl and delivered it up to its master using a small kitten's paw. When it saw that her attention was taken up by the barrier and was full of curiosity, it reminded her, "It looks like we've arrived at the barrier of the Dragon King's Palace."

“Barrier? Isn't that a term that only appears in the stories about gods and heroes?” Yu Xiaocao took the black pearl in passing and stuffed it into her bulging pouch as she asked in an astonished manner.

“Then do you think that I, this divine stone, should only appear in the stories about legends and not appear before you ah?” The little divine stone rolled its eyes at her so hard that its eyes almost rolled out of its head.

Yu Xiaocao scratched the back of her head and chuckled sheepishly, “What you say makes sense! Also, me transmigrating over to here is also something that science cannot explain.”

“Science? Pffftt—” The little divine stone snorted disdainfully. Science was only something that those bored human mortals came up with in order to describe the world around them in a flawed manner. What atheism, it was all such bull...fart, ahem ahem! Alright, it didn't really matter what the humans believed. None of it had any impact on it. It needed to keep its mouth shut in order to avoid getting censored. Hold one's tongue, hold one's tongue!

In the little divine stone's eyes, every independent realm, that is, what the novels described as separate dimensions, had three layers to it that housed different beings. This particular realm was truly too lowly and it must have been created by the Goddess of Spirits on a whim in her early days. The human world had very little spiritual energy so there were very few people who could cultivate here. From the last time it visited the God of Thunder and Goddess of Lightning here, the so-called upper layer here, if compared to the realm that it originally lived in, could only be considered a small place full of small fry.

The little divine stone used its tiny claw to gently push at the barrier and discovered that with its current level of spiritual energy, it was very easy for it to open. This barrier was truly quite trash!

“I, this divine stone, am able to send you through the barrier. Do you have any interest in exploring around the palace of the Dragon King?” The little divine stone's golden eyes glanced at Xiaocao as it asked arrogantly.

Explore around the palace of the Dragon King? Yu Xiaocao shrunk back and refused without even thinking about it. One must forgive her for being gutless. After all, she was currently on her second chance of life and didn't want to lose it for a moment of curiosity. She was quite satisfied with her current state of life now!

The only thing she knew about the Dragon King came from stories like 'Nezha Conquers the Dragon King' and 'Journey to the West'. Who knew what kind of tempers the dragon king, his daughters, sons, and grandchildren had? In fact, when she first arrived at the capital, she had been rejected and isolated by all of the noble young maidens. How could the realm of the dragon king be any different? It was possible she might even die without knowing what had happened to her!

The little divine stone snorted disdainfully when it saw how cowardly and cautious she was. However, it did have to admit that with its current powers, it was able to do whatever it wanted in the mortal realm but it may not be able to protect Xiaocao completely in a more godly realm. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing that it had a cowardly master to follow.

“Eh? Who are you guys? How come I've never seen you guys before?” Suddenly, before Xiaocao's eyes, an adorable little face appeared in the ocean waters. The creature had large, doe-like eyes, a pointy chin, long violet hair, and two little horns at the top of its head—the horns resembled a young deer's antlers that had just sprouted.

Yu Xiaocao looked at this young maiden with horns on her head and saw that her large eyes were filled with curiosity and good will. Xiaocao revealed a brilliant smile and replied, “I am...a pearl diving girl and I'm swimming in the ocean to gather pearls!” As she talked, she showed the other girl her pouch full of pearls.

“Pearl diving girl? Ah! Then aren't you a mortal from the human world?” The young maiden looked quite excited and went forward to get closer but ended up getting repelled by the barrier.

“Just what is going on here?” The smile on Yu Xiaocao's face didn't waver one iota but she was inwardly quite furious at the little divine stone. This girl's sudden appearance absolutely had to do something with the stone.

The little divine stone laughed sheepishly, [Earlier, when this divine stone opened up the barrier, you didn't want to go in so I had to seal it again. Perhaps the method I used to seal it is different from the methods used in that world, so...this is why something like this has happened.]

Yu Xiaocao frowned and silently asked the stone, “Are you sure the barrier you put up works ah? What if the fish and shrimp that have reached a higher state in the Dragon King's world secretly come over and

cause problems for humans here? Wouldn't I become the criminal who has harmed all of the people here?"

The little divine stone's voice was filled with displeasure as it replied, [You actually dare to doubt this divine stone's abilities! Let me tell you ah, even if the old barrier between the worlds gets broken, this divine stone's barrier won't!]

"Eh? Is this the legendary kitten? Kittens can swim in the water ah? Its fur is golden and shining and it's so small. How adorable ah!" The young maiden with horns saw a tiny golden kitten using its paw to knock on the barrier between their worlds in a quite furious manner. The glowing excitement in her eyes deepened perceptibly.

"Pearl diver girl, can you tell me some stories from the human world ah? Ever since my third older brother secretly came out and was murdered by a human named Nezha, my royal father reinforced the barrier between our worlds. Us siblings, who were born later, are all not allowed to secretly go into the human world to play like our older brothers and sisters did. I really want to know what the human world is like." The young maiden's eyes were filled with longing and it was hard for anyone to refuse her request.

Yu Xiaocao would have never expected that her transmigration story, which led her to become a farming expert, would suddenly morph into a fantasy. If she wasn't wrong about her guess, she was pretty sure that this young girl was the youngest daughter of the Dragon King. Was it also boring to spend one's entire life in the ocean ah?

Thus, she kindly described a few defining features of what the world was like onshore and also told the other girl a few interesting stories. Although it was all ordinary things she talked about, the young maiden seemed absolutely fascinated and repeatedly sighed, "The ways humans live their lives are too interesting. If I could break the barrier between the worlds and visit the human world to look, that would be too good! Older Sister Xiaocao, I really want to give you some pearls and let you win the pearl diving competition. However, this stupid barrier..."

[Not a problem, give them to me!] As soon as she finished speaking, a golden cat paw stretched out in front of her. A beautiful pouch that was embroidered with orchids on it dangled from the paw.

The young dragon maiden's eyes opened wide in shock and she asked in surprise, "How come it can go through? Older Sister Xiaocao, can you also go over? Come over and play with me ah. I'm the youngest in the family and they all have their own things to do and don't play with me..."

“If someone like you who has magical powers can't come through, how can I, a mere mortal, go through?” Yu Xiaocao stretched out her hand and let it bounce off the barrier. She shrugged and revealed a helpless expression on her face.

The little dragon maiden was so unhappy that she started to pout and drooped her head down. Even the little horns on her head seemed to be less luminous and lively compared to before. Suddenly, she reached out a hand and held tightly onto the little divine stone's claw and a rascally smile appeared on her face, “Older Sister Xiaocao, how about you leave your cat behind to accompany me? That should work, right?”

However, the smile on her face soon congealed. Apparently, other than that golden kitten's paw, the rest of it couldn't go through the barrier. She didn't dare to use all of her strength as she was afraid she'd hurt the little cat, so she could only helplessly let the little paw go.

The little dragon maiden used all of her strength to hit the barrier and then used all of her magic power to hit the barrier in the vicinity of the little divine stone's paw. However, it was no use. The barrier stayed strong and continued to stay an impenetrable wall between the two of them.

In the end, the young dragon girl let her head hang down dispiritedly and took out a pouch made of an unknown material. She placed it near the barrier and said to Xiaocao, “This pouch probably has twenty to thirty pearls. I don't know for sure since I never bothered to count them. Usually, when I'm bored, I use them like marbles to play. Go take them to your pearl competition, okay? I don't know whether I'll be able to see you in the future...”

“In a few days, I'll be going back to the capital, so...you need to cultivate hard. Once you're strong enough to travel across worlds, I'll gladly welcome you in the capital! It's getting late now. If I don't go home now, my family will worry about me!” Yu Xiaocao saw that the little divine stone's paw had already come back with that multicolored gorgeous pouch. Thus, she reluctantly said her farewells to the young dragon maiden.

When she turned around to glance at the little dragon maiden, who looked like a pathetic little dog who had been thrown away by its owner, Yu Xiaocao hardened her heart and waved a hand at her. They had only met each other for a short moment and had become friends, but she didn't know if she would ever see her again. Then, she turned and lay on Xiaobu and swiftly swam back towards shore.

Xiaocao's casual polite remark had become a promise in the naive and pure dragon maiden's eyes. She originally had a cultivating talent that was only seen once every ten thousand years for the dragon race. However, she loved to play and was lackadaisical about training. She spent a lot of time fishing and sunning. Despite that, her cultivation speed still wasn't slow.

Ever since she made a 'date' with Older Sister Xiaocao, the young dragon maiden suddenly became serious about practicing cultivation. She worked hard every day and spent time in closed-door cultivation to get more powerful. By the time she reached a state that other people envied and was able to travel between worlds, she impatiently left the ocean and arrived at the capital.

She excitedly asked after Yu Xiaocao's whereabouts and had finally been led into the prince's residence. There, she saw Older Sister Xiaocao, who was now over a hundred years old and had wrinkles all over her face. The young dragon maiden could still vaguely see that sweet and adorable little maiden in the wrinkled and aged face in front of her.

As for Yu Xiaocao, who was on her deathbed, she had never expected that one casual remark from her would cause this adorable and naive young dragon maiden to assiduously train for a hundred years. She also didn't expect that right before she died, she would be able to be reunited with that friend who she had a brief encounter with but would never forget. The young dragon maiden took out the embroidered orchid pouch that had already faded with time and been roughened up. Yu Xiaocao also trembled as she took out the colored pouch that was made with an unknown material and placed it into the dragon maiden's hand.

The young dragon maiden was still as cute and sweet-looking as she was when she first encountered her. However, Xiaocao had already reached the end of her life. Gods and humans truly had a difference in lifespans. However, she didn't envy the immortals and didn't regret transmigrating over because, in this life, she had parents and siblings who loved her and a husband who doted on her like a loyal dog. She also had filial and obedient descendents.

She was most grateful for that little divine stone, who had sent her over and also helped her for her entire life. Without it, she wouldn't have been able to live her legendary life...

After clasping her hand with the young dragon maiden, Xiaocao slowly closed her eyes and let go. Her descendents, who were all kneeling around her bed, began to weep. Suddenly, a golden light came out of her deceased body and shot out. Under the amazed looks of everyone there, it circled a few times in the room and then escaped into the sky, never to be seen.

Naturally, all of this occurred around a hundred years later. Since meeting the young dragon maiden caused Xiaocao to tarry, she was currently being scolded roundly by her family and Royal Prince Yang for staying out for so long.

“You said that you were having so much fun with the little dolphin that you forgot the time? You're not a child anymore but you don't know to come home when it gets dark. Do you know just how worried we all were when we didn't see you come back this late? Do you know that if you didn't come back now, this prince would have sent out ships to patrol and search for you tonight?!”

It wasn't surprising that Zhu Junyang was angry. This was the final day of the pearl diving competition. Since he needed to judge the results, by the time he got back to Dongshan Village, it was already completely dark. When he found out that Xiaocao hadn't gone back then, how could he not be worried?

In addition, Zhuang Xiaomo, who had won first place in the competition, told him that when he had gone back to shore, Xiaocao had still been in the ocean playing around with her dolphin friend. At that time, it was already sunset. The sea at night looked tranquil but there were a lot of hidden waves and currents.

When the whole family heard this, they almost became crazy from anxiety. Although Xiaocao's swimming abilities were quite good, it wasn't as if she was idly frolicking in the pool at 'Blossoming Beauty' or the pond behind their home. Instead, she was playing in the dangerous ocean. No matter how smart the little dolphin was, if they encountered any sharks or other fierce beasts, it would be hard pressed to save itself let alone protect Xiaocao.

As the moon rose higher and higher and the stars illuminated the dark blue sky, there was still no word of Yu Xiaocao. Madam Liu and Xiaolian both started to weep from worry and Yu Hai and Yu Hang had already changed into swimsuits. They were planning on going to the areas that Xiaocao usually liked to play in to find her. Zhu Junyang had Bodyguard Dong bring over his horse in preparation to go docks to get the fleet put under his command. Even if he had to search the entire night, he needed to find either the live person or a dead body...

The whole family was about to go crazy when Xiaocao, holding her little golden kitten, suddenly appeared before them. When they asked, they found out that she had been having too much fun playing around and forgot the time!

“Yu Xiaocao, from what this prince knows about you, you're not that type of person. Are you not telling the whole truth about what happened to delay you until now?” Zhu Junyang deeply inhaled a breath in an effort to calm himself down and not let his temper spill over.

Yu Xiaocao also knew that no one would believe this weak excuse of hers. However, if she told the truth and said that she had been distracted by the Dragon King's youngest daughter and had been telling her about the mundane world, who would believe that? In any case, if someone told her that story earlier in the day, she would have slapped them silly for telling such a foolish story—just how stupid did they think the other person was?

“Zhu Junyang saw that she refused to tell the truth and was even curling her lip. He couldn't help but grab onto her shoulder and shake her a few times, “Just what is it? Just what are you hiding that you can't tell us? The people here are the ones closest to you. Why can't you believe in us?”

Her refusal to tell the truth made Zhu Junyang unable to stop himself from thinking more. A young maiden, coming back very late, who refused to tell the truth of what happened...was it possible that Xiaocao encountered a bad person and was...harmd, so that she...

When he got to that thought, Zhu Junyang felt his whole body shudder. He had been protecting his little treasure and keeping her safe as she slowly grew up, making sure to never go too far. However...however...an aura of fury exploded from his body and everyone in the room couldn't help but take a few steps back.

“Zhu Junyang! Zhu Ruizhi!!! Wake up, wake up!!” Yu Xiaocao instantly could tell that something was wrong and she pulled on Zhu Junyang's hand while patting his face gently with her other hand. She had personally watched as the Wu Family's 'demolition' had happened and she didn't want her family's residence, which had only been recently built in the past few years, to also be destroyed by his 'presence'.

The soft and icy cold hand on his face returned a bit of reason back to him. He forcefully clenched his hands into two fists and didn't even feel his nails digging into his flesh. He felt like he needed to be considerate of the little girl's frail and tender feelings and lowered his voice to say, “No worries, no matter what happened, this prince will make sure to stay by your side. Don't be afraid, I'm here! I will absolutely make sure to rip the person who hurt you into ten thousand pieces!”

“What are you talking about?” Yu Xiaocao, who had been tightly embraced by him, didn't know whether she should cry or laugh as she used a hand to pat his back, hinting that he should let her go. This fellow's

imagination was a bit too strong, right? He actually thought that she had been...however, didn't the ancient people take chastity and celibacy quite seriously ah? Even though Zhu Junyang thought something of that magnitude had happened to her, he still tried to comfort her through his anger. This truly showed just what a treasure he was.

“Zhu Junyang, I am seriously telling you that I am perfectly fine! When I left Older Brother Xiaomo's boat, I truly spent the rest of the time in the ocean and didn't come ashore!” Yu Xiaocao looked directly into his eyes and stated the facts solemnly.

Zhu Junyang gripped Xiaocao's wrist to feel her pulse. Her calm and steady heartbeat told him that she wasn't lying. The pressure that had been choking his heart seemed to disappear and it felt like a ten thousand catty stone had fallen down. However, if that was the case, then what was she doing this whole time in the ocean? Why didn't she come back before it got so dark?

Yu Hai noticed that his youngest daughter had been looking into Royal Prince Yang's eyes for a bit of time and hurriedly cleared his throat, “Royal Prince Yang, Cao'er is still half a child, so it's quite normal for her to want to play as much as she can. In a bit, her mother and I will definitely scold her properly.”

“This prince wasn't angry, I was just worried about her, that's all!” Zhu Junyang let go of the little lass's right hand but still kept her left hand in his as he said, “Xiaocao, this prince doesn't want to worry about you and also have to hear lies too.”

Yu Xiaocao rolled her eyes and sent her maidservants as well as Zhu Junyang's bodyguards out. Only after they left did she remark playfully, “Alright ah, since all of you want to know why I came back late, I'll tell the truth then!”

Everyone perked up and began to listen with an attentive ear. Xiaocao vaguely outlined what had happened, “The little dolphin brought me to a secret place in the sea. There, I encountered the youngest daughter of the Dragon King. She wanted me to spend some time with her to chat, which was why I came back so late! It's that simple, ok? Do you all believe me?”

If it were anyone else telling this story, Zhu Junyang would have long scolded the person for giving a bad excuse that no one would believe. However, the pulse underneath his hand didn't change its steady beat one bit. Thus, he had to believe this somewhat ridiculous and absurd explanation. He looked at everyone in the Yu Family. Although they all looked quite shocked, not a single one rebutted Xiaocao's story. What did that mean? It meant that they had already taken her excuse as fact, even though it was an outrageous story!

He had long suspected that Xiaocao had a giant secret. Perhaps...she was truly like what the rumors claimed, that she was the reincarnated form of a little immortal girl or dragon girl? If that was true, then it wasn't so weird that she could encounter a creature like the young dragon maiden in the sea then!

Once again, Zhu Junyang pulled Xiaocao into his chest and tightly held onto her as if he was afraid that as soon as he let go, she would fly away into the sky, never to be seen again. He muttered endlessly, "This prince knows you have a lot of secrets but I will respect you and not force you to tell me. However, listen up, this prince will do everything within my power to keep you by my side. No matter how great the enemy is or whether I have to make the Heavens themselves my enemy, I will do so. Remember, I won't ever let you go!"

It wasn't that Yu Xiaocao wasn't touched by this vow of his, but this fellow's imagination was truly a bit too active. Just what was going on in that head of his, ah? Yu Xiaocao could sense the disapproving looks her parents were sending them and hurriedly pushed Zhu Junyang away. In a voice commonly used to soothe children, she placated him, "Alright ah, alright ah! My career and businesses are going quite well and my life is very enjoyable the way it is right now. How could I possibly bear to let everything go and leave? Don't worry, other than the God of Death, no one else can possibly take me away!"

The God of Death? If the god wanted to take his little lass away, he needed to get past him first. Although it was unlikely that he was the opponent of the Death God, he would still choose to fight to death for her! Zhu Junyang held onto the little lass's delicate and soft hand and he felt energy rush into his heart.

Yu Xiaocao didn't know that her casual mention of the God of Death had once again provoked the overactive imagination of a certain someone. She suddenly remembered that she had missed the end of the large competition and asked enthusiastically, "Who's going to tell me what happened at the end of the pearl diving competition today?"

Xiaolian revealed a somewhat shy and bashful smile as she said, "Older Brother Xiaomo had a pearl that was larger than a pigeon's egg. Whether it was the size or shape of the pearl, it was still the best out of all of the ones presented there. Other than the pearl that gave him first place, he also came across a purple pearl and it was bought by Royal Prince Yang for twenty thousand taels. Younger Sister, when you go back to the capital, help me keep an eye out for any suitable residences or shops up for sale there!"

“Eh? Our family is planning on opening a business in the capital? Right ah! I should have thought of this earlier! In the future, once younger brother places first in the imperial exams and becomes an official at court, our family needs to have more properties and areas in the capital ah!” Yu Xiaocao deliberately misinterpreted her sister's request and repeatedly nodded her head.

Xiaolian became even more embarrassed and hurriedly shook her head, “No, that's not it! It's...Older Brother Xiaomo who wants to use his prize money to buy a shop and residence there...”

“Xiaolian, how can you butt into Older Brother Xiaomo's affairs? Just what type of relationship do the two of you have?” Xiaocao had a wicked look on her face and even deliberately raised an eyebrow to tease her older sister.

Xiaolian glared at her helplessly and stamped her feet, “So annoying! I'm not going to pay attention to you anymore!!” After she finished, she fled back to her room with her head lowered and refused to come out.

Madam Liu used a finger to tap her youngest daughter's head and laughingly said, “You ah! You know that Xiaolian gets embarrassed easily yet you still try to tease her! However, that child Xiaomo truly is quite good and even said that the properties he's going to buy in the capital will be under Xiaolian's name.”

Zhuang Xiaomo was truly showing his intentions now. His actions were similar to a boyfriend in the modern times buying a house and writing his girlfriend's name on the housing deed. This at least showed just how highly he valued Xiaolian in his heart.

“No worries, we won't be taking advantage of him. When Xiaolian gets married, we will just add more to her dowry then!” Yu Xiaocao thought for a bit. When the time came, she was planning on giving her shares of the braised food shop in the capital that she had jointly opened with the emperor emeritus to Xiaolian as a part of her dowry. At that time, if the married couple wanted to live in the capital, they would have an extra source of income.

“Oh right, I also experienced what it was like to dive for pearls today and got quite a haul!” Yu Xiaocao took out her embroidered pouch and poured out the contents. Although the pearls she got were not as large as the giant one Zhuang Xiaomo had encountered, they were all still quite big and were considered superior grade pearls. The pink ones were especially good and were rarely seen usually.

Seeing the whole table full of similarly sized pearls that were even bigger than a thumbnail, Zhu Junyang suddenly said, "Are these pearls...gifts from the young dragon maiden that you met?"

"You can consider it that way!" Yu Xiaocao deliberately smiled in a mysterious manner. In truth, she wanted to say, 'The pearls that the young dragon maiden had given me are all still in my pocket.' She had not dared to take them out, for fear of shocking others with the pearls that were about the same size as small chicken eggs.

The Pearl Hunting Competition this time was considered quite successful. They had managed to find several thumb nail-sized pearls. Including the ones that they had bought while they were in the capital, and some of the smaller pearls, there were enough to make a pearl crown. The value of the crown increased by another fold when the purple pearl that symbolized grace and eminence was placed in the center of the crown.

Anyway, during Princess Consort Duan's birthday celebration, she wore this crown and outshone all her guests, stunning the noble ladies of the capital. What made others envy her more, was that aside from this crown, the Imperial Palace had also given her a bright, sunset-red coral that was as tall as a person. She had put it on display in the middle of the hall for everyone to admire, earning praises from noble ranking ladies for raising a filial son.

Only Imperial Prince Duan and the princess consort were aware that this red coral display was actually obtained by Yu Xiaocao, that little lass, when she went diving. It was rare to find a girl with such disregard of fame and fortune at such a young age, that she would privately offer the coral to the emperor as tribute, and, though his 'hands', give this extremely valuable gift to them.

Princess Consort Duan was now even more curious toward this little lass who she had never met before. For a girl who was born into a farmer's family, she was not petty at all, and her bearing was even better than the noble maidens of the capital. Moreover, she had remarkable skills in medicine. She heard that Yu Xiaocao had learnt all of this from a barefoot doctor in the countryside, and that her skills were no worse than the families well-known for their medicinal prowess. In fact, she maybe even better, as even Imperial Prince Duan's damaged body was already slowly recovering from her nursing.

From the little girl's skilled hands in medicine, it was clear that her teacher must have been a master of medicine who had secluded himself away from the world. Many had guessed that he was the disciple of the Medicine King Valley that the previous dynasty had annihilated. According to the rumors, the disciples of the Medicine King Valley could do the impossible—they knew ways to revive the dead and even the secret to immortality. The emperor of the previous dynasty had coveted this, and that had directly caused the annihilation of the whole Medicine King Valley.

Many had guessed that the Medicine King Valley should still have a few disciples who survived because they had left to gain experience outside of the valley. However, they were now keeping a low profile and secluding themselves deep within mountain forests and in packed cities. It was just that no one was aware of their true identity. As such, Doctor You, who had given Xiaocao enlightenment in medicine, had become a reclusive master in the words of others. As for his disciple, Xiaocao, although she had only learned the bare basics of concocting medicine and wellness, it was enough for her to be praised by others.

It had to be said that the public had quite the imagination. They found logical explanations for Xiaocao's 'cheat' medicines and medicinal diets, and in effect, she was saved from a lot of explanation.

At Princess Consort Duan's birthday banquet, Yu Xiaocao held a very low profile, only giving her a set of cream that she had personally made. Her seat was also placed among the young maidens who she was close to. There were also some who she had seen before but had not had much interaction with. All in all, they got along quite well.

In the circle of well-bred, young ladies of the capital, although there would still occasionally be people who made sour remarks, the majority of the people still had good words to chip in for Xiaocao. They said that she was kind and easy to get along with, very generous towards the people who she considered her friends, and really knew how to hold refreshing gatherings. Compared to those tea banquets and flower banquets where they only sat around and talked, activities like fruit picking, hunting and beachcombing seemed so much more refreshing to the young ladies of prestigious families who had only known one source of entertainment.

During the banquet, Liang Jiahui, the granddaughter of the Grand Preceptor, saw that Xiaocao seemed quite approachable, so she asked probingly, "Miss Yu, I heard that it's about the season that the fruits in your family's orchard ripen. Do you have any plans of holding an orchard gathering this year?"

The youngest daughter of Imperial Prince Sa, Zhu Yaner, was a little glutton. Upon hearing this, she finally dropped her chopsticks and raised her head with sparkles in her eyes—her excitement evident in her expression. Previously, she had only heard rumors of this mysterious Official Yu, and thought that Xiaocao was a person who was vengeful and hard to approach.

After interacting with her today, she found that she was actually quite an amiable and interesting person. The delicacies that she mentioned, and her interesting stories from her time at the beach became the little girl's yearning. The young girl regretted that she got to know her too late, which had

caused her to miss out on the previous beach gathering. However, it shouldn't be too late now. She should be invited to the next orchard gathering, right?

With Xiaocao's status of a royal princess, the young ladies at this table were either relatives of the imperial family, or the daughters and granddaughters of first-ranked court officials who were usually quite haughty. However, after hearing He Wanning's stories of collecting seashells at the beach, the underwater adventure and the pearl hunting competition, all of them started to long for events like this. The life of young girls could actually be so exciting!

Especially when they heard Xiaocao mention that the person who won third place in the pearl harvesting competition was actually just a fifteen-year-old girl. They started to think that perhaps being born in a fisherman's family and living a carefree life would be much more interesting than being cooped up indoors and learning the four arts every day.

However, the freedom in their eyes was just part of the struggles of the livelihood of a daughter born into a fisherman's family. In the eyes of the daughters of fishermen, these girls who were born with a silver spoon in their mouths were the ones who should be envied. If one wasn't a fish, how would one know how much a fish would envy a human's joy?

Yu Xiaocao's circle of friends widened considerably after Princess Consort Duan's birthday banquet. There was the daughter of Imperial Prince Sa, the granddaughters of the Grand Preceptor and the Director of the Imperial Court Clan... By the time the gathering was held, some of their uninvited brothers also joined them, so the group attending this fall's orchard gathering was more than twice the size of the group that attended last year. Their group was so big that the little animals around the hill had been too scared to come out, so the animals that were caught by the traps they had set were much lesser than the number they had caught last year. If it weren't for Little Black and Little White, they might not even have had enough ingredients to carry out the orchard barbeque!

Just like this, these peaceful days slowly passed. Because she had been keeping such a high profile for the past two years, Xiaocao did not come up with any new ways to earn money. However, even just her pharmaceutical workshop, beauty spa and greenhouse vegetables were enough for others to envy her.

With the passing of fall, came winter; and with the end of spring, summer returned. Regardless of whether it was the imperial plant breeding center, or Yu Family's farm in Tanggu Town, they all had a plentiful harvest of fruits. The seeds of winter wheat were enough to satisfy the plantation needs of the dozen states and prefectures in the north, and corn was already becoming a common crop in the northeast and northwest. The people of the northwest, which was known for its barren lands, were

finally able to keep some extra grains after filling their stomachs because they planted high-yielding corn seeds.

Just as the Yu Family's twenty thousand mu farm in Tanggu started to show some good results, they welcomed Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony. Originally, Xiaocao only wanted to have a meal and eat a cake together with her family in Dongshan Village, but her godmother and Royal Prince Yang were unwilling!

Needless to say, it was such a rare occasion that Zhu Junyang actually had a valid chance to court Xiaocao's favor, how could he miss out on such an opportunity? If things went according to his way, the ceremony would be held as large-scaled and as grand as possible!

Lady Fang was also of this opinion. Before, she was only able to attend the hairpin ceremony of the daughters of other people, and who knew how many gifts she had given away. But now she finally had the chance to hold one for her own daughter. So, of course, she wouldn't let go of this chance to earn gifts!

Xiaocao's best friends also excitedly chipped in their ideas. Although Xiaocao had already been in the capital for a few years, she was still completely clueless about the various etiquette of the hairpin ceremony. Not to mention, her godmother had arrived at her home a few months in advance to discuss with her about how they should decorate the place. It made her feel that the ceremony was too bothersome. She dearly missed the way she celebrated birthdays in her previous life, where she could just walk into a restaurant and they would take care of everything else for her.

Oh right! In her previous life, in order to save trouble, everyone did it like this, so why couldn't she do it now? Didn't she have Zhenxiu Restaurant's boss as her friend? If they could successfully host her hairpin ceremony's banquet, it might even be a new business opportunity for Zhenxiu Restaurant!

As such, she invited Third Young Master Zhou, who was in the capital, over and told him the gist of her idea. What? She wanted to hold her hairpin ceremony in Zhenxiu Restaurant? Turn the whole third floor into a big hall that could hold the hairpin ceremony? She wanted to hold the hairpin ceremony and the banquet together as a bundle?

This idea was very fresh, so without much thought, Third Young Master Zhou, who was always willing to experiment, agreed to the plan. As Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony was only less than two months away, Third Young Master Zhou put off every other matter and focused solely on this.

Lady Fang was disapproving when she heard that her goddaughter wanted to hold her most important fifteen-year-old coming-of-age ceremony in a restaurant, but she ultimately gave in since Xiaocao insisted. However, she was even more invested in the renovations and decorations of the hall on the third floor where the hairpin ceremony was going to be held than her own home. She mulled over almost each and every decor for half a day.

With an expert like Lady Fang who watched them closely, Third Young Master Zhou was even more confident towards the success of the hairpin ceremony and banquet. Coupled with the help of Xiaocao's friends who were of high status, the decoration of the main hall on the third floor was done in a quick and orderly manner.

Just a few days before the hairpin ceremony, Third Young Master Zhou invited Xiaocao to check out the results. The main hall, which appeared luxurious yet elegant, presented itself to Lady Fang and Xiaocao. It was looked simple, yet also exuded magnanimity,

Every drapery in the hall was top-notch in both pattern and texture, and even the pendants on top were embellished with pearls or gemstones (these were sponsored by Royal Prince Yang). The furnishings on the antique shelves were genuine antiques, and the paintings and calligraphy on the walls were also prized possessions of famous people. Even the floor was cut and polished from limestone that was brought back from Dali. The marble floor was as polished as a mirror, and the patterns on it were like a natural ink landscape painting... In short, the entire hall was decorated more beautifully than the couple's parlor room.

As for the hairpin ceremony's banquet, that went without saying! In addition to all of the signature dishes of Zhenxiu Restaurant, Xiaocao also specially introduced several new dishes. These dishes were mainly Cantonese dishes: honey roasted pork, stewed shark's fin with vegetables, bird's nest with coconut milk and sugar, steamed striped bass, fried salt and pepper mantis shrimp, pineapple with sweet and sour pork, and steamed crabs. The head chefs of each branch of Zhenxiu Restaurant, led by Head Chef Wang, gathered together to learn and practice their culinary skills in order to make a splash at the banquet.