

Finest 366

Chapter 366 Trace

Though the palace lamps were dim, he could see clearly the scene depicted in the painting. Amidst the faint glimmer of lake and mountain, there was a vast expanse of mist, with boats weaving through. Nearby on the shore, a man dressed in a green robe was standing by the lake, his eyebrows raised in a cold smirk. The man was facing the lake, and only his silhouette was visible in the painting; his face was unclear. However, there was a sense of *déjà vu*, and the tattered shoes on his feet were particularly striking. A woman, dressed in a pale yellow palace robe, graceful and elegant, stood quietly by the lake, staring at the man as if puzzled or amazed. On the right side of the painting, two graceful lines were inscribed:

"Mountains beyond mountains, buildings beyond buildings,

when will the songs and dances of West Lake cease?

The warm breeze intoxicates the traveler,

mistaking Hangzhou for Bianzhou."

"Qingxuan, Qingxuan!" Lin Wanrong stared blankly, his eyes gradually reddening, and he rushed forward with a swoosh. But two young eunuchs suddenly appeared, blocking him urgently, "Who dares to intrude upon the forbidden palace?"

'Forbidden palace? My wife is here; I don't care about your forbidden palace,' he thought, thrilled and emotional. He didn't stop, rushing straight in, calling out loudly, "Qingxuan, Qingxuan, where are you?"

The two young eunuchs probably never expected that someone would be so audacious as to intrude upon the imperial palace. They were caught off guard and one was knocked to the ground.

Lin Wanrong reached the painting and carefully gazed at the woman depicted there, her fine eyebrows and cherry lips, standing gracefully by the Luo River, a hint of a smile on her face, noble and pure like a celestial being. Though he hadn't seen her in many days, this figure was already etched into his bones; it was the very Xiao Qingxuan he had been searching for. Standing beside

Qingxuan, the man with the cunning smile was none other than himself on that day. The painting captured their first meeting by the Xuanwu Lake; judging by the brushwork, it must have been done by Qingxuan herself.

With a rustle, he jumped onto the long table and carefully took down the painting. Studying it closely, he saw Xiao Qingxuan come to life before his eyes, as if he could see her teasing and laughing shyly with him, and hear her whispering in his ear. He stared dumbfounded, lightly touching Qingxuan's cheek, wanting to smile, but a sour feeling welled up in his heart.

"Qingxuan, Qingxuan—" he cried out like a madman, leaping down from the table and rushing inside. The hall was filled with beautiful long curtains, dancing lightly in the dim light. He searched the entire hall, finding it completely empty—no Xiao Qingxuan, not even a shadow.

"Qingxuan, where are you?" Looking at the beautiful, fairy-like face in the painting, he sighed, his eyes already moist.

"It's him, the one who intruded on the forbidden ground. Seize him!" A clamor arose as two squads of guards rushed in from outside the hall, surrounding Lin Wanrong. He seemed not to notice, staring intently at the two young eunuchs, demanding loudly, "Where is Qingxuan?"

"What do you mean, 'Qingxuan, Luoxuan'? Who is this lowly riffraff? We don't know—ow!" Before the words had fully left their mouths, two crisp slaps rang out, leaving the two young eunuchs with swollen cheeks. They hurriedly covered their faces, looking in terror at the man before them.

"How dare you insult my wife?" Lin Wanrong's hands creaked as he clenched his fists, his facial muscles twitched violently a few times, and his eyes shot out bursts of ferocity. "I'll kill you, you cur!" In his fury, he no longer cared where he was. He grabbed both eunuchs by the throats, lifting them up as though they were nothing.

The guards who had rushed in were momentarily stunned, having never before seen such audacity within the palace. They were about to advance to intervene, but a loud cry from outside stopped them: "Stop, stop at once!"

The guards turned their heads and saw Eunuch Gao hurrying in, terrified. "Master Lin, Master Lin, please stop! I cannot bear your anger," he exclaimed.

With two loud thumps, Lin Wanrong threw the two young eunuchs to the ground. They panted heavily, their faces pale with fright. Seeing Gao Ping bow and bend his knee before this dignitary, they knew they were in serious trouble.

"Eunuch Gao, have I ever asked anything of you?" Lin Wanrong said, smiling darkly, but the veins on his forehead stood out sharply.

"Oh, Master Lin, where does this come from? I wouldn't dare presume. Just command me, whatever it is," Gao Ping said quickly, his obsequious smile in place. As someone close to the Emperor, he knew very well the Emperor's attitude toward Lin Wanrong. Although Master Lin's official position was not high, it was only because Master Lin chose it to be so. To surpass Prince Cheng, Xu Wei, and Li Tai, and become the first man of the court was only a matter of time. He dared not be negligent with such an important figure.

"Very well," Master Lin nodded, his face clouded. Pointing at the two young eunuchs, he said, "These two scoundrels dared to insult my wife. I won't ask for much, just cut off their tongues. You may insult me, but if you dare insult my Qingxuan, you are courting death, courting death, courting death—" In his rage, his voice grew louder and more venomous, as he brutally kicked the eunuchs without holding back. The other guards exchanged glances but dared not make a sound. For an outsider to beat up the inner palace attendants in the Emperor's home was unthinkable; Eunuch Gao's meek compliance only made it more bizarre.

After a few more vicious kicks, Lin Wanrong stopped and snorted, "I never use power to bully people, but if anyone dares touch my beloved, I have my ways! Eunuch Gao, you handle it!"

Gao Ping nodded and shrilled, "Come! Take these dogs who offended Master Lin away, cut off their tongues, and give them a hundred heavy lashes—Master Lin, does this satisfy you?"

Lin Wanrong looked at Qingxuan's beautiful eyes in the painting and nodded, not speaking. The two young eunuchs screamed in terror, "Mercy, sir, mercy! This is a forbidden area; we were only doing our duty—"

Gao Ping waved his hand, and the attendants promptly dragged the two eunuchs away. Lin Wanrong was silent for a long while before he finally spoke, "Eunuch Gao, do you recognize the woman in this painting?"

Gao Ping looked closely at the image, examining it with careful scrutiny. After some time, he shook his head, "I don't recognize this woman."

Not recognize her? Lin Wanrong cast a doubtful glance at the eunuch. Considering his standing before the Emperor at this time and his relationship with him, Eunuch Gao would certainly not dare

to lie in his presence. Could it really be that he didn't know Qingxuan? How could that be possible? Paintings by Qingxuan, her very portraits were hung in the palace. How could someone who had been with the Emperor for so many years not recognize her?

"Why is this place marked as forbidden?" Lin Wanrong changed the subject and asked.

"I'm not quite sure. Ever since I began serving the Emperor over a decade ago, this place has been listed as forbidden, unoccupied all along," Eunuch Gao replied respectfully. "Other than the Emperor himself, no one else has been here, and I've never seen this scroll in your hand."

No one else but the Emperor had been here? But the painting made by Qingxuan couldn't be more than half a year old. How could it have ended up here? He pondered for a long time but couldn't figure out the reason. It seemed that he would have to seek answers from the old Emperor. He hoped it wouldn't turn out to be a debt like the one with Xian'er's mother.

Thinking that he had found a trace of Qingxuan, he tightly gripped the scroll, feeling incredibly invigorated. Hurrying towards the Palace of Heavenly Purity, he asked Gao Ping, "The Old Man, oh, I mean the Emperor, has he gone to bed now?"

"The Emperor has just retired for the night. I came over because I heard the commotion outside and was afraid it might disturb His Majesty's rest. Little did I know that I would find two young brats offending you, Sir," Gao Ping hurriedly explained.

Retired? That wouldn't do. He had just done such a great favor for the Emperor that day; the Emperor must explain Qingxuan's situation to him. Otherwise, he would cause an uproar.

As he was about to speak, a gentle cry came from ahead, "Husband, why have you not retired yet?" Qin Xian'er slowly emerged from the Palace of Heavenly Purity, her eyes red and swollen from crying, her face still marked with tears, looking utterly pitiful.

"I pay my respects to the Princess," Gao Ping hastily knelt to perform a salutation.

Qin Xian'er waved her hand dismissively and approached Lin Wanrong. She glanced at the scroll in his hand, a flash of curiosity in her eyes, and lightly snorted through her small nose, "I wondered why you were not resting at this late hour, only to find that you are thinking of that fox-like woman, even holding onto her painting so dearly."

Lin Wanrong smiled slightly, not answering her but instead asked, "Have you made peace with the old Emperor? You're not still at odds, are you?"

Qin Xian'er nodded and hummed an affirmation, tenderly embracing his shoulder and leaning against him. She then deftly took the scroll from him, "Husband, rest assured, I won't fight with Father Emperor again. I have misunderstood him for so many years, and from now on, I will dutifully honor him and never leave him alone again. I'll keep this painting for you; we can look at it another time."

Lin Wanrong found it amusing in his heart, this little jealous one. While talking about her father, she still couldn't forget Qingxuan. Without responding to Xian'er's words, he turned to Gao Ping and said, "Eunuch Gao, go and inform the Emperor that I wish to see him now."

Chapter 367 A Bad Sign

"This..." Gao Ping hesitated for a moment, "Master Lin, you must know that the Emperor has already retired for the night." He had met many officials, but Master Lin was the most audacious among them. Others would wait until the Emperor had eaten, drunk, and relieved himself before they dared to ask for an audience, but Master Lin was one to pull the Emperor out of bed.

"He may be resting, but we must still go." Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, "This matter sticks in my heart, and if I don't clarify it, I will find no peace. Don't worry, Eunuch Gao, if anything happens, I'll bear the responsibility. If the Emperor wants to blame someone, let him blame me."

Even if Gao Ping had ten times the courage, he wouldn't dare disturb the Emperor's peaceful slumber. But having just witnessed Master Lin's full martial display, he also knew well that this man was no easy one. If words were to clash, perhaps he'd end up on the receiving end of a tyrant's punch. At that moment, he was caught in a dilemma, neither able to advance nor retreat, finding himself in an impossible situation.

"Husband, do you have some urgent matter that requires you to see Father at this late hour?" Qin Xian'er asked softly.

"It is a very important matter." Lin Wanrong nodded gravely. In front of Xian'er, his jealous wife, he could not say what the matter was, otherwise, who knew what chaos this girl might create.

Qin Xian'er nodded and looked at Gao Ping, "You go and see if Father is sound asleep, tell him I will accompany Husband there in a while."

Upon hearing the Princess's command, Gao Ping reluctantly complied and left. Qin Xian'er glanced at Lin Wanrong, her mouth pouting slightly, "Husband, are you going to ask about that fox-like seductress?"

"This... may I refrain from answering?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, thinking that Xian'er, this little minx, was truly not ordinary; nothing could be hidden from her.

"You may if you wish, how could I stop you? I knew long ago that you couldn't give up your old feelings for that fox-like seductress." Qin Xian'er pouted.

‘Old feelings? When did I ever let go? This girl really knows how to put things!’ Lin Wanrong laughed, embracing her waist, "Don't worry, I will balance things out perfectly, like carrying water with a pole. Sigh, taking care of all of you, it's not easy for me."

Xian'er smiled sweetly, tightening her arm around him, sighing softly, "Husband, to be honest, all I want is to spend a lifetime with you and to honor Father properly. Being a princess doesn't interest me."

"How did you change your mind?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

"My master was right. Husband, you are a talent unlike any other in history. It would be a waste to be buried among the common people. With my status and Father's love for me, there's nothing you can't accomplish in this world. Besides, Father likes you so much." Qin Xian'er's eyes sparkled with determination, her face filled with affection and trust.

Was it the old man speaking to Xian'er again? Sigh, ambition never dies. One must not be too outstanding! Lin Wanrong put away the painting scroll, embracing Xian'er and smirking, "Don't worry, I will certainly strive hard — let's strive together, and have a dozen children. Let the old man hold one each day, heh heh!"

Qin Xian'er's face flushed with a rosy glow, and she hid in his embrace, shyly whimpering, "Nonsense, my mother gave birth to only me in her lifetime; having two children with my husband will be enough."

The two were affectionately teasing each other when they suddenly saw Gao Ping rush out hurriedly. He looked at Lin Wanrong and said, "Master Lin, the Emperor says he has gone to bed."

‘What a clever statement this is! Is it meant to deceive me or you?’ Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Is this the Emperor's exact words?"

Gao Ping nodded, "These are his exact words. His Majesty instructed me to convey that he has gone to bed and that if Master Lin has any business, you should seek an audience tomorrow."

‘I just did something for him, and now he doesn't recognize me? This old man's face changes fast indeed,’ Lin Wanrong thought, about to grab Xian'er and charge inside when Gao Ping spoke again, "The Emperor also says that he will not pursue the matter of you trespassing in the forbidden palace. If you are so inclined, just remember these three words—Zhe Bao Ding!"

Zhe Bao Ding? What did it mean? Lin Wanrong looked at Gao Ping with suspicion, "Did the Emperor say anything else, Eunuch Gao? Please tell me everything at once!"

Most commonly means "to break" or "to fold".

In a figurative sense, it can mean "to discount" or "a setback".

Depending on the context, it has other meanings as well.

宝 (bǎo)

This means "treasure" or "jewel".

It can also refer to something precious or valuable.

丁 (dīng)

Most commonly it refers to the fourth Heavenly Stem, a part of the system used in traditional East Asian calendars.

It can also mean "a male", "a nail", or "robust", depending on the context.]

Gao Ping sighed bitterly, bowing respectfully, "Master Lin, these were the Emperor's instructions, and I dare not omit a single word. I have conveyed them to you in full. As for their meaning, this servant understands nothing."

Seeing Gao Ping's expression, Lin Wanrong knew that the old Emperor would not meet him tonight. Since the Emperor was even aware of his trespassing, his instructions must have been inspired by recent events. But what did "Zhe Bao Ding" mean? Could it be related to Qingxuan? It seemed the old man was also a master of riddles.

He racked his brain but could not fathom the meaning of these three words. Even if he had forced his way in to see the Emperor, given the old man's temperament, he still wouldn't have explained his cryptic message. That night, after receiving news about Qingxuan, he was extremely excited but became frustrated thinking that a small riddle might keep them apart, even if they were close by. He felt an unspeakable gloom, tossing and turning without sleep. Even the incident of encountering the Dongyin warriors on the back mountain the previous day slipped his mind.

The next morning, when he went to seek an audience, he was stopped by a worried and downcast Gao Ping. Gao Ping looked around before cautiously saying, "Master Lin, you are no outsider, so I will tell you the truth. The imperial physicians are all waiting inside, and the Emperor is in a great fury. Three have already been dragged out and executed."

Executed three? Could it be because of the injury from the assassination attempt yesterday? But Xian'er had returned to Grand Prime Minister Temple this morning, her vow to build a hut for her mother still unfulfilled, and she hadn't mentioned anything about the old master's condition worsening. Remembering his discussion with Xu Wei and Li Tai yesterday, he had a moment of insight—this was a deliberate strategy by the Emperor, a cunning play of hard to get!

Lin Wanrong remembered something he had instructed Ning Yuxi to do yesterday and wondered if she had passed on the message. He was a little concerned about it but also thought that the old Emperor, possibly knowing Qingxuan's whereabouts and intentionally being enigmatic, was not being fair. He didn't feel like dealing with the Dongyin matter, thinking that they could attempt another assassination if they wished.

Upon leaving the palace, Lin Wanrong found Xu Wei lurking outside the gate, his demeanor rather eerie. Lin Wanrong stealthily approached and gently tapped him on the shoulder. Xu Wei jumped in fright but breathed a sigh of relief when he realized who it was. "Little brother Lin, you've finally come out," he said.

"What do you mean 'finally come out'? I'm not in prison," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "What's the meaning of this, Mr. Xu? Didn't we just see each other yesterday morning?"

Xu Wei pulled him aside and carefully examined him from head to toe. Glancing around cautiously, he finally nodded and said, "It's good that you're alright. Miss Xiao and Madam Xiao were worried about you after the Emperor summoned you yesterday, and we heard nothing from you till this morning. Miss Qiaoqiao was especially frantic."

Lin Wanrong realized he had neglected to think about Miss Xiao and Qiaoqiao. In his excitement over reuniting Xian'er with her father and seeing the scroll left by Qingxuan, he had forgotten about them entirely. Guiltily, he asked, "Mr. Xu, they're alright, aren't they?"

"They're fine!" Xu Wei shook his head, his expression enigmatic. "You don't know, but now the Xiao family has secret guards from the palace protecting them. You are the one we were worried about after seeing the Emperor yesterday."

Lin Wanrong, a clever man, understood the implications in Xu Wei's words. The Emperor's assassination attempt was a significant matter, and his summons at such a critical time was a potentially ominous sign. The fact that he had not been seen for a whole day and night was bound to raise suspicions. Lin Wanrong gratefully clasped his fists, his face a mix of emotions. The experiences of the previous day still sent shivers down his spine, and he was torn between laughter and tears. Yet he felt a touch of warmth at Xu Wei's evident concern.

"There's another matter," Xu Wei began, his brow furrowing, concern written across his face. "I don't know how to tell you this."

Lin Wanrong's heart sank, and he urged, "Come on, brother Xu, what's with the modesty? Just spit it out."

Xu Wei gave a bitter smile and shook his head. "It's not that I don't want to tell you. I'm just afraid you'll lose your temper. You know that General Li Tai's army is set to depart in about twenty days, right?"

"Everyone in Great Hua knows that." Lin Wanrong waved his hand impatiently. "Brother Xu, get to the point!"

"The reason for the delay in Li Tai's deployment of hundreds of thousands of elite soldiers is that the necessary funds have not been gathered. The most critical sum, totaling 350,000 taels, comes from Jiangnan," Xu Wei slowly explained, watching Lin's face.

"What's wrong with Jiangnan? Once the silver is gathered, that's it," Lin Wanrong said, laughing. He thought of Luo Min's tax collection in Jinling and how easily men could be swayed.

"350,000 taels, gathered apart from the sum submitted to the national treasury, was to be transported to the capital. But en route—" Xu Wei sighed, shaking his head.

"Something went wrong?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, taken aback.

Xu Wei nodded somberly, "350,000 taels of silver, escorted by five thousand elite soldiers, vanished without a trace in Shandong, along with the entire contingent of men and horses, all in one night."

Chapter 368 Foresight

'350,000 taels of silver, vanished without a trace overnight? You must be joking with me, 350,000 taels, nearly 20 tons in weight; it's not something you can just cart away. Do you think it was loaded onto a truck?'

Upon seeing his disbelief, Xu Wei helplessly shook his head and bitterly smiled, saying, "At first, I didn't believe it either. But the news was brought by trustworthy messengers from Shandong, who rode 800 li at full speed. There's no reason for us not to believe them. Besides, who would joke about a matter that could cost one's head?"

Seeing Xu Wei's forehead beading with sweat from his urgency, Lin Wanrong's expression gradually changed. 350,000 taels of silver gone just like that; damn it, this was the vital fund for Li Tai's army. Without this silver, how could they fight against the Turks? They'd simply starve to death.

The tax silver from Jiangnan, Master Lin's efforts in the restaurants were not small. Although he was quite dissatisfied with the excessive taxes and levies, he couldn't just let the common people's hard-earned money feed thieves, right? He snorted heavily, thinking that he was always the one to rob others of their silver; no one dared to rob him.

"When did you hear this news? Why didn't I hear it yesterday? Have you informed the Emperor?" Lin Wanrong cautiously asked. Without these 350,000 taels of silver, Li Tai would be rendered helpless, and the nomads might seize the opportunity to invade the Central Plains. Furthermore, the discord within would make the situation truly perilous. Could the ailing old Emperor even withstand such a blow?

"The incident happened the night before last, and the news only arrived last night from Shandong. Apart from those in Shandong, only you and I know," Xu Wei glanced at him and said. "As for the Emperor, I haven't had the chance to report it to him yet."

The night before last? Wasn't that the night before the assassination attempt on the old Emperor? An assassination here, and the military funds robbed there - a massive conspiracy!

However, with such a significant incident, why wasn't Xu Wei rushing to report to the Emperor but instead came to tell him? Even if the silver was stolen, it had nothing to do with him. He was just a minor Vice Minister of Personnel, with dozens ahead of him in line, and this matter has nothing to do with my department.

Xu Wei seemed to see through his thoughts and sighed, saying, "I'm not intentionally hiding it from the Emperor, but this matter is grave. One wrong step, and hundreds or thousands of heads could roll. Besides, this happened in Shandong—"

"Shandong? What about Shandong?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"It happened in Shandong, in Jinan," Xu Wei sighed faintly, his face filled with confusion.

"Jinan? You mean Luo Ning? Oh, no, Luo Min?" Lin Wanrong jumped up, secretly chiding himself, wondering why he always thought of women first, and only then the actual matters.

"Whether it's Luo Min or Luo Ning doesn't matter now," Xu Wei said with a bitter smile. "It happened within Jinan, involving 350,000 taels of silver. If you were the Emperor, what would you do?"

Lin Wanrong felt a chill in his heart. If he were to be implicated in this, both the elder Luo and the younger Luo would be doomed. Poor little Ning, his dear darling, who hadn't even enjoyed the happiest moments of life, was about to be lost. No, he couldn't allow this to happen. Understanding this, he realized why Xu Wei, under such pressure, had delayed reporting the matter. He was buying time for Luo Min, trying to save the lives of Luo Min's entire family.

"Have you understood now?" Xu Wei's smile was filled with bitterness. He was indeed helping Luo Min, but at the price of his own fortune and life.

Lin Wanrong gave him a thumbs up and patted him on the shoulder, "Good brother, you have integrity! Old Xu, you are a true friend. I thank you on behalf of my father-in-law."

"I have been friends with Brother Luo for many years. How can I stand by when he is in trouble now? Besides, this is not a matter of thanks; the key is how to recover the silver." Xu Wei shook his head, sighing deeply, "With this happening, Brother Luo is far away in Jinan, and there's no one around me to consult with, except you, little brother Lin. You are learned and talented, wise in every way. I believe you must have a solution. I have been waiting here for you since early this morning."

Old Xu was flattering him, and Lin Wanrong nodded, "Mr. Xu, I'm not at the scene. Even if I have great skills, I cannot solve the case remotely. But, though I, Lin San, like to bluster ordinarily, I am always serious when it matters. Luo Ning is my girlfriend, Luo Min is my father-in-law; my father-in-law's affairs are my affairs. If we find the silver, all is well; if not, I will sell everything I have to save Ning's family—Mr. Xu, you better not be stingy when I ask you for a hundred thousand or so."

Xu Wei was momentarily dumbfounded. Little brother Lin's demands were high, starting at a hundred thousand or so. Not just him, even the Emperor would find it difficult to produce such a sum at once. But for someone like little brother Lin who was so skilled at accumulating wealth, having a fortune of several hundred thousand was no problem.

Lin Wanrong laughed, joking with Old Xu, relieving some of the pressure in his heart. Ning must be saved, and the family fortune must not be lost. Otherwise, how would he support so many wives in the future? Why did he always face such dilemmas? Being a man was truly damn hard.

"Little brother Lin, what should we do now?" Xu Wei said, his brows furrowed. He was the Minister of Revenue; if the 350,000 taels of silver were really not recovered, the responsibility for finding the money would still fall on him. There was no escape.

"We mustn't panic over this matter. Mr. Xu, I'm afraid you'll have to suffer a bit," Lin Wanrong said, his face serious.

Xu Wei looked at him, puzzled, "Suffer? How?"

Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth and hummed, "You must go to the palace now, report the facts to the Emperor, word by word, honestly, without omitting anything." Whether the old Emperor was really

executing people or bluffing, he probably wouldn't calm down without actually beheading a couple. Hopefully, Xu Wei could endure it.

Xu Wei gasped, no wonder little brother Lin said he would suffer. This was no ordinary suffering; it was life-threatening. The Emperor was gravely injured yesterday, and today he would hear this news. What would happen then, no one knew. "Little brother Lin, if I report to the Emperor now, what about Brother Luo?" Xu Wei asked, his face full of distress.

"You think you can hide this from the old master? He's like an octopus, with countless tentacles; what can be hidden from him?" Lord Lin shook his head and said with a bitter smile, "Mr. Xu, you've followed the Emperor for many years; what do you think of him?"

Xu Wei was the emperor's chief strategist and knew the monarch deeply. Upon hearing these words, he sighed slightly and summarized with one simple word: "Inscrutable."

"Inscrutable! Well said. Mr. Xu, I can candidly say that even last night's amorous encounters between you and Sister Su are clear to the emperor. Do you believe it?" Lin Wanrong said with a mischievous smile, but his face was filled with seriousness.

Xu Wei's face turned red, but after thinking it over, his expression became gloomy: "I understand what you mean, little brother. The Emperor's eyes and ears are everywhere, and this matter will never be concealed from him. In that case, I will report the truth to the Emperor. If he truly wants to execute Luo's family, I will risk my life to save them."

Lin Wanrong waved his hand, took a few slow steps, then turned around and said, "Let's not talk so drastically yet. Things haven't reached that point. You go and tell the Emperor that I, Lin San, guarantee that within twenty days, I will retrieve the silver."

"Twenty days? Isn't that a bit too late?" Xu Wei looked at him doubtfully, "In over twenty days, Li Tai's army will set out."

‘Damn, is old Xu really naive or just pretending? If I tell the Emperor twenty days, will he allow me that time? Even if he cuts my time in half, that would be a heavenly grace.’

Xu Wei finally understood and asked, "But what if it is not found within the specified time?"

"Not found?" Lin Wanrong touched his nose with a bitter smile, "Honestly, I haven't thought about the consequences. At worst, I will sell everything I own. Sigh, I haven't counted our family's silver notes or checked Qiaoqiao's accounts for a long time. I don't know if our recent income is positive or negative. Damn it, my official position is too low, no one gives me gifts. Otherwise, three hundred and fifty thousand taels of silver would be nothing. Mr. Xu, if you don't want me to borrow money from you, then tell the Emperor to promote me. I only want three hundred and fifty thousand, nothing more!"

Old Xu burst into hearty laughter, feeling much lighter after talking with Master Lin, as if nothing in the world could perplex them.

"Then it's settled. I will go to the palace now. Oh, little brother Lin, why don't you come with me? Perhaps with the Emperor's favor towards you, we can delay the deadline," Xu Wei said, full of confidence, seemingly relying on his influence with the emperor.

Master Lin chuckled, "You think I'm foolish? I'm not going to the Emperor just to be scolded."

Xu Wei was taken aback, but he brushed off the implied insult and asked, "So what will you do?"

"My business is very important," Master Lin said with a solemn face, muttering, "I'm going to see how Du Xiuyuan's military training is going—I admire my foresight, really. Fairy, my dear treasure, don't let me down!"

Watch Du Xiuyuan's military training? Is this a serious matter? What foresight? What fairy? Not understanding little brother Lin's words, Xu Wei shook his head, took a big step, and went to the palace for an audience with the Emperor.

Chapter 369 Cunning and Endurance

Yesterday, as Li Tai was leaving, he had handed over 10,000 elite troops to Lin Wanrong, who were now stationed at the foot of Grand Prime Minister Temple's back mountain. Li Tai knew that people like Du Xiuyuan had been personally nurtured by Lin Wanrong. They had fought bravely against the White Lotus cult in Shandong, demonstrating remarkable valor, so he specifically left Du Xiuyuan's unit for Lin Wanrong to command. Had this been yesterday morning, Lord Lin would surely have mocked Li Tai's old man as overly cautious. Only now could he truly appreciate the uniqueness and shrewdness of this illustrious General of Great Hua in handling affairs.

In a hurry to reach the base of Grand Prime Minister Temple's back mountain, before he had even approached the camp, he heard voices shouting in joyous surprise, "General Lin? Isn't that General Lin? Brothers, General Lin is back, General Lin is back!"

Lin Wanrong looked up to see several familiar faces. He vaguely remembered that these men were the scholarly soldiers that Du Xiuyuan had brought from Hangzhou when he had been in command in Chuzhou. They had all grown into brave and robust warriors, resembling the lads from the north.

Du Xiuyuan's troops, formed from those who had fought a bloody battle against the White Lotus by Weishan Lake, had witnessed General Lin's awe-inspiring power just a few days ago during a military exercise. He had defeated Su Mubai in one fell swoop, a victory they had all seen. Hearing that General Lin had returned, the crowd had already gathered to greet him. Lin Wanrong chuckled and greeted them all when Xu Zhen hurriedly rushed out from the camp, loudly exclaiming, "General Lin, you've arrived!"

Lin Wanrong nodded and smilingly asked, "Xu Zhen, did you receive the letter I sent yesterday?"

"We received it, we received it," Xu Zhen nodded repeatedly, then asked, puzzled, "General, where did you find such a young child to deliver the message? He looked only four or five years old. If it weren't for Brother Du's recognition of your handwriting, we might have driven him away."

A child? Lin Wanrong looked at Xu Zhen, confused, "Are your eyes deceiving you, boy? That was clearly a beautiful woman of heavenly grace and charm, not a child."

"No way!" Xu Zhen shook his head repeatedly, "Not just me, many brothers in the camp saw it. It was a four or five-year-old child, not a beautiful woman."

Could it be the illegitimate child of Fairy Sister? General Lin's face displayed a lascivious grin. Regardless of who delivered it, as long as the letter reached Du Xiuyuan's hands in time, that was what mattered: "Did you do as I instructed you?!"

Xu Zhen glanced around and lowered his voice, "When we first saw the letter, we weren't sure, but Brother Du said, 'General Lin's actions are always mysterious and unpredictable. It's better to believe it than not.' So I took three thousand brothers to the location you specified in the letter. Meanwhile, we intentionally acted carelessly and left a small gap."

"So someone took advantage of the gap and slipped out quietly?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, a triumphant look on his face.

Xu Zhen smiled broadly, "Naturally! Catching them is not easy, but letting them escape is all too simple. Last night, under cover of darkness, they 'slipped away unnoticed' from our encirclement. Brother Du took some elite brothers and quietly followed them."

Du Xiuyuan was sharp and efficient, making him trustworthy. Lin Wanrong nodded. On one side, there was an assassination attempt on the Emperor's life, and on the other, the military pay was stolen. If someone told him these two incidents were unrelated, he would never believe it. If he could find those Dongying culprits and trace the clues, he did not believe he could not uncover the whole truth.

"General, who exactly are those people you let us release?" Xu Zhen asked curiously. He had never faced the people of Dongying and naturally did not know who they were.

"They are a band of scoundrels plotting against our great nation," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Where is Brother Du now? Take me to see him."

Xu Zhen gladly agreed, leading out two swift horses from the camp. The two mounted their horses and galloped off, heading straight for the city. Lin Wanrong's brows furrowed; could it be that those Dongying people were hiding in the city? Those fellows seemed to be well-versed in the art of war.

Once inside the city, Xu Zhen unexpectedly headed for the densely populated western part, where taverns and shops lined both sides of the street, and pedestrians bustled about. The calls of merchants rose and fell, and the scene was one of bustling prosperity.

"It's right there." Xu Zhen suddenly stopped, pointing to a house ahead and speaking softly.

Following the direction of his finger, Lin Wanrong saw a row of residential courtyards, with Xu Zhen pointing at the one in the middle. The gate was not tall, and spring couplets still hung from the beams, with the large doors tightly shut and no sounds coming from within. Lin Wanrong looked around but saw nothing unusual among the bustling crowd. If those Dongying people were really hiding in that courtyard, there must be guards outside, but where was Du Xiuyuan hidden?

"General, let's go upstairs and have a couple of drinks," Xu Zhen grinned, pointing to a nearby tavern. The tavern was four or five stories high and faced the small courtyard. Business was booming. A bright idea flashed in Lin Wanrong's mind; Du Xiuyuan had chosen a good location.

The two went upstairs, and Xu Zhen, without calling for the waiter, went straight to the private room on the top floor. He knocked softly, and Du Xiuyuan opened the door, exclaiming joyfully, "General Lin, you've arrived?"

"You've worked hard, Brother Du," Lin Wanrong chuckled, and the three of them entered. The private room was simple in the furnished, but its window faced the small courtyard across.

"How is it, Brother Du?" Seeing the courtyard's silence without even a shadow, Lin Wanrong's brows furrowed, and he asked softly.

"We disguised ourselves and tracked them here last night, witnessing them enter the courtyard. Our brothers have been guarding the front and back doors, and we haven't seen them leave. I've also inquired about the courtyard; it was sold just a few days ago, and the previous owner has returned to Shanxi to retire," Du Xiuyuan explained the situation. He was a cautious man and had not detected any guards around. Even the private room in the tavern was changed frequently to avoid startling the suspects.

"Have you seen them inside the courtyard? Has anyone come looking for them?" Lin Wanrong asked urgently.

Du Xiuyuan shook his head: "We haven't seen anything. After they went in, it's like they died in there; not a single sound."

"Have you seen any cooking smoke? Or them going to the toilet?"

Du Xiuyuan shook his head repeatedly. Lin Wanrong could not help but frown; this was far from what he had expected. Damn it, could it be that these Dongying people were made of wood, needing neither food nor drink, never leaving the house?

"General Lin, who exactly are these people? Last night when we were trailing them, we saw that they were very cautious and their formation was tight; they appeared to be battle-hardened veterans," Du Xiuyuan voiced his doubt, and Xu Zhen also stared at General Lin, a question he had asked once before but to which General Lin had evaded answering.

Lin Wanrong sighed slightly, "They are from Dongying!"

"Dongying?" Du Xiuyuan and Xu Zhen exclaimed in unison, "How could they be in our Great Hua?"

"I don't know, perhaps their intentions are noble, spreading culture, exchanging goods and ideas, maybe they came to Great Hua to pay their respects," General Lin said with a joking smile.

"Exchanging goods and ideas with Great Hua? You must be joking, General Lin. They live on a tiny speck of land that can't even grow enough grains, what can they exchange with our Great Hua?" Du Xiuyuan shook his head and snorted, "I have several close friends in the naval forces at Fuzhou and Mawei, and they tell me that these Dongyin pirates frequently invade our southeastern coastal borders, plundering, and committing all sorts of atrocities. The problem of the Dongyin pirates is becoming as serious as the northern barbarians; if not handled properly, I fear it will cause endless trouble."

Brother Du's perspective was indeed unique and far-sighted, seeing that Dongying was an island nation, lacking resources and plagued by natural disasters; their dream of expansion onto the mainland would never be extinguished. Lin Wanrong looked at Du Xiuyuan intently and said earnestly, "Brother Du, listen to me, send word to your friends in the navy: If the Dongyin pirates come, beat them mercilessly. Don't talk about morals or benevolence; kill and cut them down, spare not a single one. Show the spirit and might of our Great Hua."

"Agreed," Du Xiuyuan clapped his hands loudly, "I will write to Brother Qi Xian tomorrow. If the Dongyin pirates invade again, we must strike back fiercely and enhance the prestige of our Great Hua."

Lin Wanrong smiled slightly, while Xu Zhen glanced at the small courtyard across the street and said with concern, "I heard that the people of Dongying are crafty and greedy. They have been hiding here for so long without coming out; could they have already dug a tunnel and escaped?"

"That's unlikely," Lin Wanrong paused and shook his head, "Brother Du already mentioned that the property has just changed hands, and it would be impossible to dig a tunnel in just a few days. Moreover, the house is in a bustling area with many watchful eyes, and it's a quadrangle dwelling; a tunnel would easily be discovered. The Dongyin people have been in the capital for only a few days; it's impossible for them to have everything prepared."

"What should we do now?" Xu Zhen asked anxiously.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "In Dongying, they have a technique called 'Ninjutsu,' which essentially means enduring technique, even if it means not eating or sleeping for days. It's nothing to them.

Now is their time to watch for any movement outside, and if they notice anything unusual, they will leave immediately."

Xu Zhen nodded quietly, "Ninjutsu? Then we shall endure as well!"

"Endure? We should eat, drink, play, and have fun as we like," General Lin laughed, "My method is called 'Play Technique,' Xu Zhen chuckled, his gaze falling on the door across the street. He paused, then said with excitement in a low voice, "General, someone is coming."

Chapter 370 Avant-Garde Thoughts

Du Xiuyuan and Lin Wanrong hurriedly looked forward, only to see an old man standing at the entrance, glancing left and right before he picked up the knocker and tapped lightly on the door.

"The contact has arrived." Xu Zhen and Du Xiuyuan's expressions changed simultaneously, looking back at Lin Wanrong for guidance, wondering if they should act at once.

"Wait and see," Lin Wanrong said calmly, shaking his head. "This matter is not so simple, Brother Du. If you were to meet with these Dongyin people, would you come rushing in so recklessly?"

"No, I would at least probe first." Du Xiuyuan suddenly realized. "General Lin, are you saying this is merely a test? Is it possible that the person who has come is not the one we're waiting for?"

"Big fish are not so easily hooked," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Let's wait a little longer. Save the best for last."

As they spoke, the old man knocked at the door for a long time, but there was no movement inside the house. He looked at the door with confusion, then turned to leave. Xu Zhen and Du Xiuyuan instantly became anxious. Speaking of a test was just speculation. If this man were the real deal and they let him go, would it not be a wasted effort?

Lin Wanrong slowly shook his head and softly said, "Keep watching." Before his words fell, the old man had reached the corner when suddenly, someone darted out from the alley to stop him, whispered a few words, and threw a silver piece to him. The old man departed happily.

Lin Wanrong heaved a sigh of relief. "Damn, the cunning rabbit has three burrows. Luckily, I'm no simpleton either." Du Xiuyuan and Xu Zhen were astonished. General Lin's tactics were truly extraordinary. If they had rushed out earlier, the real target might have escaped. They looked at General Lin admiringly. In a battle of wits, they had never seen anyone who could outmatch him.

A man in fine clothes emerged from the alley, a middle-aged man with a small mustache, looking like a steward of some wealthy household. He would stop every three steps, look back every five, constantly glancing around with high vigilance. Seeing no movement, he carefully stomped to the door, turned his back, and pulled the knocker, knocking three long times and two short ones. After a brief wait, the door creaked open, and the steward-like middle-aged man quickly looked around once more before darting into the yard.

"We've been waiting for this," Xu Zhen exclaimed excitedly, slapping his hand. "General Lin, when do we make our move?"

"There's no rush," Lin Wanrong hummed, shaking his head. "These are still not the big fish, merely small shrimps. Let's wait for them to meet first, and then we'll make our plans."

General Lin left no strategy unconsidered, as Du Xiuyuan and Xu Zhen witnessed firsthand. Naturally, they had no objections to his words. The three waited patiently for a while, and although the steward didn't reappear, they had already proven that someone was in the house, so they were no longer anxious.

Lin Wanrong took out a small white tube, slightly longer and thicker than a finger, from his pocket, put it in his mouth, and struck a match. After a flash of light and smoke, strands of green smoke rose, and Mr. Lin exhaled a pale blue cloud, sighing contentedly.

Xu Zhen and Du Xiuyuan watched in amazement, wondering what this cloud-swallowing, fog-exhaling device was, and why Lin Wanrong seemed to enjoy it so much. Xu Zhen swallowed hard and said, "General, could this be some new invention by Brother Li Sheng? There's both light and fire."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, exclaiming, "This is not a weapon; this is the tobacco my wife rolled for me. It's a fine thing indeed. As our great nation strides towards the world, this tobacco can act as the vanguard. It's just a pity—"

"A pity? What?" Du Xiuyuan asked hurriedly. Since Master Lin, a man of profound knowledge, said that tobacco was good, it must indeed be good.

"A pity that such a fine thing grows in the Turkic lands," Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, taking a puff with a face filled with regret.

"The Turkic lands?" Xu Zhen was young and easily fooled by Master Lin. He snorted and said, "Then let's attack the Turkic lands and take this tobacco back. Brother Du, General Lin, I have to tell you, I've always been perplexed. Our great nation is vast, our people intelligent, yet why do we always suffer foreign aggression? Why are the nomads always bullying us? Why can't we bully them instead? Honored sirs, don't laugh at me, but I have a dream of planting our flags across the nomads' lands, where our soldiers can loot and plunder without restraint!"

Lin Wanrong drew a sharp breath, thinking that the youth had indeed spoken the words he himself had wanted to but dared not say. Ah, such a wicked thought!

Du Xiuyuan was probably hearing such an idea for the first time. He was shocked at first, but on reflection, had to admit that Xu Zhen had a point. Why couldn't they be the aggressors? Had they become accustomed to being oppressed?

Lin Wanrong patted Xu Zhen's shoulder sentimentally, laughing, "Little Xu, I must say, your thinking is incredibly avant-garde, almost as much as mine. Peace and development are the eternal themes of this world, but local wars and conflicts are inevitable. When you are doing whatever you want in the nomads' lands, all the people of our great nation will take comfort in you, heh heh—"

The three burst into laughter, feeling a surge of primal energy. They knew that repaying evil with evil might be wrong, but they would never return evil with kindness. Peace was not something to be merely spoken about; it was forged in blood and fire.

Master Lin passed the rolled tobacco to the others, and they choked and coughed as they tried it, tasting a mix of bitterness and a sense of extraordinary satisfaction, grabbing and puffing a couple more times. Master Lin watched them with a guilty expression, lamenting, 'I have sinned. This must be the birth of a new generation of smokers.'

After some merry-making, Lin Wanrong waved his hand, and the others stopped their banter. They saw the 'master' cautiously peering out and swiftly stepping through the gate, heading into the crowd.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Brother Du, have some nimble fellows follow him. Remember, be cautious and don't startle him. Damn, this master can speak the language of the barbarians. How many families in the capital can raise such a servant, heh heh—"

He did not say it outright, but Du Xiuyuan sniffed something from his words, falling silent for a moment, "We must indeed be careful; this is not a game. Xu Zhen, you go personally."

Lin Wanrong nodded, recognizing Xu Zhen's cleverness and loyalty. Indeed, he was a fine fellow, although his ideas were slightly ahead of their time, which was just to General Lin's taste.

"General, what shall we do next? How shall we deal with the Dongyin people inside the house?" Du Xiuyuan quietly asked after Xu Zhen had left.

Lin chuckled and said, "Brother Du, how many men have you brought?"

Du Xiuyuan smiled and replied, "Around here, perhaps more than a hundred. Outside the west gate, there are also two squads of a thousand men each, plus three cannons, and a hundred archers from the Divine Machine Unit."

'My goodness, this Du Xiuyuan really doesn't mess around. He had arranged nearly three thousand men, along with cannons for support. I love this kind of setup; bullying people is so delightful!' Lin Wanrong chuckled sinisterly, "Excellent, excellent. Have your men surround this house, and they must act quietly. Let these ninjas stay inside without daring to move. Don't need too many men, just arrange two thousand, and the three cannons will suffice. Sigh, I can't really bully people, Brother Du. Do you think I'm quite generous?"

"Generous, indeed generous," Du Xiuyuan laughed heartily. Being around General Lin, his own shamelessness had unwittingly thickened as well.

Once Du Xiuyuan had left to make the arrangements, General Lin sat by the window and took a puff of his pipe. Suddenly, he slapped his palm and exclaimed, "Oh no, I forgot something. The 'master' can speak the foreign language and communicate with the foreigners, but I don't understand gibberish, so how will I converse with the Dongyin?"

"Fairy Ning, Fairy Ning, come here, come here—" Remembering that Fairy Sister was fluent in the Dongyin language and an ideal translator, General Lin cried out without concern for whether she was nearby.

The room was silent, his voice echoing emptily, but no one appeared for a long time. Fairy Ning seemed to have vanished into thin air.

"You haven't returned after completing the task? That's a dereliction of duty, you know?" General Lin shouted angrily, somewhat frustrated. Below the tavern, more and more bystanders were gathering. Du Xiuyuan had called in the troops, and they were about to act, but the translation issue was still unresolved. How could he communicate with the Dongyin and inquire about the whereabouts of the 350,000 taels of silver?

"How can you be so shameless?" A light, floating voice sounded beside him, and Fairy Ning appeared, standing quietly before him in plain clothing. Her skin was like ice and snow, her eyebrows slightly raised, her figure tall and graceful, beautiful and enchanting like Chang'e from the moon palace.

"Thank you for the compliment." Lin Wanrong grinned, "Without you saying it, I really wouldn't have known I had such a quality. Sister, it's only been a day, and you've become even more beautiful, like a flower."

"What do you want now?" Fairy Ning's brows furrowed, she shook her head and sighed. Her greatest regret now was encountering this man, whom she could neither beat nor kill, and he was a real eyesore.

"Actually, it's nothing major," General Lin said with a gentle smile, looking at her, "Where's Qingxuan?"

"Are you still deluding yourself?" Fairy Ning sneered coldly, "I told you long ago, Qingxuan will never have feelings for—"

"Save your breath." Lin Wanrong smirked dismissively, "My relationship with my wife is none of your business. If you won't tell me about Qingxuan, I won't force you. Now I'm going to catch some ghosts, will you come or not?"