

## Gold Chapter 561

### Fields of Gold Chapter 561

As for the pastries and fruits, that went without saying. The fruits were naturally meticulously hand-picked from the back hill of the Imperial Plantation: pears, apples, grapes, mulberries, raspberries... Although it was already late fall, many fruits from the previous seasons like peaches, watermelon, cantaloupes, strawberries had been preserved fresh, as though they had only just been harvested from the orchard.

The pastries were all sent from The Yu's main pastry shop. Other than the exquisite little pastries on each table, the one thing that became the focus of everyone was still the giant cake that was being made on the spot in the main hall on the ground floor of Zhenxiu Restaurant. The cake at the bottom was brought in from the pastry shop after it was baked, and formed a large rectangular structure of about 10 meters long and 3 meters wide. As for the whipped cream, fruit jam and fruit compote that were spread on top, they were made then and there with the cooperation of six pretty little misses.

Those little misses and young masters that arrived earlier surrounded the area where the giant cake was taking shape and peered at it curiously. Gasps sprouted from their lips as they saw beautiful, life-like whipped cream flowers and multicolored decorations taking form under the skilled hands of these young patissieres.

The giant cake was covered with pink and purple roses, with lush leaves that made the colors pop, as though they had only just been picked from the bushes. The cake was decorated with a lining of whipped cream, while jams and fruit compotes of different colors decorated the center of the cake.

The last touch was a little girl at the center of cake with a slender figure, big eyes, and a sharp chin wearing a red Qi-style attire—vaguely recognizable as Xiaocao through her facial features. This humanoid decoration was the masterpiece of the head manager of The Yu's pastry shop and top patissiere, Yang Liu.

Those who had arrived slightly later were unable to witness the creation of this giant cake and deeply regretted missing out on it when they heard about it from those who did. However, they all discreetly asked the few cake makers who were standing next to the cake if such a superstar's birthday cake like this could be custom ordered. Even when they were told that it had to be booked a month in advance and that it cost a lot, no one hesitated, because most of the people who came to Xiaocao's Hairpin Banquet were either rich or of a high status, and no one was short of money for a cake. Some people even wrote down their birth date on the spot on the reservation book in the cake maker's hands. Yang Liu, who had wanted to make her mistress proud at her banquet, had inadvertently ushered in a new high of reservations for her pastry shop again.

Originally, Yu Xiaocao had planned to keep a low profile, only inviting some friends and family over, and have a meal together to celebrate her birthday just like how she did in her previous life. However, even without mentioning Lady Fang's reluctance, the imperial palace had already sent out a decree along with the palace maidservant, Chunhong, to help Lady Fang with the preparations of the hairpin ceremony. Such imperial favor caused certain people in court to start making plans in their hearts.

Naturally, the Yu Family's relatives could not be missing from the list of banquet guests: her eldest granduncle's family, maternal grandparents, eldest uncle, second uncle, youngest uncle along with her three aunts, and her cousins and their spouses. Zhu Junyang had sent his own convoy to transport all of them over.

Then, there were the relatives of the Fang Family. Fang Zizhen was an orphan, and had no other relatives except for his master's wife, Madame Zhao. However, there were quite a few relatives from Lady Fang's maternal family. Although only the families of the eldest and younger legitimate uncles were invited, the party that arrived was still quite big.

In the past, Lady Fang's maternal family didn't understand her when she took a peasant girl as her adopted daughter, saying that instead of choosing her niece from her maternal family, she took a low-born, vulgar country girl to be her adopted daughter. Her sister-in-law even came to argue with her about Xia Furong, threatening to cut off all contact with her.

But in the past two years, Yu Xiaocao, with her own abilities, had not only managed to reach new heights in her career and made her businesses prosper, but she was also in great favor with the emperor, and had been given the honorary title of a royal princess. Now, in terms of wealth and the favor of the emperor, even Fang Zizhen, Count Zhongqin, found it hard to compete with, let alone the Xia Family, which had already been in a gradual decline.

The Xia Family, which had always sucked-up to the influential and looked down on people who had lower status, would never miss this opportunity to get closer to the Yu Family—or to be exact, Yu Xiaocao—even without Lady Fang's invitation. As such, everyone who was part of the legitimate bloodline, regardless of whether they were on the invitation list or not, came to get acquainted.

The sister-in-law who had threatened to sever ties with Lady Fang was actually shameless enough to come up and suggest that Xia Furong be the master of ceremonies of Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony. Disregarding the fact that Xia Furong and Xiaocao had an unpleasant encounter in the past, the master of ceremonies was always either the best friend or sister—who did she think she was?

Apart from the relatives were the families that they were closer with. There was the Grand Princess Royal, Marquis and Marchioness Anning, Heir Anning and his wife, who also brought along their one-year-old baby, and last but not least, He Wanning. She had already reserved the role of the master of ceremonies a long time ago, and even asked Yuan Xueyan and Royal Princess Minglan to not fight with her.

Quite a few members of the Yuan Family also came, starting with Great Scholar Yuan, then the prime minister and his wife, Yuan Xueyan's brothers and sisters-in-law, plus Yuan Xueyan and her youngest brother Yuan Yunxi. Other than that, there was Royal Princess Minglan and her mother and sister-in-law. Not to mention, Left Assistant Minister Yu and his wife, along with Yu Wanqing and her brother and sister-in-law were also there.

As her business partner, naturally, Li Mengru wouldn't be absent. Madam Li came along with her eldest legitimate daughter, Li Mengqi, and her two young sons who came to join in on the fun....

As for the Zhou Family, the old master and old madam personally came over to watch the ceremony. The madam and children of the first branch, and of course, Madam Zhou, the mother of the third young master who had a good relationship with Xiaocao, also brought congratulatory gifts to celebrate the little girl's birthday. Madam Zhou was not aware that Xiaocao was already promised to someone else, so she wondered if they could cement old ties through marriage? After all, her son and Xiaocao had known each other since they were small, and had always been on good terms.

Then, there was the master and mistress of Prince Sa's Estate, as well as the heir and his wife, and Zhu Yan'er, who was quite close to Xiaocao. The moment she arrived, she started to argue that she wanted to be Xiaocao's master of ceremonies, but He Wanning quickly rebuked her.

Naturally, as Xiaocao's future in-laws, it was impossible for Prince Jing's Household to not attend their future daughter-in-law's coming-of-age ceremony. Princess Consort Jing had almost stolen Lady Fang's seat and taken herself as the host to greet the guests. As Zhu Junyang and his lady mother made their way to the third floor, his two mothers-in-law approached and stopped him. Lady Fang looked at him with a half-smile and said, "The people watching the ceremony upstairs are all female guests, so it wouldn't be appropriate for Royal Prince Yang to go up there, would it?" Although Zhu Junyang did not want to miss his little fiancée's hairpin ceremony, he was forced to stay downstairs to wait for her to come down after the ceremony due to etiquette.

The most unexpected thing was, Imperial Prince Duan, who had rarely left his residence, had actually brought Princess Consort Duan with him to observe the ceremony. Imperial Prince Duan looked a little thin, but his body was still quite strong—he didn't look terminally ill as said in the rumors. Could it be that Miss Yu's medical skills were really better than the old physicians' at the Imperial Hospital, and she had actually cured Imperial Prince Duan's decades of chronic illness?

Humans were just mere mortals, so how could they not fall sick? Not everyone had a chance to befriend a skilled medical practitioner. As such, Imperial Prince Duan's arrival had attracted quite a few uninvited guests to Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony. It wouldn't be right to chase this group of people who eagerly rushed up to present their gifts out, right? While Lady Fang enthusiastically greeted the guests, she sent a servant to ask Third Young Master Zhou to see if he had prepared sufficient dishes. Fortunately, Third Young Master Zhou was reliable and had prepared extra dishes, so they didn't embarrass themselves by not having enough tables for their guests.

Of course, only the female guests were able to watch the ceremony unfold on the third floor while the rest of the guests were served refreshments downstairs. Originally, the hairpin ceremony was held in the 'ancestral shrine', so many secretly laughed at the Yu Family for not following customs when they saw that the invitation said that the hairpin ceremony was going to be held in Zhenxiu Restaurant. However, as soon as they entered the grand hall on the third floor, their hopes of witnessing a farce immediately dissipated.

The grand hall on the third floor was quiet and open, decorated lavishly yet with a scholarly elegance, revealing an air of solemnity everywhere. It was surprisingly better and more imposing than most ancestral shrines, and the decorations and all kinds of details in the hall especially received everyone's praises.

When they climbed the steps, they were met with a calm, smiling Lady Fang, and Madam Liu, who was beautiful, fair-skinned and donned a gorgeous dress—not a single bit of her bearing told others that she was, in fact, only just the wife of a farmer. The both of them stood at the eastern side of the steps to welcome guests, while the woman who stood on the western side of the steps was actually the wife of Heir Anning.

As for the protagonists of the day, sisters Yu Xiaocao and Yu Xiaolian changed into their ceremonial clothes and shoes, and calmly waited in the dressing room at the east side of the hall after taking a fragrant flower petal bath. That's right, as Xiaocao and Xiaolian were twin sisters, their hairpin ceremonies would naturally be held together.

Xiaolian secretly peeked out from inside the dressing room, looked at the luxuriant and graceful guests outside, and stuck her tongue out and said mischievously, "Younger Sister, I've really ridden on your coattails today—there are so many wives and daughters of court officials that came to celebrate! I wouldn't have dared to dream of it before!"

"What's not to dream about? So what if they're the wives of court officials? Don't they also have two eyes and a mouth? Can they possibly have one more nostril than we do?" Yu Xiaocao's little head also appeared above hers, poking around and looking out.

Eldest Maternal Aunt Han saw them and hurriedly pushed the two similar-looking little heads back into the room, "Behave yourselves! Today is your big day, so don't become a laughing stock in front of so many guests! You should still remember all the etiquette that the senior palace servant taught you the other day, right? Hurry up and recall them in your head before you make a mistake!"

Yu Xiaocao playfully hugged her eldest maternal aunt's arm and swung it, acting cute, "Eldest Maternal Aunt, I'm thirsty, can you bring me a piece of watermelon to quench my thirst?"

"No! What if you get nervous and want to pee? Bear with me, as soon as the ceremony is over, I'll bring you a glass of watermelon juice. Xiaolian, you too! Be good, alright?" Eldest Maternal Aunt pacified the two restless little girls, and hurriedly went out to serve the guests again. Although those noble guests did not need her to take care of them, there were still quite a few guests from their hometown, and her younger sister and sister-in-law might not be able to handle it all—she still had to go and keep an eye out.

As the classical musical instruments began to play, the arrival of the guest of honor caused an uproar. The Grand Princess Royal who had originally planned to fight for the seat of the guest of honor immediately gave way with a smile as soon as she saw the guest of honor. In her heart, she muttered, 'This little girl of the Yu Family is so reputable—she actually managed to invite the empress as her guest of honor. Is there any other guest more honorable than her?'

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Yu Hai and his wife didn't recognize the empress, but Fang Zizhen and his wife, who were also the hosts of this ceremony, couldn't act as if they didn't know her. The couple quickly brought over their adoptive relatives to greet the empress. Yu Hai and Madam Liu's eyes widened in surprise upon finding out this guest's identity. Was their daughter's reputation truly so great such that even the empress herself would come to her small hairpin ceremony?

“Please rise quickly. Today's leading role is Miss Xiaocao and her sister. I am merely looking for an excuse to relax a bit after living deep in the palace for so long.” The empress's smile was as warm as a spring breeze which calmed Yu Hai and Madam Liu's racing hearts.

“Where is Older Sister Xiaocao?” The eldest imperial prince also benefited today. He had been given a day off of class, so he could leave the palace. He stuck out his head from behind his mother's back and looked around curiously at everything on the third floor. A pair of eyes as bright as the stars looked for Yu Xiaocao's figure. Older Sister Xiaocao hadn't been in the palace for so long because she was busy with the matters of her hairpin ceremony!

Fang Zizhen and his wife hurriedly gave the eldest imperial prince—no, the crown prince a greeting. After coming back from the Mulan Imperial Hunting Ground, Zhu Hanwen was conferred the title of crown prince and moved into the eastern palace. However, there weren't many children in the Imperial Palace, and he also wasn't very old. Thus, things remained the same as before with him going to the empress's Kunning Palace and staying there if it got late.

Lady Fang asked Zhenzhu to invite Yu Fan, the second young master of the Yu Family, over. The two of them were about the same age as the crown prince was younger than Yu Fan by less than two years. Thus, these two young people should have many things to talk about.

Sure enough, when Zhu Hanwen saw Little Shitou, he forgot all about Older Sister Xiaocao. Due to his relationship with Xiaocao, Little Shitou's fame had also spread into the palace. Zhu Hanwen highly regarded this person who was only a little older than him and had become the last disciple of Great Scholar Yuan, who was the father of the prime minister. This youth was also called junior brother by the old scholars in court, whose beards have turned white. He didn't forget to live up to their expectations. At the age of eight, he passed the county-level exams and became a county official. If it wasn't because his master, the Great Scholar Yuan, took him to travel in recent years, making him unable to participate in the recent autumn examinations, he probably would've become a provincial official at ten and an imperial official at fifteen. Didn't the ancients have Gan Luo, who became an official at the age of ten? So why couldn't the Great Ming Dynasty produce a scholar who placed first in the imperial exams in his teens?

Maybe if these words were spoken from the mouth of someone else, it could've been counted as an exaggeration. However, these words were spoken by the Great Scholar Yuan, the strict and proper Headmaster Yuan, who has never even praised his son, the prime minister, before. This clearly showed that he was quite satisfied with this disciple of his.

Zhu Hanwen had been spiritually attracted to this youth scholar for a long time. He had long wanted to see the person that Great Scholar Yuan had praised like a flower. In addition, Yu Fan was Older Sister Xiaocao's younger brother. Although they never met, he admired him, and envied him a bit, from the bottom of his heart.

As Xiaocao's younger brother, he could enjoy the snacks and food made personally by Older Sister Xiaocao every day. Such a wonderful thing! If it was possible, he would've liked to exchange identities with this youth named Yu Fan! Even though he was the crown prince, he actually envied a youth from a peasant family. The world of a foodie was really hard for ordinary people to comprehend.

Little Shitou, who was already thirteen, had become a graceful and beautiful young man. His cultured and quick-witted manner, his scholarly and polite speech, along with his features that were similar to that of Xiaocao's allowed Zhu Hanwen to increase his sincerity even though it was the first time they met. Soon, the two youths were chatting together.

Little Shitou's return to the capital, in addition to celebrating his second sister's hairpin ceremony, was to prepare for next year's autumn provincial exam. These past few years, he had traveled to the north and south of the Yangtze River with his master. He debated academics with the scholars who lived south of the Yangtze River, allowing him, a young boy, to quickly grow up. The knowledge in the books had been thoroughly dissected by Little Shitou as he had an eidetic memory. He was like a dry sponge greedily soaking up the spring of knowledge. Through these years of travel, his lack of perspective and experience had been quickly enriched. He and his master, Great Scholar Yuan, were confident about the autumn exams next year!

Great Scholar Yuan had high expectations for this talented and diligent disciple. This autumn exam, Little Shitou needed to get first place in order to not weaken the reputation of Rongxuan Academy and his master. On the other hand, Yuan Yunxi, the youngest grandson of Great Scholar Yuan who was also going to participate in the provincial exams, had been overlooked by him.

Yuan Yunxi: "Grandfather, am I your grandson, or is Yu Fan your grandson?"

Yuan Sinian: "No respect for your elders, call him little martial uncle!"

Yuan Yunxi looked at Little Shitou who was a full head shorter than him and seven to eight years younger. He had nothing to say now...

But that was enough about the future emperor and prime minister, Zhu Hanwen and Yu Fan, who were conversing animatedly and regretting that they didn't meet sooner. The sound of beautiful instruments came from upstairs, since the empress, who was the guest of honor, had already entered the hall. The guests were seated at the left and right seats. As the hosts, Yu Hai and Fang Zizhen, along with their wives, sat at the hosts' seats after all the guests were seated.

As the fathers, Yu Hai and Fang Zizhen stood up at the same time after glancing at each other. Originally, the opening speech could be made by one person; however, these two people quarreled at home for a long time. Neither of them was willing to miss the opportunity to give the opening speech at their daughter's hairpin ceremony. In the end, Xiaocao slapped her hands down and said how about they each say half, which solved the problem between the two fathers.

Yu Hai gently smoothed the folds of his fine clothes with his rough hands and said in a strong voice, "Today is my little daughters, Yu Xiaocao and Yu Xiaolian's hairpin ceremony. Thank you all for coming..."

"It's my turn, my turn!" Fang Zizhen quietly reminded as he gently pulled on Yu Hai's clothes. Then he looked at the guests with a smile and loudly said, "Once again, I thank everyone who has found the time to come to my daughter's Yu Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony. Next, Yu Xiaocao and Yu Xiaolian's hairpin ceremony will officially begin! Linglong, go invite the two young misses to come in and greet the guests!"

After Linglong went into the changing room, He Wanning, who got the position of master of ceremonies, came out, washed her hands, and took her place on the western stage. Yu Xiaocao and Yu Xiaolian came out holding hands and went to the center facing the south, with their backs to the north. They greeted the guests and then kneeled down in their position facing the west.

The two sisters came out looking like copies of each other. They had the same clothing, the same hairstyle, and they had similar heights, weights, and facial features. In addition, both were wearing light makeup. For a moment, it was hard to tell who was the older sister and who was the younger sister.

"Imperial Uncle, Imperial Uncle! Let me have a look, just a look!" On the balcony of the third floor on the east side were three young men in fine clothes. Wasn't the one jumping up and down the crown prince who had been conversing happily with Yu Fan downstairs?

Unexpectedly, the person, who was in front of the young prince, with the best view was actually the cold and fierce Royal Prince Yang. He was currently craning his neck to look through the window. As for



the light-complexioned youth beside the two, who had a helpless expression on his face, wasn't that Little Shitou, Yu Fan, who was responsible for keeping the crown prince company?

On the narrow windowsill, there were three people, big and small. Below them were bodyguards that were looking up with nervousness, attracting the attention of people passing by. The pedestrians on the street followed their line of sight and found the three figures that were peeping on the windowsill. They were surprised for a moment. What hobbies did these high officials and royal families have to do something so uncouth in broad daylight? For a period of time, many pedestrians, who were passing by Zhenxiu Restaurant, gathered in front for a moment and pointed up at the window.

The emperor and Su Ran, who had come a little later due to handling government affairs, looked at this scene in bewilderment. When they followed the view of the crowd, the emperor found that it was his cousin's tall back that was on the balcony peering through the cracks of the window. A wide grin that held hints of anticipation appeared on his face as he said to Su Ran, "We should let those who are afraid of Royal Prince Yang, who is like a tiger, come and have a look at what this guy looks like right now. If this occurred at night, wouldn't he look like a Peeping Tom?"

"Your Majesty, doesn't the person next to him look familiar to you?" Su Ran had already spotted that there was a small figure jumping up and down, trying to squeeze Prince Yang out but couldn't. It was the crown prince.

Zhu Junfan looked over at the small figure beside Zhu Junyang with interest and his expression suddenly became dark. Just now, he was looking on passively, but now that the person being watched passively was his child, he couldn't be calm as a father.

"Zhu Hanwen, you little rascal, come down now! Quickly!" Zhu Junfan roared, scaring the crown prince upstairs, making him almost fall off the balcony.

"It's over. Didn't Father say he was too busy to come? How... Yu Fan, quick help me figure a way out. How can we avoid this..." Zhu Hanwen had a premonition that if he couldn't find a reasonable cause, his small butt was going to blossom when he went back to the palace.

Yu Fan's eyes roved around and pointed his lips in the direction of his future brother-in-law. Zhu Hanwen suddenly understood and nodded with a giggle.

Sliding down the pillars outside of the Zhenxiu Restaurant, the crown prince was caught by the guards and smiled at his father. In a low voice, he said, "Imperial Father, I was just having a good talk with Yu Fan in a private room on the second floor when I saw Imperial Uncle sneaking up to the third floor through the window. I was curious and followed him..."

"Is that so?" Zhu Junfan asked in a deep voice with a frown after he saw his cousin leaping down.

"How could this prince be absent from the lass's hairpin ceremony..." Zhu Junyang said confidently.

Zhu Junfan kicked his cousin's butt but almost made himself fall down. Fortunately, Su Ran was at his side holding him. Zhu Junfan was furious, "You dare to refer to yourself in such a pompous manner? If you want to go then go openly. By doing it secretly, you're teaching children the wrong things!"

"This prince... If I could go up, would I still be here talking to you? My Future mother-in-law said that the female guests are all up there and that we needed to wait downstairs!" Zhu Junyang's tone was somewhat indignant. As her man, he couldn't even attend the lass's hairpin ceremony!

Zhu Junfan exasperatedly gave him a look and said, "Then you're just taking your future brother-in-law and your nephew to climb walls and to do sneaky things?"

Zhu Junyang glanced at the crown prince and thought, 'Your son also wants to see his Older Sister Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony, what does that have to do with me? I'm not taking the fall for this alone.'

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Zhu Hanwen was afraid his imperial uncle would expose his affairs and quickly cut off the conversation and asked, "Father, Older Sister Xiaocao's hairpin ceremony has already started. If you don't go up now, you won't get to see anything exciting!"

Zhu Junfan glared at him, 'Little rascal, I'll settle this when we get back!' Zhu Hanwen, who understood the meaning in his father's eyes, couldn't help shrinking his head down and going to hide behind his imperial uncle. Seeing his father take long strides up toward the third floor, he winked at the friend he just met today and followed his father up like a fox masquerading as a tiger.

Wasn't it an honor for the emperor to come in person to their daughter's hairpin ceremony? Who would quibble about whether or not it was in line with customs? The womenfolk on the third floor all knelt on the floor to give their respects to the supreme emperor.

Fang Zizhen quickly told people to add in a mahogany chair in between the hosts' seats to let this uninvited god sit down. The thick-skinned Zhu Junyang stole the position of a bodyguard, standing tall behind the emperor. However, that pair of phoenix eyes focused on a delicate figure on the stage without blinking.

The lass seemed to have grown up suddenly. The broad clothes couldn't hide her delicate and exquisite figure. Her eyebrows were lightly swept and her eyes looked deep and clear as if it was a deep pool. If a person had a moment of carelessness, it would be easy to be sucked in. A light pink color had been lightly added to her small mouth and her lips looked as delicate and charming as a rose, making people unable to do anything but fantasize... Zhu Junyang's soul was about to be hooked out by this little spirit! Faced with the hot gaze of a beautiful man, Xiaocao, who was originally relaxed, suddenly became tense.

At this time, the crown prince also straightened his back, standing behind his father. However, his little partner, Yu Fan, soon brought over a chair so he could sit at the right hand side of the emperor. Yet... Little Shitou also stood confidently behind the crown prince, but his slightly skinny figure was less imposing than Prince Yang.

Su Ran took a look at his position that was currently occupied and revealed a helpless expression. Fortunately, Yu Hai had ordered people to add a chair slightly off to the side, so he didn't have to stand in the hall at a loss.

The emperor waved his hand and commanded, "You all can continue." The hairpin ceremony, which was interrupted by the emperor's arrival, went on. The only difference now was the atmosphere of the room became more restrained.

As the master of the ceremony, He Wanning stood behind Xiaocao. While gently combing her long silky black hair, in a slightly jealous tone she said, "The emperor and empress have come to attend your hairpin ceremony. This is the first for any young lady in the capital! You're in the limelight now."

"Is this limelight any good? Having too high a profile might not be a good thing!" Yu Xiaocao murmured into He Wanning's ear.

"Wow! There's two Older Sister Xiaocaos!" The crown prince was dazed by the two similar-looking faces in the same dress. He thought that there was something wrong with his eyes and he was hallucinating. He blinked his eyes a few times, but the two figures were still there. The little guy was confused.

Little Shitou, who was standing behind him, bent down and explained in a low voice, "My oldest sister and second sister are twins. They just look alike."

"Twins? Isn't it said that twins will compete for each other's luck and generally only one can survive?" This was a folk myth. Many families sent one of the twins far away so both could survive. In actuality, because of the backward medical conditions of the ancient times, twins were generally born prematurely. The nutrition in the womb couldn't keep up with two little guys, so they were born weak. Thus there were very few twins who could survive at the same time.

Yu Xiaocao was the weaker of the two. It was Madam Liu, who was a careful mother, that managed to raise her sick little daughter to the age of eight. Unfortunately, that girl managed to survive the illnesses but she couldn't survive that senseless disaster, which had benefited Lin Xiaowan's soul from a different world. If it wasn't for the Little Divine Stone's help, the broken body carrying the transmigrated soul might not have survived till now.

Zhu Junfan turned his head and gave his silly son a warning look. They were having a solemn hairpin ceremony right now. This fellow was asking for trouble with his questions and exclamations. Zhu Hanwen pursed his mouth, held in his curiosity, and calmed down to watch the girls' hairpin ceremony.

The two masters of ceremonies finished combing the girls' hair and placed the combs on the south side of the mat. The empress, as the guest of honor, stood up and washed her hands with Madam Liu and Lady Fang. They then returned to their respective places and sat down.

The pair of sisters, Yu Xiaocao and Xiaolian, turned to the east and sat straight. The empress walked slowly over to Xiaocao and Xiaolian and chanted a congratulatory message, "On this month and this auspicious day, I add on your first robes of adulthood. Leave behind your juvenile aspirations, and let it become your adult virtues. Blessed with longevity, and prosperity be with you." Then she knelt down onto the mat to comb the sisters' hair and inserted their hairpins in. Afterward, she got up and returned to her original position.

He Wanning corrected Xiaocao's hairpin and said in a low voice, "The empress personally added the hairpin for you, so you can't keep a low profile anymore! However, it's no problem. In any case, no matter what, your Royal Prince Yang will block any problems for you. Look at him, his eyeballs are following you without stopping. They've almost become cross-eyed with how much he's staring!"

Yu Xiaocao gave her a glare but she couldn't help looking at the tall and upright figure. She met his eyes, which were full of passion. Her face became hot and she quickly lowered it. The gentleness of her lowering her head was like the modest bashfulness of a water lily. In Zhu Junyang's eyes, it became another alluring expression.

The two sisters slowly rose to their feet and the guests congratulated them. However, no one knew who was sincere and who was jealous. When they returned to the dressing room, He Wanning took the clothes from her sister-in-law and followed the two sisters into the room to help them change into plainer looking robes to match their hairstyles.

After changing their clothes, the two sisters came to show the guests their clothes and hairpins. Facing their parents, they bowed down solemnly in gratitude for the love and care received from them. After Xiaocao bowed to her parents, she extended the same courtesy to her godfather and godmother, who were waiting at the side.

Lady Fang helped her goddaughter up with tears of joy in her eyes. Originally, her husband didn't discuss it with her before he took a peasant girl to be his goddaughter. Although Lady Fang never opposed it, she didn't expect to look after her either. In her mind, the country girl would be naive, simple, and not noble enough.

Yet, when she first saw Xiaocao, she immediately had a good impression of this strange yet funny girl, who had good self-control, even more than her niece who had accompanied her many years. Maybe this was the so-called fate. Although her goddaughter came from a peasant family, she was surprised again and again by her. She was most impressed by her goddaughter's medicinal food, which had improved the couple's physiques and allowed her to have a blood-related descendant that she had always dreamed of.

After the little girl came to the capital to further herself, her businesses became more and more prosperous. She, as her godmother, gained a lot of credit. She now had a supply of fresh vegetables and fruits that seemed never ending during the winter, so much that she couldn't finish them. Furthermore, she also had unlimited access to the rare floral teas from 'Blossoming Beauty' and the expensive skincare products she couldn't even finish. Using them to give to people as gifts to improve relationships had proven to be quite welcomed by the other parties. She had reached the age of forty-five this year,

but when she stood next to her childhood friends, she looked almost a decade younger than them. All of her friends regarded her with pure envy now.

Today that lovely and filial girl had finally grown up and become a beautiful young maiden. As her godmother, her heart was filled with incomparable joy, and her eyes couldn't help becoming moist.

Yu Xiaocao raised her hands to wipe away the shining tears from the corners of her godmother's eyes. She gently hugged this godmother who treated her better than a mother could treat her own daughter and gave her the biggest smile possible.

Returning to her original position, she continued to sit facing the east. The empress washed her hands again in the gold basin inlaid with jewels. Heir Anning's wife presented a bright and dazzling hairpin. After a closer look, the main gem on the hairpin was a huge pink diamond. Small diamonds were also embedded around the hairpin, making it seem as if it was decorated with shining stars that had gathered together. The hairpin looked incredibly bright and dazzling.

What woman didn't love beauty? What woman could resist beautiful jewelry? There was an uproar in the field! Needless to say, the hairpin must've been gifted by Royal Prince Yang. There wasn't any place to buy diamond jewelry besides Royal Prince Yang's Treasure Pavillion. The unmarried girls present casted odd looks towards the cold Royal Prince Yang one after another. However, they found that the other person's gaze had never left the pretty figure in the center field.

The noble madams and young ladies present all felt jealous. How could Xiaocao, a small bird flying out of a mountain nest, have the emperor personally come to her hairpin ceremony to bless her, have the empress be the guest of honor, and even have her master of ceremonies and attendant be of such outstanding statuses? Furthermore, the arrogant two beauties of the capital and the eccentric Royal Princess Minglan all became her best friends. However, most of them here couldn't even find a way to curry favor with these people. Comparisons were truly the quickest way to infuriate oneself!

What really angered them the most was that the most promising new noble in court, Royal Prince Yang, was also fascinated by that girl. He couldn't even see the beauty of other women! Could it be that this little girl was really the rumored sprite in the mountain or the dragon king's daughter in the sea, using her magic to blind the people around her and making them willing to dig out their hearts and lungs for her?

No matter how complicated the young ladies in the room felt, the hairpin ceremony still continued. The empress chanted, "On this auspicious month and such day, I affirm your robes. Respect it with dignity.

Let grace and modesty be your virtue. May your longevity last a myriad of years, and may you forever receive good fortune."

He Wanning helped Yu Xiaocao take off the hairpin in her hair and the empress picked up the hairpin that made all of the women's hearts flutter and put amidst the dark and beautiful black hair. The sisters, under the complicated gazes of the guests, gave the empress a salute. They then, once again, returned to the changing room and changed into robes with long trains. At this point, all the clothes for the hairpin ceremony were in the Han-style and were all embroidered by Modiste Jiang, who was like a sister to Xiaocao. When the girls present learned about this, the jealousy in their hearts became even stronger!

Fields of Gold Chapter 564

After Xiaocao and her sister changed their clothes, they went back into the reception hall and faced the guest of honor, the empress. Their first kowtow was to her, their second was to show their respect to their elders, and then they stood up and kneeled towards the east. The guest of honor washed her hands three times and then took the offered hairpins for the ceremony.

All of the matrons and young maidens present, who had envious hearts, had no reaction when they saw the two lavishly decorated hairpins that had valuable pink pearls embedded in them. This was because they were already numb to the situation. It was as if there weren't these extremely expensive hairpins present, then it would be abnormal for this ceremony.

The empress looked at the identical hairpins. Each one had several pink pearls decorating it. The pearls were all around the same size, perfectly round shapes, and seemed to glow gently under the light. Any one of these pearls would be considered a top-notch pearl on its own, let alone the dozen or so that were on each hairpin. It was said that Xiaocao herself had personally gathered these pearls from the ocean. It was already considered fortunate for an experienced pearl diver to get one such specimen during their career. The fact that she was able to get around twenty or so in one trip made it a bit odd.

Although the empress's heart was full of doubts, she still remembered why she was the guest of honor here today. She chanted, "By the auspiciousness of this day, and by the times of the moon, I give you this robe. With your family here, use these to actualize your virtues. May you enjoy boundless longevity and receive the joys of heaven."

Following that, she inserted invaluable pearl hairpins into Xiaocao's and her sister's hair and stood up to go back to her original position. The guests all squeezed out a smile and congratulated the two of them for reaching their coming of age. The two sisters then went back to the changing room and changed into extravagant long ceremonial robes with long sleeves that matched their hairpins perfectly.

Now that the two sisters were wearing their pearl hairpins paired with beautiful ceremonial robes that were embroidered all over with peonies, it made their previously slightly immature looks seem more charming and mature. Even the jealous female guests had no choice but to admit that the two sisters looked quite lovely and attractive. In fact, anyone in the room could tell that Royal Prince Yang's eyes were almost glued onto Yu Xiaocao and couldn't be pulled away. The two sisters then faced the emperor and saluted gracefully to show their respect for the imperial throne.

The heir of Marquis Anning and his wife directed the maidservants to set up the ceremonial table and to lay out the ceremonial wine and offerings out on the west side of the room. The empress took the two girls to take a seat and He Wanning presented the sweet and nourishing fruit wine. The empress took the ceremonial wine and walked to Yu Xiaocao and her sister, revealing a contented smile as she started to recite verses again, "A goblet full of sweet wine to add auspiciousness and fragrance. Accept it in worship for settling your prosperity. Take unto the beauty of the Heavens and remember this for a lifetime."

After the two of them kneeled again, they took the goblet of wine and saluted the guest of honor. This wine wasn't for the two sisters to drink. Instead, they kneeled again and sprinkled some of the wine onto the floor as a libation. Following that, they symbolically touched a bit of wine to their lips and returned the cup back onto the ceremonial table. There was some sweet cooked rice on the table, so the two of them symbolically ate a mouthful each. Then they kowtowed to the guest of honor and the empress returned the bow before standing back up at the east side of the steps.

They had to admit that the coming of age ceremony was quite complicated and full of rituals. The two of them had gone back and forth between the rooms, changing their clothes and kneeling and bowing all the time. The two of them were starting to feel quite dizzy from all of this. Xiaolian was well aware that she was riding on her younger sister's coattails in order to have all of these guests here to celebrate. Furthermore, it was also the only reason why she was able to get so up close to the empress herself.

Although she was quite nervous, she was also incredibly proud and a bit joyful too! She was proud and happy that she had such a capable younger sister who had brought so much glory to their whole family. She stealthily took a look at those noble young maidens, who usually had their noses up in the air, and saw their envious and jealous expressions. From that, the slight bit of inferiority and timidness she felt completely melted away and her movements became even more graceful and calm.

Next came the process of choosing a 'courtesy name' for the two sisters. The empress stood up and faced the east while Yu Hai, his wife, and Fang Zizhen and his wife stood up and faced the west. The empress chose the courtesy names for the two young maidens and recited a few more lines, "The rites



and rituals are prepared, and on this auspicious day and month, I announce your courtesy names. By a splendid courtesy name, it shall benefit your virtues. To show you chaste virtue, and forever keep you. You two shall be named 'Weihe' and 'Yongxi'."

The empress had recited so many ceremonial verses that were all written in classical Chinese. The two sisters felt like they were listening to an entirely different language and their heads were just floating along. They only understood the last verse. One of their courtesy names was 'Weihe' and the other was 'Yongxi'. Xiaolian's courtesy name came from 'Fine Rain on a Lotus Pond', as a misty rain falling upon lotus flowers was an enchanting sight. The mood the name evoked was good and the meaning behind it was auspicious. Xiaocao's courtesy name was 'Yongxi'. The character for 'Xi' referred to the first light of day and the character for 'Yong' meant forever. The meaning of her name evoked that she would forever bring light to the people and also gave them hope.

The emperor and empress had discussed this for a whole night before coming up with these two courtesy names. The profound meanings behind them caused the noble ladies in the crowd to fall into deep thought—this Yu Yongxi had given the common people hope, so was this person someone who they could afford to offend? Did it matter if you were jealous? Or envious at this point? After all, their daughters were only slightly talented but they had not done anything to benefit the people, so what leg did they have to stand on now?

At this time, Yu Xiaocao and her sister simultaneously replied, "Although I, Xiaocao (Xiaolian), may not be worthy, I dare not refuse the honor..." Following that, they bowed to the guest of honor and the guest of honor returned the salute. Then, all three of them returned to their respective places.

Xiaocao and her sister kneeled in front of their parents and listened to the instructions given to them. Yu Hai and his wife gratefully looked at their two beautiful daughters who had finally grown up. They had slight smiles on their faces as they said, "In a wink, you two have become adults. As your parents, we don't have any requests or expectations for you two. All we hope is that your lives in the future will be smooth and happy." Although their speech was quite plain and simple, their words showed just how deeply these two loved and cared for their daughters.

Fang Zizhen was also an uncouth fellow and didn't bother trying to make things sound poetic. He lifted his adopted daughter up with his arms and trumpeted loudly, "Your father is right! Young maidens shouldn't think so much. Supporting one's family and chasing positions and wealth is the job of a man. You two sisters should just be preoccupied with having happy lives in the future. If there's nothing to do, then spend more time with your friends. Play whatever you want to play and don't take such heavy responsibilities on your shoulders all the time. You've taken on so many weighty responsibilities on these slim shoulders of yours that we, as your fathers, feel very ashamed ah..."

The emperor, who was seated high above, felt the corner of his eyes twitch. Was Fang Zizhen encouraging his beloved official to stop working ah? Did Old Fang really think things through before he said such words in front of him?

Yu Xiaocao grinned broadly at her two fathers and said, "Father, Godfather! This daughter understands what you're both trying to say. However, my greatest happiness is to make a lot of money and count the money I make whenever I get bored! Therefore, you two may think that I'm very tired from engaging in so many businesses, but I actually take a lot of pleasure and fun in managing them!"

When her two sets of parents heard this, they all revealed helpless smiles. Fang Zizhen guffawed heartily and said, "Alright! Daughter, as long as you're happy, that's all that matters!"

Xiaolian pulled at her younger sister's sleeves and the two of them became solemn again and seriously answered, "This daughter may not be worthy, but I dare not disobey!" Then, they kowtowed again towards their parents.

The final segment of the ceremony required Xiaocao and her sister to be present and salute all of the guests to express their gratitude for attending. The two of them first bowed to the guest of honor, the other guests, the assistants, and the attendants. Everyone smiled gently at them and nodded their heads.

Yu Hai bowed to the crowd and thanked them, "My daughters, Yu Xiaolian and Yu Xiaocao, have now completed their coming of age ceremony. Thank you, honored guests, for your great kindness in participating. We have prepared some drinks and light refreshments downstairs. Please, everyone, head down and take your seats..." Madam Liu and Lady Fang respectfully led the female guests downstairs and also had the maidservants lead people into the already prepared private rooms.

Downstairs, there was a gargantuan cake that had these words written on it bright red jam: 'Congratulations Yu Xiaolian, Yu Xiaocao, for your coming of age ceremony'. Under the inquisitive and greedy eyes of the children there, the attendants sliced up the cake into small pieces and the waiters from Zhenxiu Restaurant served them to every table at the feast.

The banquet was sumptuous and delicious. The new style dishes especially caused the guests' taste buds to explode in flavor. The men had all been served the Yu Family's Winery and Distillery's new alcoholic beverage that had a high alcohol content. The generals especially enjoyed it. As for the women's and

children's tables, they had the sweet and sour fruit wine that also had health benefits. It was tasty and good for one's health.

The emperor, his imperial father, and his two imperial uncles sat at the same table. After toasting three rounds of wine, Zhu Junfan suddenly discovered that the table seemed to be missing one person, "Imperial Uncle, where's Junyang ah?"

Imperial Prince Jing drank a mouthful of the fresh and tasty Five Grains Liquid and lightly waved a hand, "Don't worry about him. Ever since we entered Zhenxiu Restaurant, I haven't seen heads or tails of the youngster. Earlier, if I hadn't come down from the third floor with Your Imperial Majesty, I wouldn't have even known that the brat had stealthily gone up to attend the ceremony! That stinky brat's heart only has room for his sweet and adorable future wife, so how could he possibly spend the time eating food with us?"

"What?! You stinky brats all went to the third floor to attend the ceremony? How come you didn't call your father up with you all? A bunch of good-for-nothings ah!!" When the emperor emeritus heard this, he angrily finished chewing his mouthful of honey roasted pork and indignantly slapped the table to hoot.

Imperial Prince Duan leisurely drank a mouthful of grape wine. With his body's current condition, it wasn't suitable for him to drink a more alcoholic drink. Following that, he calmly spoke to his father, "Imperial Father, you're the father of us three brothers. Junfan's father is me, your son! He couldn't even think of his own father when there was something fun to watch, how could he possibly think of his father's father?"

Imperial Prince Sa had shrunk down like a quail as soon as the emperor emeritus became angry. He didn't say anything but gave his eldest brother a big thumb's up. Only his eldest brother had the guts to tweak the tiger whiskers of their bad-tempered old father.

As expected, the emperor emeritus's pair of bushy eyebrows came together in a frown and he was just about to flip out when he noticed the prominently pale face of his oldest son. He turned his attention to his youngest son, who was making faces and growled, "Stinky brat, what sort of face are you making? You're old already and are already at the age of a grandfather but you still don't do anything proper. Are you not afraid that Little Xinxin thinks you're a joke?"

Little Xinxin was Imperial Prince Sa's grandson who hadn't even reached one year old. He had also been brought along. However, the child was currently with Imperial Prince Sa's heir's wife in one of the private rooms and eating delicious egg-drop soup.

Imperial Prince Sa revealed an innocent expression. He hadn't even said a word but why was he always the one being targeted? Luckily his second older brother was a true brother and helped him to change the target.

“Imperial Father, you're too right! Zhu Junyang is such a brat and doesn't even think of me, his father! All he can think of is his future wife's coming of age ceremony and he even boldly goes up to attend. Right now, I'm sure he's trying to figure out some way to see his wife alone somehow!” Imperial Prince Jing deliberately complained in a sour tone.

The guests who attended today were either people who had already had a good relationship with Xiaocao in the past or those who saw that she had a boundless future ahead of her and wanted to shamelessly worm their way in. That little lass had only arrived at the capital two to three years ago but she already had so many connections. This made him feel quite astonished and grateful. However, the fact that his future daughter-in-law was so capable gave him, as the future father-in-law, quite a bit of pressure. Perhaps...once his daughter-in-law married in, he should split that stinky brat from the family?

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At this time, Zhu Junyang didn't know that he was going to get kicked out by his father once he married his future wife who was too good at making money. He had taken advantage of the time when the guests were moving downstairs to secretly enter the east room.

His little lass was currently sitting next to the window. The light from the window illuminated that slightly smiling and pretty girl with a gentle veil of warmth. Her pair of lively and occasionally crafty or coquettish eyes were glowing with life. It was as if they could suck a person's soul away from them and make them bewitched.

He didn't know what Xiaolian had said but his little lass stopped looking out the window and turned around. Her pretty face had a hint of anger on it. In addition, the skin on her slight face seemed to glisten like the most precious jade and had the most perfect texture, glowing with health. It was as if she had been sculpted from a high-quality piece of jade.

Zhu Junyang suddenly had a saying that he didn't know where he got from flash through his head, 'A so-called beauty resembles a flower, has the demeanor of an immortal, the grace of the willow, bones like

jade, cold snow-like skin, and the limpid autumn water-like eyes...' Before he had known it, his little lass had already grown into a beautiful young lady!

Perhaps his staring was a bit too obvious or perhaps the two of them had their hearts linked together, but Xiaocao looked in the direction of where he was hiding and met his eyes directly. Zhu Junyang watched as the young maiden suddenly revealed a smile that seemed more gorgeous than spring flowers blooming. He immediately had a desire to go up and embrace his adorable little lass. Thus, Xiaolian and the two maidservants in the room seemed a lot more irksome now.

He frowned and thought for a bit before motioning at Xiaocao to 'wait a bit'. He stealthily left the room. Before long, Princess Consort Jing's most capable maidservant, Meixiang, entered the east room with a somewhat unnatural look on her face. She spoke to Xiaolian, "Miss Xiaolian, my mistress wants to see you to chat for a bit."

"Me? Older Sister Meixiang, are you sure Her Highness wants me?" Xiaolian was extremely surprised. Although Princess Consort Jing spent around half a year every year recuperating on the villa on the West Mountain, she still had very little contact with her. In addition, she didn't have the gift of gab like her younger sister. Why would the princess consort want to talk to her?

Meixiang secretly glanced at a particular corner in this room and nodded, "This servant is not mistaken. Her Highness truly wanted to see you."

Xiaocao had a faint idea of what was going on and glared at that hidden person in the corner. She comforted the slightly nervous Xiaolian, "Don't be nervous. Just treat Her Highness as a kind senior, alright?"

Xiaolian uneasily exited the east room and her maidservant naturally followed her. However, Wutong continued to stick to her own post. Meixiang thought for a bit and then smiled, "Miss Yu, this servant has something that I need Younger Sister Wutong to help with. Do you think..."

Xiaocao sighed within her heart and revealed a faint, knowing smile at Meixiang. She turned her head to address Wutong, "Since Older Sister Meixiang has asked, then I will have to agree to your request even though I care for my maid dearly. Wutong, go out with Older Sister Meixiang for a bit ah."

Wutong bowed slightly and said, "Young Miss, please wait a moment. This servant will go down and call Yangliu up to have her keep you company." In her thoughts, she believed that a good maidservant would never let her master be left without someone to take over her duties. If she went down, then the young miss wouldn't even have someone to pour more tea if need be. This would not do.

Meixiang smiled, "I'm just taking you out for a little bit. It's not as if your young miss will be kidnapped by a big bad wolf in that time!" As she spoke, she sent a glare at a particular corner in the room that harbored a big bad wolf and silently snickered in her heart.

With Zhu Junyang's powers, he could naturally tell what his lady mother's maidservant was thinking about. However, he didn't have the time to fight with her. His entire heart was focused on that delicate and sweet young maiden in front of him.

"What did you want to tell me that made you take all of the people out of this room?" Yu Xiaocao strolled over to the corner he was hiding in and yanked at the front piece of his clothing. She casually pulled him out into the open.

Since the young maiden had gotten closer to him, Zhu Junyang naturally could smell the little lass's unique and alluring scent coming off her body. His eyes darkened a few shades.

"It's your birthday today, so why can't this prince spend some quality time with you alone for a bit ah?" Zhu Junyang pulled at her wrist and gently embraced her against his chest. The little lass's soft and silky hair was underneath his chin and that alluring scent intensified. Furthermore, he didn't know when his lass had developed a more womanly body but they only had a few pieces of thin cloth between them. With her pressed against him, he could feel two soft little buns against his rock hard eight-pack abdomen. The softness made his mouth suddenly feel incredibly dry.

After having her hand being pulled and her face being rubbed, Yu Xiaocao felt her cheeks turn fiery hot. Everyone said that men were controlled by the bottom halves of their bodies. Although this fellow always claimed that he was waiting for her to turn eighteen before they married, she had just reached the age of majority and he couldn't seem to suppress his hungry side and was hugging her tightly. This fellow's chest was quite sturdy and felt as hard as steel. Her chin was starting to ache at this point. She started to curiously explore the muscles of his abdomen with her small hands...

"Are you satisfied with what you feel ah? Isn't this prince's body quite good ah?" Her cheek, which was pressed against his chest, vibrated a few times as she heard his somewhat hoarse voice speak. The voice held a hint of sexiness as it brushed past her ears.

"It's...it's not bad!" Yu Xiaocao buried her face, which was scalding hot at this point, deeper into his chest. A little snicker wound its way around her lips.

Zhu Junyang slightly lowered his head and he could see her slender and white neck, delicate and attractive collarbones, a bit of extra skin from where her collar had slipped a bit, and an alluring and bewitching dip. Zhu Junyang felt like his head was exploding at the moment and a wave of heat welled up and headed towards a particular part of his body.

Yu Xiaocao felt that the arms around her had suddenly tightened and her soft and delicate body had been pressed even harder against a particular fellow's firm body. Her chest area, especially, started to ache from the prolonged contact and being squished. She lightly wiggled a bit but was soon stopped by a pair of large hands.

"Don't move! Let this prince hold you..." Zhu Junyang was in the midst of being tortured with happiness. He started to feel that he wanted to enjoy the feeling of this soft body against his for as long as possible.

He looked down at his adorable little girl, who had her bright red lips slightly parted open and a somewhat silly expression on her face. That look completely stoked the fires within him. He held onto the young maiden's shoulders and gently pushed her away before turning his body slightly to avoid a direct look from his lass's alluring eyes.

Her delicate pink and soft lips seemed to have a faint and dangerous fragrance coming off of them. His usual iron self control was starting to loosen. His throat moved up and down and he could hear himself hoarsely say, "This prince has prepared a very special present to congratulate you on reaching your coming of age..."

"A present? Didn't you already give me a diamond hairpin and helped me find the best jewelry maker to craft my pearl hairpin..." Yu Xiaocao looked a bit perplexed. The confused expression on her face, when seen in a certain person's eyes, looked incredibly adorable and tempting.

"Those didn't count. What I really wanted to give to you was—myself!" As he finished talking, he lowered his head to accurately peck at those beautiful petal-like lips. Originally, Zhu Junyang only planned on stealing a brief kiss from her but the lass's warm lips were too tempting and fragrant, which made it impossible for him to stop there.

Zhu Junyang acted as if he was bewitched as he gently bit down on the young maiden's tender red lips. His tongue swiped quickly around the perimeter of her perfect mouth and softly teased her lips open to get a taste of the sweet inside. Xiaocao, who had suddenly been attacked, felt her head turn completely blank.

Although she was already an old maid in her early thirties in her past life, she had been preoccupied with working and making money the entire time. Dating had become a luxury for her. On the few blind dates she went on, they had never even reached the stage of holding hands, let alone stealing kisses from each other.

In the past, she always thought that entwining her tongue with someone else's and exchanging saliva was a very disgusting prospect. But why was her heart beating so fast now and she was starting to feel a strange form of...pleasure?

As her lips were being thoroughly plundered in a gentle and soft manner by the man in front of her, she could hear the ambiguous sounds of panting coming from the two of them. Her mind seemed to be completely blank and a feeling of helplessness rose within her. However, her body seemed to instinctively know what to do and reacted honestly. She felt like her soft and delicate body was starting to melt into a warm puddle from all of this. Her cherry red lips opened further in invitation, revealing a soft pink tongue within.

The young maiden's body had a fragrant scent wafting off of it and it was extremely alluring and tempting. Furthermore, now that her delicate tongue was now inadvertently revealed, this only increased the temptation. Zhu Junyang felt like there was a violent wave of heat surging inside his chest as if a fierce tiger was trying to claw its way out. His large hands had begun to surreptitiously roam further down her body naughtily and were now around her willowy and soft waist.

Although he was self-taught, he was doing quite well in ravaging and conquering the girl's lips. His disobedient tongue began to wind itself and play with her bright white teeth before it slipped further into her mouth. As it explored inquisitively, it continued to teasingly lick and sample within to get as much sweetness as it could.

As soon as it encountered the smaller tongue, which didn't seem to know what to do, it became much more excited and rushed forward. Zhu Junyang caressed and began to gently nip at Xiaocao's small tongue in a sensuous dance. When the smaller tongue tried to dodge and run away in embarrassment, his larger tongue vehemently chased it down and captured it again.



The feeling of having her tongue entwined with another's provoked another new feeling that Xiaocao had never felt before. She felt incredibly woozy and there didn't seem to be a bit of strength left in her body. She could only weakly lean against the tall and strong man and let him continue to do as pleased. Suddenly, a particular hard object seemed to jab against her body and jolted her out of this misty dreamscape. She pushed with her arms in an effort to get further away from this fellow who was enjoying the feast a bit too much.

She had read a few raunchy novels in her past life, so she naturally knew what that object was. When men became...aroused, they really didn't have much logic left in their minds. Although she had already accepted this person in front of her after many years of testing, they were living in ancient times. In these times, having any sort of physical intimacy prior to marriage was a huge taboo and would bring shame upon her. She truly didn't want such a giant scandal to come out on her own coming of age ceremony!

Fields of Gold Chapter 566

Now that she had her reason back, Yu Xiaocao used her small fists to pummel the guy in front of her. However, her tiny bit of strength only tickled the fellow in front of her, who was in his prime and very strong. It didn't seem to affect him at all as he continued to steal kisses.

His rock hard abdomen and a certain something seemed to heat up even more and become harder. It poked against Xiaocao, making her feel quite uncomfortable. She knew that it was pointless to struggle as it would serve to excite a certain fellow. After going through her options in her woozy head, she forcefully bit down on the fellow's lips. However, when the iron taste of blood touched her lips, the fellow seemed to not care and continued to lick and nibble at her swollen and bright red lips.

She reached out a hand and accurately pinched the fellow's attractive nose closed. He had to breathe sooner or later, which meant that he had to let her go! Yu Xiaocao's eyes glittered with a crafty light. However, she didn't expect that Zhu Junyang had a very good lung capacity and continued to ravage her lips for a long time before he finally let her go.

"Deng Tuzi, such a pervert!!" Yu Xiaocao scuttled away in that one moment when he had regained his mind. She glared at him in displeasure and her swollen and red lips were in a pout. Her eyes had a tinge of fury in them, which made Zhu Junyang feel quite puzzled.

"Tell me the truth!! Have you kissed a lot of women before? Which is why you're not the least bit unfamiliar with the techniques?" Yu Xiaocao put her hands on her hips and had a sour, jealous expression on her face. She looked quite fierce at this moment.

“This prince is being wrongly accused. Other than you, who else is attractive enough for me to kiss? Don't you know ah? All men instinctively know what to do, so we're all self taught. In addition, this prince has been kissing you in my dreams for a long time. Isn't it better that I seem practiced?” Zhu Junyang had a righteous expression on his face, and he was secretly delighted that the little lass was feeling jealous.

Yu Xiaocao glared at him suspiciously for some time and couldn't detect a hint of guilt anywhere. Only then did she reluctantly say, “Hmph! This time I'll let you go. If I find out that you dared to fool around with other women, I will make sure to drug you such that you're unable to...perform!”

“Pfffft——” Zhu Junyang had almost just choked on his own saliva and he frowned. He used his pair of seductive phoenix eyes to inspect the little lass as he remarked in displeasure, “Where did you hear such nonsense? If this prince is unable to...perform, what are you going to do?”

Yu Xiaocao's cheeks flushed a bright red and she leveled a glare at him and growled, “If you're ever disloyal, then I will sweep you out of the door. When the time comes, we will no longer interact with each other for even a second. Thus, why would I care whether you can perform or not? Don't forget, I've learned medicine, so I've naturally skimmed through and seen what certain conditions a man can have...”

“In the future, stop looking at those weird medical texts. It's not as if we need to rely on your medicinal skills to make money! If you want to make money, next month when the ships set off to the western hemisphere, I'll have them trade tea and porcelain for precious gems and diamonds. We can open a jewelry store, which doesn't require much capital and make a lot of profit...”

His little wife was very good at a lot of things and most of these skills seemed to come out of nowhere. For example, the lass claimed that she had spent time with her village's barefoot doctor when she was young, learning the basics. However, her skills were such that they sometimes even surpassed the imperial physicians. As for her ability to concoct medications...Zhu Junyang suddenly felt a bit helpless. His wife had too many secrets. In the future, it looked like he had a lot of cleaning up after her to do!

“Why are we talking about medicine now ah? Be a bit more serious. Right now, we're discussing whether or not you're able to stay loyal in one relationship!” Yu Xiaocao had almost been taken astray by this change of topic and hurriedly went back to the problem at hand.

Zhu Junyang saw that his future little wife was brandishing her power, so, as a future husband who knew how to bend and sway with the situation, he hurriedly said in a solemn manner, "Don't worry, this prince will absolutely be loyal to you alone. In my twenty-two years of life, other than you, there hasn't been a second woman around me! My feelings are definitely more loyal and long-lasting than Little Black and Little White's feelings toward you!"

Seeing that he was comparing himself to Little Black and Little White, a brilliant smile appeared on Yu Xiaocao's face. Zhu Junyang couldn't help but step forward a couple of times in an attempt to take advantage of her again. However, his plans were cut short by the sounds of people talking outside, "The banquet has already started downstairs. Why hasn't the young miss gone down? Eh? Wutong, how come you're not in the room?"

"Older Sister Meixiang needed me to help her out with something and I already got permission from the young miss. Yangliu, how do you have the time to come up ah?" Wutong was a bit puzzled by what had happened. It was clearly a very simple task that any maid would be able to handle. Why did Older Sister Meixiang need her especially for it? However, Meixiang was her young miss's future mother-in-law's personal maidservant. She needed to bury her doubts within her heart no matter what.

Yangliu had a bit of excitement in her voice, "The giant cake downstairs has already been cut and served and all of the other desserts have been displayed appropriately. It's been a while since I last saw the young miss so I wanted to greet her on this special day and give her my congratulations!"

Yu Xiaocao could hear the sounds of the two maidservants approaching. She looked at Zhu Junyang's lips, which had been injured from her bite, that stopped moving about two inches from hers and restrained a laugh as she said, "Wutong is back. Are you not going to hide again?"

The sound of a soft sigh came out of Zhu Junyang's mouth and he looked at that delicate and pretty face in front of him and softly said, "Lass, let's not wait until you're sixteen. Can we get engaged before the end of the year?"

"It's only a few months difference. You've already waited for this many years, does it matter if you wait a few short months more? That being said, an engagement isn't marriage. Did you think we'd start becoming intimate right after getting engaged?" Yu Xiaocao quipped.

"After the engagement, you'll have my name all over you and then those crazy wolves won't dare to approach you anymore. Don't think that just because this prince has been spending a lot of time at the barracks that I've neglected keeping an eye out on what's happening in the capital. Don't you think Duke

Ronguo's second son is interested in you? Every time you organize an event, he brings his younger brother along to shamelessly join you. That fellow has a face that attracts women. In fact, the first time you saw him, you were entranced by his appearance!" Now the one feeling jealous was Zhu Junyang.

His little lass pretty much had no defenses against men who had outstanding looks. Every time she saw Chief Steward Su Ran, her eyes began to sparkle so much that they could blind a person. If Chief Steward Su wasn't an eunuch, Zhu Junyang would have long started a fight with the other fellow! The second young master of the Ning Family had been complimented by the lass for having a gentlemanly exterior and a refined appearance. In his eyes, however, the other youth was only faking it!

"Alright ah, alright! Stop bringing up these old rotten topics. How old was I then? I was only admiring him like I would a painting! Wutong and the others are almost at the door, are you still not going to leave now?" Yu Xiaocao pushed him towards the window and watched as he climbed over the windowsill and sat down.

Zhu Junyang turned his head around and, with a rascally expression on his face, threatened, "Kiss me one more time. Otherwise, this prince will just sit here and not leave!"

She could already hear the sound of the door opening behind her. Helpless, Yu Xiaocao pecked at his lips as lightly as a butterfly. As the sounds of people walking approached her, she forcefully pushed Zhu Junyang's back and didn't care that they were up on the third floor. In her eyes, with his martial arts skills, even if he fell off a thirteen story building he would be fine, let alone a three story fall.

"Young Miss, let this servant do it instead, alright?" Wutong saw that her young miss was standing in front of the open window and thought that she was about to close it so she hurried over and shut the shutters. At this time, Zhu Junyang, who was hanging off of the windowsill, saw the window being closed and licked his lips, wishing that he could continue. His little lass was truly too sweet. It was such a pity that her maids were too quick! However, in the future, there were plenty of other opportunities. Now he should go attend the little lass's birthday feast!

Zhu Junyang gracefully walked into the banquet hall. By the time he arrived at his assigned table, everyone there had already drunk plenty of wine and eaten until they were half full.

Zhu Junfan keenly spotted that there were some tell-tale teeth marks near his younger cousin's lips and he secretly laughed. It looked like this fellow had tried to steal a kiss from a beauty. Not bad, not bad at all, the child was teachable and seemed to resemble himself during his youth.

“You stinky brat, where were you ah? How come you only got back now? If you came back any later, you wouldn't be able to have a share of your little wife's birthday cake!” There was a piece of cake in front of Zhu Junyang's seat. That piece had the word 'Cao' written on it with bright red jam and it was obvious that it had been especially reserved for him.

“Imperial Grandfather, Imperial Majesty, my two imperial uncles...” Zhu Junyang greeted all of his family members one after another. His usually cold and icy face didn't seem to be as frosty today. Instead he seemed quite lively, which made everyone at the table gape in astonishment.

The emperor emeritus was currently chewing on some sliced pig ears in chili oil and loudly remarked, “That's the spirit ah! Young people need to smile more in order to make girls like them! You look the most like myself when I was young. I just remember, back then, although we were quite poor, there were still plenty of young maidens eyeing me in admiration...”

Imperial Prince Jing glanced at his father's large face that was as round as a pancake paired with a fat double chin. Then he turned to glance at his younger son's slender and well-sculpted face that was paired with alluring phoenix eyes. His lips twitched involuntarily—this old man was clearly too overconfident about his own looks! Junyang was obviously the son that most resembled his mother in looks. If the emperor emeritus had to be compared to someone else's looks, then he should be using the emperor, who had large eyes and fierce manly eyebrows.

Imperial Prince Sa stared fixedly at the teeth marks near Zhu Junyang's mouth and he snickered endlessly. Finally, he couldn't resist and teased the younger man, “Oh ho, Boy Yang, what happened to your mouth? You were only gone for a bit so how did that happen?”

Zhu Junyang idly touched the wound near his mouth and revealed a bit of softness in his expression. He immediately became serious to confront the insatiable curiosity of the older man and drilly said, “Nothing much, I wasn't careful earlier and was injured by a little wild cat who bit me...”

Imperial Prince Sa's son, Zhu Junxu, was similar to his father and liked to tease other people. When he heard his cousin's explanation, he snickered and said, “Oh ho! This little wild cat must know martial arts in order to injure our Royal Prince Yang, who has exceptional skills. Furthermore, its ability to target your mouth accurately shows that it's quite impressive!”

When Zhu Junyang sent an icy glower at him, Zhu Junxu shivered and hurriedly showed his cousin that he wasn't going to say any more. He buried his head down towards his plate to eat more delicious food as he silently cursed the other fellow, 'Stinky brat. With your cold and stupid personality, it'd be a miracle if any girl liked you! Getting bitten by someone else is karma for you!'

When Yu Xiaocao and her sister came over to toast their table, all of the people there noticed immediately that her lips seemed to be a bit swollen and red. Hence, all of their expressions as they looked at her seemed a bit ambiguous. Under the slightly puzzled looks of Madam Liu and Lady Fang, Yu Xiaocao angrily glared at the criminal in question and pretended as if nothing had happened while she toasted each imperial family member at the table. After saying a few words of gratitude, she immediately fled. She was afraid that someone might link her with Zhu Junyang and spill the beans to her two mothers!

Fields of Gold Chapter 567

Ever since that passionate kiss during her coming of age ceremony, Yu Xiaocao discovered that Zhu Junyang had become much more clingy compared to before.

The firearms camps portion of Xishan Barracks had already started. With the emperor, who loved and was fascinated by firearms, at the forefront at this project, they needed to make sure that progress on developing and manufacturing firearms and red coat cannons was going well. Those soldiers under Royal Prince Yang, who had been assigned to the firearms camp, each had a firearm assigned to them and every battalion was given a large cannon.

After he delegated the task of training these new firearms to Dong Dali, who had already become a skilled gunman, Zhu Junyang became much more idle. He took on the task of escorting his future little wife to and from her tasks at the Imperial Plantation. Occasionally he'd steal a kiss from her. Thus, the days passed idly and happily for him.

At this time, whether it was the capital's seed breeding program or the Yu Family's commercial farmstead, they were all operating smoothly. The capital's seed breeding program had been split into four large farmsteads and each one had an overseer who was personally sent over by the emperor to keep an eye on things. They were already two years into the program and everyone working there knew the drill. Prior to the plowing seasons, Xiaocao would go to each farmstead to deliver her 'specially prepared' seeds. In addition, she also took the time to inspect the wells at each place.

Some of the stewards in the plantation discovered that the seeds that Official Yu sent over didn't have much difference between the seeds that were produced there. Thus, they tried an experiment and grew a batch of seeds on a separate plot of land. When it was time to harvest, they discovered that the yield between the two types of seeds wasn't very different from one another.

However, when these seeds were sold on the market, the officials in those areas got accused by the farmers who bought them. They claimed that those stores had sold counterfeit high-yielding seeds as they gave an output of around one hundred to two hundred catties per mu less than the other villages. For the commoners, their crop outputs were even more important than their lives. Wasn't selling counterfeit seeds tantamount to killing them?

Since the outputs between the two types of seeds were so different, even though they were sold at the same shops, this made people question what might have happened. After a thorough investigation, they discovered that the seeds that had lower yields were all products that had not gone through Official Yu's hands.

With such a report that had 'the facts', they found out that Official Yu always used a special type of 'plant liquid' that not only increased the yield of the seeds but also prevented pests from damaging them. Consequently, there were some shrewd people who wanted to force Yu Xiaocao to bring out the recipe in the open and the 'lawsuit' had even been sent up to the emperor.

The emperor was well aware of Xiaocao's hidden hand, so he found a suitable excuse and helped Xiaocao smooth this all over. However, this wasn't the true solution he was looking for. After all, the little divine stone would one day go back to its home dimension. Once that happened, wouldn't all of the high-yielding crops they had now revert back to the way things were at the start of the dynasty?

In private, the emperor urged Xiaocao to experiment with methods to breed real high-yield seeds. In addition, he commanded the Ministry of Works to develop more high tech machinery for the use in farming, such as seed drillers, crop harvesters and threshing machines.

Yu Xiaocao consulted with the little divine stone about this problem. She found out from it that once it restored all of its powers, it would help her alter the genetic materials of the seeds before it left. That way, they would truly have wheat seeds capable of producing a thousand catties per mu. With that guarantee on hand, Yu Xiaocao no longer had to worry about this issue. After all, she wasn't a true farming expert and wasn't able to become like Yuan Longping . She mostly relied on the little divine stone as her cheat item for this.

“Lass, the autumn corn has already been harvested and the winter wheat has been sowed. You promised me in the past that you would help this prince start a good horse breeding program. Isn't it about time for you to make good on that promise?” After Zhu Junyang had organized everything at the

firearms camps to his liking, he once again started to ponder about his desire to create a standing cavalry.

Cavalries had the advantage of being incredibly mobile and fast, so their attack power was quite high. In Zhu Junyang's eyes, the Great Ming Dynasty needed to build their own cavalry, and the sooner the better. Troops on horseback could speedily chase after enemies, surround them, mount sneak attacks, and provide rescue missions. A charging cavalry could effectively deal with a battalion of crudely equipped foot troops. Furthermore, troops on horseback relied on the speed of their horses to travel. This meant that they could strike an enemy's camp like lightning and effectively break apart their formation. The imposing looks of a cavalry could also strike at an enemy's morale and make them cower back in fear. All in all, for foot troops, a well-trained cavalry was their worst nightmare.

At the northern borders of the Great Ming Empire there were fierce nomad tribes that were on horseback. On the wide prairies, their superiority over foot troops in battle could easily be seen. Time after time, the Great Ming Empire's army had suffered losses against them. It was particularly bad once winter set in. For the sake of obtaining food and other goods, these enemy tribes adopted guerilla warfare tactics and would strike border villages like the wind. After plundering and killing all of the inhabitants there, they would then flee like ghosts. By the time the Great Ming's army arrived, all that was leftover were the grisly corpses of the dead villagers and the burnt out shell of the village. The soldiers stationed at the borders naturally hated these tribal horse cavalry units to the heavens.

There were also other high-ranking military officers who had wanted to create fast cavalry units to fight against these attacks. However, where would they get their supply of good horses? The outside nomad tribes naturally wouldn't sell or trade their best horses to the Great Ming Empire to be used against themselves. As for the horse breeders within the country, they didn't have good bloodlines to work with so they naturally couldn't produce horses that could be of any threat to the nomads. If they attempted to forcefully create these cavalry units without a good supply of horses, then they would end up being ineffective units in the end.

Zhu Junyang had long been eyeing Yu Xiaocao's beloved horse, Little Red. In fact, he had especially invited horse experts over to inspect Little Red from head to toe but ended up getting inconclusive findings. Many of the experts who had examined Little Red stated that the horse was of a typical hybrid breed that was found in the country and that breed was usually considered inferior. These horses were typically used to transport cargo or pull wagons. However, they had no idea how its master had raised it to transform an inferior breed into such a prime specimen. If it weren't for Zhu Junyang's high and mighty status as a royal prince, those horse experts would have chased after him incessantly, begging him to tell them his secrets in raising and feeding horses.



Zhu Junyang was even more certain that Xiaocao had a method on her hands to alter an inferior horse into a good horse. Naturally, if Xiaocao didn't want to reveal this secret, he wouldn't force her to. His backup plan would be to bring along some troops armed with firearms and sneak into enemy territory to steal their horses.

However, his little lass didn't fail him this time either. He only proposed the issue and the little lass easily agreed to his request. However, Xiaocao told him that all of the credit of breeding good horses needed to go to him as well as the expert breeders he brought along. Zhu Junyang was quite happy to serve as a smokescreen for the little lass and deliberately chose two soldiers from the hidden guard ranks to become these expert horse breeders and trainers and announced it publicly.

On a bright and beautiful morning, Royal Prince Yang received an imperial decree and headed towards the northern border along with his two 'horse experts' to begin his breeding and training program.

For the past two years, the firearms camp's soldiers had participated in missions to suppress and protect the borders from bandits, and they did extremely well. Furthermore, they hadn't lost a single soldier but had managed to capture three enemy cities. It could be said that the soldiers within the firearm camps were extremely well disciplined and trained in tactics and battling. At court, even those military officials, who didn't see quite eye to eye with Zhu Junyang, had to admire his abilities at training and drilling troops.

When Zhu Junyang went to court and impassionately described the advantages of building up a cavalry as well as starting a horse breeding program, the entire court was silent. After all, was making a successful horse breeding and training program that easy? Was having good horse trainers alone enough to reach their goals? Where would they be getting these good bloodlines? Many of the officials thought that Royal Prince Yang's idea was a bit too far fetched and decided to wait and laugh at him when he failed.

However, the emperor thought that this idea was a good one because, two days prior, Xiaocao had entered the palace to speak to the empress. Afterwards, she had asked him to allow her to go with Zhu Junyang to the borders to start the horse breeding program. With Yu Xiaocao's golden finger along, Zhu Junfan was looking forward to the results of this endeavor.

If the Great Ming Empire could have a cavalry equipped with fine horses and modern firearms, then no one around them would be able to beat their military superiority! Every man had a dream of accomplishing something big and grand in his life and every emperor hoped to have a flourishing country with a strong military. Zhu Junfan felt his heart fill with excitement at this prospect and

immediately gave Xiaocao permission to go along. Furthermore, he also sent Chief Steward Su Ran to become the overseer there.

Consequently, when it was time to head out, there was an addition of a handsome man, dressed entirely in ethereal immortal white, to their group. With such a piece of eye candy by her side, Xiaocao was naturally in good spirits while Zhu Junyang sulked. Originally, this was supposed to be a sweet and sappy journey for the two of them. No man would be happy with such an eye-catching third wheel tagging along.

The emperor also sent a squadron of the firearms camps from Xishan Barracks along to act as guards for the horse breeding program. Although the nomad tribes near the borders had become a lot more quiet after getting defeated a few times, this horse raising ranch was right by the border. They needed to prevent the enemy foreigners from playing tricks and sabotaging this endeavor.

The two person journey Zhu Junyang had hoped for had now turned into a grand procession full of people. It didn't bother him much that there were a bunch of small insects tagging along. However, he was quite upset that his lass regarded that stupid and extremely handsome eunuch with admiration and joy.

Perhaps he should find an excuse to fight a bout with that stupid eunuch? However, if he lost the spar, how would his little lass regard him then? Argh! He had to endure this instead! Since he didn't have a guarantee that he would be able to win against Chief Steward Su, he could only bear with the other person's presence for now.

"Sir Su, try some of my hazel grouse stew! We were quite lucky today to be able to shoot down a hazel grouse. Everyone says that hazel grouses have tasty and tender meat, so this stew should be quite delicious!" While they were camping outside, Yu Xiaocao had ladled up a bowl of stew for Su Ran and happily enjoyed having a meal with such a handsome person. It was truly something that delighted her!

"Cao'er, this prince also wants to drink some hazel grouse stew..." Royal Prince Yang, who had been coldly ignored at the side, now acted like a large dog begging for attention. He pitifully asked Xiaocao to give him some food too.

Yu Xiaocao, on the other hand, didn't even glance at him as she replied, "There's more in the pot, so go get some yourself! Sir Su, how's the taste? My cooking skills are decent, right?"

The elegant smile on Su Ran's handsome face warmed by a few degrees and he slowly nodded his head, "The meat from the hazel grouse is tender and flavorful, and it has been cooked perfectly. Everything in the soup complements each other to a superb degree, so it tastes splendid!"

Jealousy exploded within Zhu Junyang's heart as he stared fixedly at Chief Steward's Su Ran's incredibly good-looking face. He had to inwardly admit that this stupid eunuch was truly quite handsome, especially when he smiled warmly. That smile was enough to warm a person from head to toe. In fact, this was his little lass's preferred type of man! At the same time, he shamelessly rejoiced that it was fortunate that Su Ran was a eunuch. Otherwise, there would be no guarantees that his little lass wouldn't change her affections.

"Lass, you're being a bit too biased here, right? This prince killed the hazel grouse, and I also plucked it and started the fire...he didn't do anything but he gets to enjoy the fruits of your labor. This prince wants to drink some stew but I even have to get it myself! It's not fair!!" A bit of hurt tinged Zhu Junyang's phoenix eyes and he had a pathetic looking expression on his face.

Su Ran faintly glanced at Zhu Junyang to 'appease' the younger man but he was inwardly howling with laughter. Watching Royal Prince Yang drink sour vinegar every day was truly too amusing. In fact, it made him want to eat two extra bowls of rice every day!

Fields of Gold Chapter 568

Zhu Junyang's new assistant, Hou Xiaoliang hurriedly helped his master to ladle a bowl of soup. He grinned, "Master, you don't need to do anything. This one will help you get some food!"

"You are quite diligent...but does this prince want you to serve me food? Go away!" Zhu Junyang was annoyed by this fellow's inability to read the situation. Was this prince really asking for soup ah? No! This prince was trying to make a certain person serve him soup!

In the end, Yu Xiaocao could no longer ignore Zhu Junyang's pathetic act and also ladled up a bowl of stew for him. She watched as he gulped it down and then sigh in an exaggerated manner. She was simultaneously irritated and amused by his ridiculous actions. For a guy who was over twenty years old, he truly acted quite childish sometimes. Naturally, his so-called childish act was only really revealed around her.

Yu Xiaocao pushed out a food item called 'beggar's chicken' from the campfire and instructed Zhu Junyang to break the mud shell off of the chicken, revealing the inner lotus leaves layer. Immediately, a puff of tantalizing smell hit everyone's noses. She ripped off a large chicken leg and served it to Su Ran.

Then, with a certain someone staring at her with grievance in his eyes, she tore off the other leg and shoved it into his mouth. Finally, she served herself the two chicken wings as a part of her dinner.

Yu Xiaocao gnawed on her chicken wings as she looked around her surroundings. They were already approaching the border and the area around them had markedly become more open and crude. Other than a few small tree glades here and there, the rest was just a vast grassland. She casually threw her finished chicken bones into the fire and wiped her hands clean with the handkerchief Zhu Junyang handed to her. A sudden thought came to her mind, prompting her to ask, "In this wilderness, you really can't see many people around. Are there wolf packs in the area?"

"It's fine. Even if there are wolf packs, we have a lot of people here and they wouldn't dare to approach us on their own—however, if there were people who decided to lure them to us, then that's a whole different story!" Zhu Junyang had a serious look on his face as he stared fixedly in the direction of a glade of trees. The aura around him seemed to be full of fierce intent, as if he was a sharp sword ready to be used at any time.

Su Ran calmly used a pure white handkerchief to wipe his hands and the smile on his face became even more warm and gentle. Those who knew him would know that Chief Steward Su had a particular habit. The kinder and gentler the smile on his face, the more cruel he was willing to be. In a moment's notice, he could switch from being as soft as a spring breeze to as chillingly cold as a winter's storm, with a severed person's head in his hand. He was truly the epitome of the smiling King of Hell.

The two of them made an interesting pair. One was the smiling King of Hell while the other was the cold-faced God of Death. However, they had the same merciless and cruel mindset when they needed to act.

Yu Xiaocao, who was a bit slow to react, lowered her head to take a sip of hazel grouse soup and then glanced at Zhu Junyang, who was giving off a chilly aura. Then she looked briefly at Sir Su, whose smile resembled the beautiful sight of a glade of blooming peach trees. She finally seemed to sense something and asked, "What's wrong? Are there enemies around?"

Su Ran smiled reassuringly at her and said, "Not an issue, just a few wild wolves in the area. If you're afraid, go hide in the tent. Once we get rid of this wolf pack, then you can come out again."

"There really is a pack of wolves? Just look at this inauspicious mouth of mine. I just casually mentioned it and it came true!" Yu Xiaocao watched as the soldiers around her made preparations one by one and thought about the time when that pack of wolves descended on her village. One or two wolves weren't too scary but a whole pack of them could not be underestimated.

Zhu Junyang looked back at Xiaocao and stated in an uneasy manner, "Go call Little Black and Little White over. I'll feel better with them protecting you!"

Before he even finished his last sentence, under the light of the moon, two figures, one black and one white, rapidly approached them. Before the firearms troops could react, the two creatures had already jumped through the group of people and accurately landed right next to Xiaocao. They resembled two extremely loyal bodyguards with their master sandwiched in between them.

Su Ran, who was only around two steps away from Xiaocao, lightly petted Little White, who was about the height of a grown man when sitting down. Little White merely glanced at him arrogantly. The white wolf had a solitary and aloof personality and even members of the Yu Family, other than Xiaocao and Little Shitou, who had grown up with it, were warned away with bared fangs. However, all animals had an instinctual sixth sense and Little White could tell that Su Ran wasn't someone to be trifled with. It only looked back at the man with an impatient expression in its eyes. If it were anyone else, it would have already growled and howled in protest.

The night breeze that blew by held the faint scent of blood and there were small green lights that seemed to be approaching them. With the light of the moon helping her, Yu Xiaocao, who had keen eyesight, could faintly see a few staggering figures in front of a wolf pack.

"Ya! Quickly go save them!" Yu Xiaocao couldn't help but let out a cry when she saw another figure fall down and perish beneath the wolf pack.

"Stay obediently next to Chief Steward Su. This prince will go and take a look!" Zhu Junyang could hear a faint trace of sympathy in the lass's voice. If they continued to watch and observe, he was afraid that his kind-hearted lass would end up feeling remorse in the future for not doing anything.

Yu Xiaocao looked at the dense glowing green lights in the distance and couldn't help but warn him, "You need to be careful ah..."

The tall and study figure of Zhu Junyang, who was dressed in black and armored well, quickly disappeared into the dark sky. With her keen eyes that were nourished by mystic-stone water, Yu Xiaocao was able to see exactly what was going on in the distance. The people who were fleeing seemed to have seen the light of their fire and received another burst of energy. The group was shielding a person in the middle as they did their best to rush over as fast as they could.

However, these people were exhausted and already wounded. How could they possibly out run a pack of wolves who had already been excited to a bloodthirst? From the group, another two split out and used their own bodies to slow down the savaging pack in order to give their master a few more seconds of precious time. The person, who was being pushed forward by the rest, would, from time to time, look back and let out sorrowful and anguished cries when he saw more people die.

“Derang! Xiujie!” Yelu Rong watched as his bodyguards fell one by one. They had managed to avoid getting slaughtered by the traitors but now they were losing their lives to the jaws of the wolves.

“Your Majesty! Run away quickly and don't let our brothers' sacrifices be in vain!” Yelu Rong's two other bodyguards each held an arm as they forced their exhausted and wounded bodies forward. Their goal was to reach that campfire, that shining flame of hope.

Around this time of year, no one else would be in the area other than some merchant caravans. Judging by the size and light of the fire, this group of merchants probably had a decent number of people. They prayed that these merchants had brought enough bodyguards with them to get rid of the devils chasing them...

When Zhu Junyang dropped out of the sky like a god, Yelu Rong only had two loyal bodyguards left. The rest of them had already died under the jaws of the wolves.

Zhu Junyang neatly kicked away a wolf that was leaping towards Yelu Rong's back. With a few graceful moves of the sword in his hand, he easily pushed back a few other fierce wolves that were at the head of the pack. Zhu Junyang used his right hand to pick up Yelu Rong, who was wounded in his leg, by the collar. In a few quick movements, he quickly brought the injured person back to camp. Without their master slowing them down, the other two bodyguards picked up their speed and fled swiftly towards the glowing campfires.

When Little Black saw the approaching wolf pack, it became so excited that it couldn't sit still anymore. It clawed at the ground with its large paws and its shining blue eyes stared fixedly at the alpha wolf in the middle of the pack. Little Black's normal strategy was to target the leader of the group first.

The wolf pack had also long discovered that there were other people here. As they got closer, they could smell the alluring scent of their 'prey', which made them even more excited and vicious. There were at least a hundred animals in this pack of wolves and they had been a terror to the area for quite some

time. The merchants that traveled in this area banded together for safety and even that wasn't a guarantee that a tragedy wouldn't happen. As for the officials nearby, they didn't have enough soldiers on hand to destroy this pack of wolves so they were quite helpless as well.

Wolves who had already had the taste of human meat were even more vicious than usual and they weren't the least bit cowed by the sight of more people. The fire illuminated their shadowy figures and Hou Xiaoliang couldn't help but shiver when he saw densely packed figures of wolves with their glowing green eyes. He blurted out, "Holy moly! So many! Did you lure over all of the nearby wolves in this area ah?"

Yelu Rong nervously watched as his two bodyguards, who hadn't reached their circle of safety, continued to run towards them. He opened his mouth in an attempt to ask for help, but before he could, he heard the sound of a wolf howling behind him. It scared him so much that his legs buckled and he fell flat onto the ground.

Even Hou Xiaoliang had been caught off guard and was a bit frightened by the howl. He turned his head around and discovered that the large black dog next to his future mistress was currently raising its head and howling to the sky.

"Oh my! Even hunting dogs can imitate wolves now. Did Little Black just learn this ah?" Hou Xiaoliang scratched at his ear as he quietly mumbled. Compared to the calm and steady Dong Dali, Hou Xiaoliang had a bit more liveliness and nervous energy.

When the wolf pack heard Little Black howling, they all stopped moving one after another, giving the two bodyguards a chance to flee with their lives. The two of them stumbled into the vicinity of the campfire, and their faces still held traces of lingering fear.

"Awoooooo——" A tall and big gray wolf came out of the middle of the pack and gave a warning howl at Little Black. It was as if it was trying to say, 'This is my domain, so all outsiders need to scam.'

How could Little Black take this lying down? The black wolf immediately strode forward and stopped not far from where the gray wolf was standing and posed arrogantly. Its pair of blue eyes shown with disdain. Little Black's entire demeanor was like that of a king's, as if it owned the entire land before it.

The alpha wolf was the leader of this hundred-some odd wolf pack, so it naturally was quite incredible in its own way. With this black young fellow suddenly appearing and provoking it, how could it back down? It snarled furiously and leapt forward towards the black wolf to strike first.

The result went as expected. How could Little Black, who had been raised since it was a pup on mystic-stone water, possibly lose against a wild wolf? After a few quick exchanges between the two wolves, the opposing gray wolf ended up with its neck neatly bit through and it lay, dying, at Little Black's feet.

The wolf pack was now without a leader. In addition, the soldiers from the firearms camp weren't to be trifled with. The two groups fought fiercely and it ended up being a decisive win for the humans, as they had destroyed over half of the wild wolves in the pack. The remaining dozen or so wild wolves were all scared and ran for their lives. Later on, when the officials in the area found out, they organized all of the nearby hunters to hunt down these remaining creatures once and for all. After the man-eating wolves were all put down, the merchants coming to this area no longer had to take a detour for safety.

Yu Xiaocao took out the healing ointments that she had personally made and had her maidservants, as well as herself, help the military doctors to treat the wounds from the injured soldiers. Yelu Rong's leg, which had been cut deeply by a sword, was also cleaned, treated and bandaged with a thick layer of gauze. His two bodyguards' injuries were also treated as well!

“Many thanks, heroes, for stepping out and saving our lives. Xiao Rong will never forget this favor!” After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, the vast majority of people from the Yelu Clan had changed their surnames to Han ethnicity names. Yelu Rong still currently used the surname, Xiao, that was given to them back during the Liao Dynasty.

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Xiao Rong looked battered and exhausted. Although he had a rough appearance, he looked quite handsome upon closer inspection. Yu Xiaocao felt that he looked somewhat familiar, and after she carefully pondered for a while, she suddenly blurted out, “Qiao Feng—no, you should be Xiao Feng!”

If Zhu Junfan was here right now, he would definitely agree with Yu Xiaocao's statement. This person really resembled Felix Wong's version of Qiao Feng. Even the clothes he was currently wearing were similar—his clothes were shabby and looked like a beggar's clothes.

Xiao Rong was shocked as his tiger-like eyes locked on the thin figure in front of him. Last year, an elder brother from the same clan, who resided in the Central Plain for the majority of his life, had come back to the tribe to look for his roots, and his name was Feng. He couldn't remember whether or not his elder brother's surname was Qiao, but based on the surnames of the Khitan tribes, this elder brother should



be called Xiao Feng. Could the young girl in front of him, who was as delicate and tender as grass, recognize the elder brother from the same clan? Did she see through his identity?

The prosperity of the Khitan tribes had long become history. During the Song Dynasty, their Liao Empire had taken over half of the country. But ever since the Yuan Dynasty started, their empire gradually declined. In order to avoid disaster, most of the people from the Yelu Clan lived with the Han people and changed their surnames into common Han surnames.

They were ambitious and wanted to restore the former glory of their ancestors. But their wishes were quickly smothered when they were faced with the well-trained and powerful army of the Great Ming Dynasty and the fierce tribes such as the Jurchen and Mongols. With them eyeing their clan, the survival for his clan members was extremely difficult.

While the clan had external worries, they also suffered internally. His brainless younger brother was incited by his own ambition and started a rebellion while he was celebrating his younger son's birthday. Amid all the panic, he entrusted his wife and child to one of his confidants and tried to pacify and control the armed rebellion under good faith.

He never expected that the brother he entrusted had been bribed by their enemy and gave him a critical strike. Fortunately, he had brave and loyal soldiers accompanying him. They protected him and helped him escape from the rebel army's siege. But after they broke out from the siege, there were merely a dozen good soldiers left.

When it rained, it poured. They had just broken out from the siege when the blood from their wounds attracted a pack of wolves. If it weren't for the person standing in front of him, then he, Xiao Rong, the grand leader of the tribe, would've been eaten by wolves.

Xiao Rong secretly observed his 'savior'. As he observed the other party and the other party's subordinates, he realized that they were 'well-trained'. The group in front of him didn't consist of many people, but they were definitely not merchant caravans either. He could guarantee with his own life that these people definitely had military background and were brave and capable martial arts experts!

This was especially true for the leader of the group. Although he looked more beautiful and charming than a woman, he couldn't hide the stern and imposing aura his body was exuding. Just by looking at his face, Xiao Rong could already feel the blood-thirsty spirit that was directed at him. Even the best fighter from his tribe stood no chance against that man.

Although they were close to the border right now, this territory still belonged to the Great Ming Dynasty. Even if he didn't have a brain, he could already guess that the warrior standing in front of him was a soldier from the Great Ming Dynasty. But he hadn't heard about a war breaking out at the border? Could it be that his stupid younger brother's rebellion had already been exposed? Did the soldiers from the Great Ming Dynasty already prepared a counterattack plan?

Or could it be...the person who encouraged his stupid younger brother rebel was actually someone sent by the Great Ming Dynasty? The Great Ming Dynasty had become stronger and stronger with each year. They had a well-trained and powerful army. They even developed a very powerful firearm that could kill people that stood ten meters away. Could it be that the Great Ming Empire was starting to become impatient and wanted to immediately unify the various tribes outside its borders? Was the rebellion started by his own tribe, one of the conspiracies planned by the people from the Great Ming Empire? For a period of time, Xiao Rong was immersed in his thoughts.

What should he do? The young girl seemed to have recognized his identity. Although his wound was fully treated, his physical strength and energy were vastly depleted. It would take him a while to completely recover. Xiao Rong glanced cautiously at the tall and handsome man standing next to the young girl. Even if he was in his best condition, he still may not be able to escape from his opponent's grasp. Furthermore, he could tell that the handsome man dressed in white was not someone that could be easily dealt with either.

Zhu Junyang remained calm and collected as he silently observed the battered and exhausted man standing in front of him. He noticed that the man's muscles became taunt and his gaze towards Xiaocao was full of alarm and ill-intention when his little girl blurted out the words 'Xiao Feng'.

However, Zhu Junyang didn't take this person to heart. The man in front of him was injured, but even if the man was not injured, he was confident that he could protect the person he loved. Furthermore, Chief Steward Su looked as if he was inadvertently trying to protect the young girl by sticking to her side.

He glanced at Little White who was baring its teeth at the unfamiliar man. A glint of praise towards Little White flashed by Zhu Junyang's seductive phoenix eyes. Little White was always alert and loyal. Its first priority had always been to protect its master. It seemed like he should give Little White an extra chicken leg later!

"Yongxi, do you know this person?" Yongxi was the name bestowed to Xiaocao by the empress, but Zhu Junyang usually preferred to address her as 'Cao'er' or 'little lass' since it seemed more intimate.

Yu Xiaocao was embarrassed as she touched her nose. She recalled that The Great Hero Qiao Feng was a character from a book written by Sir Jin Yong. She didn't transmigrate into Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils, so there was no one named Qiao Feng here. She chuckled dryly and said, "Uhm...I mistook you for someone else! I'm sorry!"

Her explanation allowed Xiao Rong to relax. He knew that he didn't look like the elder brother from the clan that much. How could a young girl like her possibly see through his identity immediately? There were similar items in this world, so there were also people who resembled each other a lot. It was not impossible for the young girl to mistook him for the wrong person. However, he must act cautiously since he was now at the enemy camp.

Xiao Rong believed that he was hiding his identity very well, but he didn't know that his reaction and action did not escape Zhu Junyang and Su Ran's sharp eyes. The two people exchanged glances but decided to bide their time for now.

Zhu Junyang already noticed a few things. Judging from Xiao Rong and his two guards' build and appearance, they looked slightly different from people who came from the Central Plains. Based on the way he talked and his manners, he was different from the commoners living outside the border. It was obvious that he had caught a big fish. A man with the surname Xiao? Didn't the leader of the Tuha'erhanbu tribe use the same surname, Xiao, from the Liao Empire?

If he was indeed the leader of Tuha'erhanbu tribe, then it was strange for him to suddenly appear in the Great Ming Dynasty's territory. From his current attire and wounds, he looked like he had run away! If he could boldly guess the reason, then he would assume that perhaps, there was civil unrest in the Tuha'erhanbu tribe.

Zhu Junyang was a talented military strategist. He was able to guess the other party's identity quite accurately and quickly.

"This...warrior, would you like to have some barbecue?" Yu Xiaocao pointed at the rabbit they were roasting over the fire as she greeted the three guests enthusiastically.

In the past few days, in order to hide from the rebel army that was trying to kill them, Xiao Rong and his men had not had a warm meal for many days. To be more precise, they had not eaten in the past two days because the soldiers chasing after them were hot on their heels.

After he hesitated for a moment, Xiao Rong took the roasted rabbit from Xiaocao and divided it among the remaining two guards with him and devoured the food. The rabbit meat was grilled until charred on the outside, and the meat was tender on the inside. The rabbit meat was coated with honey and an unknown spice, making the meat flavorful and delicious.

“If that's not enough, then the roasted lamb over there will be ready soon. Have some soup to moisten your throat!” Seeing how the three men were choking until their necks were straight, Xiaocao hurriedly gave them the remaining hazel grouse soup. They seemed quite pitiful. How long had they survived without food? How are they living worse than refugees?

Xiao Rong gnawed at the roasted rabbit and drank the bowl of fragrant hazel grouse soup that Xiaocao had given him. His belly was finally somewhat full. He sighed happily and looked up at the innocent young girl. He sincerely expressed his gratitude, “Thank you for your help and the food. Xiao Rong will not forget your kindness!”

Zhu Junyang nodded at him indifferently. He continued to roast the wild goats that Little White had hunted. Under the flame's light, Zhu Junyang's handsome and charming face dazzled Xiao Rong. It was such a pity that such a beautiful and charming face belonged to a man.

The people from the Central Plains were as beautiful as the rumors had said. The two men standing close by, one looked charming and the other one looked refined. Even the young girl who had yet matured looked as pure as the cold spring in the high mountains. There wasn't even a trace of dust or dirt in her large eyes.

Did he guess incorrectly? Why would an innocent and young girl appear in the middle of a marching army? Furthermore, these people had tents set up and are barbecuing meat. They didn't look like a marching army, instead, they looked like people who came out to play.

Xiao Rong thought of another possibility. Didn't the Great Ming Dynasty have an imperial hunting ground? In the previous year, the emperor had also hunted in the hunting ground! Could it be that the three people standing before him were people from the Great Ming Dynasty's imperial family? Could the well-trained guards who were standing beside them be the imperial guards that were assigned to protect these people?

Xiao Rong's eyes flickered with that in mind. If this was the case, if he can contain these people, then wouldn't he have enough bargaining chips to negotiate terms with the emperor of the Great Ming Dynasty? Wouldn't he be able to ask him to send their army to help him regain his position as the head of his tribe?

However, he needed to take his time to make a final decision. Among the three people, the two handsome men were unlike the warriors he had fought against before. This was especially true for the charming and beautiful man. He gave off a dangerous aura. When his cold gaze met his eyes, he looked like a wild beast that was about to escape. Xiao Rong couldn't help but tremble at that thought. The man dressed in white was a mystery. There was a glint in his eyes from time to time, and he couldn't be underestimated. It seemed like, among the three people, he should start with the young girl who seemed like she knew nothing about the cruelty of the world.

“Have a taste of the roasted lamb leg made with my secret recipe. I added cumin, honey, and tomato sauce on it. It's crunchy on the outside, and soft and fragrant on the inside. I promise that you will never be able to forget the taste once you eat it!” Yu Xiaocao was arrogantly flaunting off her cooking skills. However, the seasoning she made for the roasted lamb was finally made after many repeated attempts to perfect the recipe. Everyone praised her after eating it!

Xiao Rong subconsciously took the roasted lamb leg from her. He took a bite of the roasted lamb leg under the young girl's expectant gaze. Sure enough, the meat was crispy on the outside, and soft and rich in flavor on the inside. The meat was tender and fragrant. In contrast, all the roasted lamb he had eaten before suddenly tasted like flavorless dregs.

After he finished the meat and soup, the young girl gave them the only unoccupied tent to them and said, “The three of you are injured, so sleep in the tent tonight! You can sleep peacefully because Little White and Little Black will keep guard. The wolves won't dare to come close with them guarding!” With that said, she patted the two formidable wolves that were snuggling her.

Although the two wolves had a different colored coat compared to ordinary wolves, Xiao Rong had lived in the grassland for nearly 30 years. How can he fail to recognize the difference between a wolf and a dog? The black wolf had just killed off the leader of the wolf pack with just a few bites. The white wolf looked feistier and more difficult to deal with. It just happened that the two ferocious wolves were snuggling up against the young girl standing in front of him. They acted more docile and gentler than regular dogs. From a glance, it was impossible to believe that they were once wild animals. He felt incredulous at the sight.

The vast grassland was like an enormous painting that was spread out between heaven and earth. Autumn didn't seem to have affected this vast plain of greenery at all. It was impossible to describe the beautiful and pure nature spread out in front of her. When she looked around, she could only see a sea of green everywhere and was unable to find a point of focus. The vast, boundless grassland was like an immobile ocean. It caused people to fall into a stupor and lost in their daydream.

Yu Xiaocao was riding on a pure white horse as she gazed far into the distance. The blue sky, white clouds, gentle breeze, and the warm sun seemed to have dispelled the exhaustion she had bottled up from all the traveling. In the distance, there were a few black dots quickly approaching them. When the rider finally came into view, Xiaocao realized that she knew him—he was the commander of Prince Cheng's Estate's private army, Commander Liu. When the Wokou invaded, Zhu Junyang had asked for an imperial decree to be sent that exact night to allow Commander Liu to lead a private army of eight thousand soldiers and headed to Dongshan Village to rescue the people. Thus, Yu Xiaocao had met him on several occasions.

“Master, you have worked hard. This subordinate has already arranged a place for you to stay. Please come with me!” Commander Liu led his men to greet their masters. But his heart tensed up when he raised his head and saw Chief Steward Su, the emperor's personal bodyguard, standing next to the group.

Chief Steward Su was in charge of protecting the imperial family, and he was also the head of the imperial guards. He was responsible for the safety of the emperor, so he rarely left the emperor's side. However, he was unexpectedly assigned to investigate the horse breeding ground outside the borders. This meant that His Majesty had placed great importance on the breeding ground. Commander Liu was originally feeling a little gloomy because he was dispatched to 'horse farm', but that disappointment and gloominess had all disappeared.

“Cao'er, are you tired? Do you want to take a break fist?” Zhu Junyang had been paying close attention to the news from beyond the borders ever since he appointed Commander Liu and a few of his trusted aides to prepare the horse farm last year. If he wasn't worried about Xiaocao's wellbeing, he would've directly headed for the breeding farm by now.

Yu Xiaocao naturally understood his current mood. After she took a sip of the mystic-stone water, all the exhaustion in her body disappeared. She straightened her back and in high spirits, she said, “No need! Let's head to the horse farm first! My Little Red is still there, I wonder if she still remembers me!”

During the spring season, Little Red finally accepted Fierce Wind and she quickly got pregnant with a baby horse. Since Fierce Wind and Little Red were Ferghana horses, everyone had high expectations for

the baby horse. So, he asked for Xiaocao's consent to transfer the pregnant horse to the horse farm outside borders. Little Red's baby was used as an important observation target and was raised with great care.

Xiaocao didn't come in person to visit the young horse after it was born, but from time to time, she would send people to deliver a 'carefully' formulated fodder for the young colt. She heard that the young colt was plump and strong after eating the fodder and was already a budding genius among the other young horses that were born around the same time. An experienced horse expert already confirmed that the young colt would not be less talented than his parents in the future.

Zhu Junyang's stern and handsome face revealed a warm smile when he noticed how considerate his little lass was being, "If that's the case, then let's head to the stable first."

"Master, what should we do about those three people?" Hou Xiaoliang pointed his mouth towards three strong figures not far in the distance. The imperial horse farm was the army from the Great Ming Dynasty's only hope. He couldn't allow strangers with ulterior motives to spy on their secrets.

Zhu Junyang glanced at him approvingly. Although this man wasn't very steady, he could be quick-witted when needed. He said to Liu Dekun, Commander Liu, "Send one of your subordinates to take the three guests to the place where you are staying and settle down. They are my 'guests', so remember to 'treat' them carefully!"

Commander Liu understood what he was implying and nodded his head, "This subordinate understands! Li Daming and Zhang Wenbin, the two of you should take the distinguished guests back to rest. Serve them with good tea and food. Remember to treat them well!"

The two people who were mentioned, responded, "Yes!" They took Xiao Rong and the two guards to a courtyard located more than five kilometers away from the horse farm. The courtyard was specially built for the people from the imperial family who came to inspect the horse farm. The outside of the courtyard looked simple on the outside, but the furnishings on the side were expensive. It was something only nobles can afford. This further convinced Xiao Rong and his guards that their savior had an extraordinary status.

"My Lord, based on the horse farm they mentioned, could they plan on raising horses outside the borders?" Ajige, one of Xiao Rong's trusted guards, frowned as he said that.

Xiao Rong's other guard, Dela Citeng, laughed so hard that his beard trembled as he said, "Raising horses? If they do not have a good stallion to breed, then all the horses they've bred will merely be inferior horses used to carry goods. What's the use of that? Speaking of good stallions, I believe the best ones are the wild horses that are tamed by the people of the grassland. But after the fine stallions bred for a few generations, their bloodlines will not be as pure anymore..."

Ajige glared at Dela Citeng, who was all brawn and no brains. He ignored him and continued talking to his master, "Do you think the Great Ming Dynasty is planning on raising a cavalry to deal with the various tribes located outside the borders?"

"It's very possible!" Xiao Rong tapped his fingers on the table. His two thick eyebrows were wrinkled tightly.

The red coat cannon and the firearms camp developed by the Great Ming Dynasty already revealed how extraordinary it was during its fight against the Jurchen tribe. If they managed to create a large and strong cavalry with the firearms they already have, then his younger brother's plan to reestablish their ancestor's former glory would become a joke. The Great Ming Dynasty had already reached a height that was impossible for them to achieve. If Xiao Xuan continued to insist on going against the Great Ming Dynasty, then their entire tribe would become victims of his ambition!

"Why don't I...secretly head down and listen to their discussion about their horse farm?" Ajige frowned when he saw that his master was caught up in his own thoughts. He wanted to share his lord's burden.

Xiao Rong raised his hand to stop him and said, "You absolutely cannot do that! Even if we disregard the fact that they had saved our lives, the well-trained and disciplined soldiers and firearms in their hands showed that they're people we cannot trifle with! I believe that among one of the three people in the group, one of them must be someone from the imperial family. Ajige, do you think our tribe has the power to fight against the Great Ming Dynasty even if we currently aren't experiencing civil unrest?"

Now, it was Ajige's turn to frown. In the past, the tribes beyond the borders relied on their strength and guerrilla warfare to barely deal with the Great Ming Dynasty's army. However, during the recent battle between the Jurchen tribe and the Great Ming Dynasty's army, the Jurchen tribe suffered a crushing defeat with numerous casualties after they faced the red coat cannon. Not only did the Great Ming Dynasty have a new weapon, their weapon didn't seem to miss. The Jurchen tribe suffered such heavy losses after that battle that they probably would not be able to fight again in the next ten years.



The Jurchen had united more than a dozen tribes to fight against the Great Ming Empire, yet their battle ended in a disastrous defeat. How can a small Tuha'erhanbu tribe like theirs face such a powerful enemy? Ajige shook his head slowly and sighed heavily.

“Ajige, you are one of the great warriors of our Tuha'erhanbu tribe! I didn't expect you to be a coward! Our Tuha'erhanbu tribe doesn't lack brave warriors who are not afraid of death! Even if the Great Ming Dynasty wishes to kill us off, I will make sure we bite a few chunks of their meat off first! I, Dela Citeng, am not a coward and I am not afraid of death!” The blockhead pounded his chest loudly. So what if they were from the Great Ming Empire's imperial family? They looked as thin as paper; he could easily pinch them to death with his finger!

Ajige glared angrily at him and reprimanded, “Do you think this is the time for us to fight force against force? You have to look at our reality. Do you think it's worth it to sacrifice the entire tribe just to prove ourselves?”

Dela Citeng was usually somewhat afraid of his crafty partner. When he saw that the other party was angry, he only muttered a few words in response before he fell silent.

“My Lord, from our current viewpoint, we can only try to be on friendly terms with the Great Ming Dynasty. We cannot be aggressive against them!” Ajige persuaded Xiao Rong patiently. He was afraid that his lord's mind would be spurred on by Dela Citeng's words.

Xiao Rong smiled bitterly and said, “I am like a stray dog right now. I don't even have the power to protect myself, so how can I fight against the mighty and formidable Great Ming Empire?”

“My Lord, this subordinate has a plan. I don't know if you'll allow me to discuss it!” Ajige pondered for a while and based on the current situation, he felt that this was the only feasible plan.

“Tell us your plan!” Xiao Rong could already guess part of his plan, so he nodded his head at him.

“The Han people believe strongly in the saying, 'enduring hardships while plotting your revenge'. My Lord can pretend to surrender to the Great Ming Dynasty and use their power to help you regain your tribe!” Ajige paused as he secretly observed his lord's reaction.

Xiao Rong smiled bitterly and said, "The emperor of the Great Ming Dynasty is not someone who can be easily fooled. If we want to borrow troops from them, we will have to show them a certain degree of sincerity! Do you think we can come up with anything that can stir the emperor's desire based on our Tuha'erhanbu tribe's current financial resources?"

Ajige gritted his teeth and continued, "Isn't the Great Ming Dynasty's army short on horses? We can pay tribute to them every year with horses..."

"Ajige! You clearly know that the Great Ming Dynasty is planning to build a cavalry! What do you think the purpose of their cavalry is? Of course, the cavalry they built will be used against us! In the end, we will be victims either way. What do you think you're suggesting?" Dela Citeng was so angry that he roared at Ajige.

Ajige glanced at him and said, "Even if they don't have a cavalry, they will still be able to subdue all the tribes beyond the borders if we give them time. Do you believe me or not?"

"Humph! I only know that they will become stronger once they have cavalry! They're already a tiger, and with their enhanced cavalry, they'll become a tiger with wings. It will be very difficult for our tribe to continue to survive once that happens. How would you know that the Great Ming Dynasty would not destroy all the tribes outside the borders once they developed a strong army and cavalry?" Dela Citeng paced around impatiently.

"Even if we don't do this, just relying on the three of us and the traitors from our tribe, we will still be helpless against the Great Ming Dynasty. We have nothing that will give us an advantage against the Great Ming Dynasty." Ajige knew that this was only a temporary measure to sate the Great Ming Dynasty's thirst.

However, he had noticed that the emperor of the Great Ming Dynasty seemed to want to pacify the tribes located beyond the borders. In the past two years, the emperor increased the trade between the tribes and people from the Great Ming Dynasty. He has also strengthened the connection between the tribes beyond the borders and the people from the Central Plains. This was the reason why he had proposed such a plan.

"Stop fighting! The Great Ming Dynasty has already started building their own horse breeding farm to raise horses for war. Even if Ajige's plan was not implemented, they will still manage to build their own cavalry in a few years!" Xiao Rong felt that he had sighed more times today than the thirty years he had lived combined.

Dela Citeng whispered apprehensively, "If they don't have a good stallion to breed, how can they easily raise an army of military horses? Didn't the Great Ming Dynasty have a cavalry before? But those horses were bred from inferior horses, so they were only worthy of eating the dirt behind us!"

Xiao Rong interrupted him and sighed, "At the present, our priority is to inquire about the Great Ming Dynasty's policies towards the tribes beyond the borders. The first matter we should focus on is to quell down the civil unrest. Otherwise, Xiao Xuan, that idiot, will be spurred on by that vile character and start a war with the Great Ming Dynasty. I'm afraid that if that happens, no matter how ingenious our plans are, we will have no use for it!"