

Finest 466

Chapter 466 A Spark of Fire

This was bad! Lin Wanrong quickly withdrew his hand and looked up, only to see a furious Madam Xiao standing in front of him. Her pretty face was flushed red and her bosom quivered with anger. To her left stood the sisters Yushuang and Xiao Yuruo, and to her right, she was holding Qin Xian'er's hand. All three women were glaring at him—Second Miss looked tense and anxious, Xian'er wore a smirk that was neither here nor there, and Xiao Yuruo clenched her fists, staring daggers at him. It was clear that if he couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation, he was in for a world of trouble.

Lin Wanrong felt a chill run down his spine. 'Damn it,' he thought, making a mistake was one thing, but being caught red-handed was another. The woman in front of him was his wife, and the other two were soon to be. This was a huge mess.

"Ah, everyone's here," he stammered, trying to lighten the tense atmosphere. His eyes darted around, his mind racing for a solution.

"Actually, I was just joking with everyone," he nervously grinned at Madam Xiao, "Ah, Madam, you really are youthful and radiant. Standing next to Xian'er, you two could easily pass for sisters. When I first saw you, I honestly couldn't tell who was the elder and who was the younger. Please don't take offense at my little joke. If anything, it's your fault for being so young and beautiful!"

Second Miss gently patted her chest and breathed a sigh of relief, giggling, "You scared me to death! No more jokes like this, okay? If outsiders heard, it would be a huge embarrassment. But Mother, you really are young and beautiful, so he's not entirely wrong. Right, Mother?"

She cooed and cuddled Madam Xiao's arm. Madam Xiao was caught between laughter and tears, touching her daughter's forehead with a delicate finger, "You silly girl, what nonsense are you talking about?"

"Are you really joking?" Xiao Yuruo was shrewd and competent, far less gullible than her sister. She cast a skeptical glance at Lin Wanrong, her face filled with disbelief.

"Of course, it was just a joke," Lin Wanrong hastily raised his right hand, "I swear, I often joke like this with Madam Xiao. If you don't believe me, you can ask her yourself."

"Mother—" Eldest Miss hesitated. This was a matter that concerned her mother's reputation; it was hard for her, as a daughter, to intervene. After a long pause, Xiao Yuruo softly said, "Is he... is he trustworthy?"

'When have you ever heard of Lin San being trustworthy?' Madam Xiao couldn't voice her grievances. Seeing Lin Wanrong's anxious gaze fixed upon her, she felt a surge of resentment. "Trustworthy? I wouldn't say—"

"What?!" At her mother's words, Xiao Yuruo's eyebrows shot up, and her face turned crimson. She pointed at Lin Wanrong, "How could you—"

Lin Wanrong frantically waved his hands, "It's a misunderstanding! I haven't done anything unforgivable. Eldest Miss, you have to believe in my character! Madam, think carefully before you speak, this could be life-or-death!"

Xiao Yuruo clenched her fists tightly, tears on the verge of falling. She thought to herself, 'The more I know about your character, the less I trust you. With Mother vouching for you, how can you deny it?'

Madam Xiao sighed, gripping Xiao Yuruo's trembling hand. Her mood slightly lifted seeing Lin Wanrong's guilty posture. "Even if he is unruly, you two mustn't spoil him. Otherwise, you'll be under his thumb for the rest of your lives." Both sisters nodded vigorously, taking their mother's advice to heart.

"What are you smiling about?" Qin Xian'er had been quietly observing and now questioned Lin Wanrong's downcast expression with a slight smile.

"I'm not smiling. I'm touched by Madam Xiao's kindness," Lin Wanrong lifted his head, his face now showing a grateful expression.

Knowing her husband's ability to change faces, Xian'er chuckled softly, "Husband, did you do something to Madam Xiao that you shouldn't have?"

"Impossible," Lin Wanrong whispered as he grabbed her hand, "Xian'er, don't you trust my character? How could I do such a thing? Even if I wanted to, Madam Xiao wouldn't allow it. Never mention this in front of Eldest Miss or Yushuang, the consequences would be severe."@@novelbin@@

"Really?" Xian'er gave him an inscrutable look, scrutinizing him from top to bottom.

'What does this mean? Doesn't she trust me? Honesty is the foundation of my character,' thought Lin Wanrong, increasingly uncomfortable under her gaze. His face flushed red. Annoyed, he said sternly, "Xian'er, you should go freshen up. Later, we need to lift the curse together."

"Ah!" Qin Xian'er gasped, her face flushing crimson in an instant, as if her life's secret had been exposed. She hurriedly covered her beautiful face, hummed softly, and lowered her head, no longer daring to speak.

Eldest Miss exchanged a few words quietly with her mother, noticing Lin San engaging in some banter with Qin Xian'er that left the young lady blushing a vivid red, radiant like peach blossoms in full bloom in March.

She snorted softly and slowly walked over, her gaze fixed on Lin Wanrong. Her face reddened before she could even speak. After a long silence, she finally whispered, "Are you still mad at me? I apologize; I wronged you earlier and caused you distress."

Xiao Yuruo's face was flushed and her expression beautiful; she almost seemed to bow her head to her chest as she apologized. Lin Wanrong was so entranced he quickly swallowed and waved his hands, saying, "It's fine, it's fine. I don't feel wronged at all."

That was his true feeling, but how could Eldest Miss know? Assuming he was magnanimous, she gently nodded and suddenly slid a sharp weapon from her sleeve, softly asking, "Do you know what this is?"

The sharp dagger shimmered in the dim courtyard light, and Lin Wanrong was instantly reminded of the time in Jinling when Eldest Miss and Yushuang each carried a dagger for self-defense. What did she intend now? Keeping his expression neutral, he reached for the dagger in Xiao Yuruo's hand and said, "Eldest Miss, it's more fitting for a girl to use a sewing needle. Weapons are not suitable for you. Let me keep it safe for you for the time being."

Eldest Miss avoided his grasp by rotating her hand and snorted lightly, "This is for my own protection. Our honor as women is more important than even our lives. If anyone dares to take advantage of my mother or act dishonestly before her, I will—"

"What will you do?" Lin Wanrong was startled and involuntarily took a step back.

With a grit of her teeth and a flush on her face, Eldest Miss abruptly waved the dagger down, saying with resolve, "I will cut!"

Lin Wanrong was both startled and horrified, stammering, "Cut where?"

Xiao Yuruo's cheeks turned icy, and she smirked coldly, "Wherever the evil is done, there shall I cut."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong instinctively covered his vital parts, whispering, "Eldest Miss, do you really need to be so harsh?"

Xiao Yuruo suddenly gave a charming smile, her soft cheeks tinged with a tender blush. She teasingly said, "If you're not the one doing evil, what are you afraid of?"

With that smile, she seemed to bloom like a hundred flowers, captivating and gorgeous, making it difficult for Lin Wanrong to turn his gaze away. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and chuckled, "Exactly, exactly. I rarely do bad things."

Seeing his lustful gaze, Xiao Yuruo felt both shy and pleased. She knew this rascal liked what he saw. No wonder Qin Xian'er had such a hold on him. Though she had become friends with Qin Xian'er, outstanding women like them would naturally compete with each other in secret.

"What happened to you? Where did you get hurt?" Lin Wanrong looked up, his eyes squinting as they fell on Xiao Yuruo. Only then did Eldest Miss get a clear view of his forehead, and she was shocked.

Yushuang also let out a gasp, hurriedly crowding beside him. Even Madam Xiao glanced his way, a trace of concern hidden in her eyes.

The courtyard was dimly lit. Xian'er had been standing beside him talking and hadn't examined him closely. Hearing Eldest Miss's words, she quickly turned to look at him. Seeing his condition, she felt a pang of pain in her heart and angrily said, "Husband, who injured you? I will kill her."

Xian'er was the sort who meant what she said. If she killed Xu Zhiqing, everything would be ruined. Lin Wanrong couldn't possibly tell the truth. Quickly covering his forehead, he mumbled, "Ah, it's nothing. I accidentally bumped into a rockery while walking."

Xian'er and the others felt distressed. All six of their hands began massaging his forehead. The sweet, soft touch made Lin Wanrong itch inside, regretting only that the injury was not on his behind instead.

Madam Xiao, standing apart, had the clearest view of it all. Seeing his evasive gaze and ambiguous words, she scoffed, "Where exactly did you get 'hit by a rockery'? In some young lady's courtyard, perhaps? Or were you beaten and thrown out?"

Her words immediately reminded the three young ladies. Given Lin Wanrong's disposition, no man capable of beating him like this had yet been born. This injury was most likely caused by a woman.

"No wonder," Eldest Miss snorted, slowly retracting her jade hand. Xian'er also turned her head away, saying nothing. Only Yushuang was truly considerate, unaffected by the atmosphere, and continued massaging him, albeit with much greater force.

Lin Wanrong, knowing he had been caught, laughed it off, pretending not to have heard Madam Xiao's words. He grabbed Yushuang's hand and said, "Second Miss, what a coincidence. What are you, Madam, and Eldest Miss doing here?"

Yushuang, always straightforward with him, nodded seriously and said, "Our family has been having some misfortunes lately. My sister was trapped and only returned yesterday. My mother went to the temple today to seek a solution. The high priest advised us to hang eighteen large lanterns around the house to ward off evil spirits. You arrived while we were hanging the lanterns. Mother is deeply devout and was so focused that you surprised her."

"Is that so?" Only then did Lin Wanrong notice that where Madam Xiao stood, a wooden frame had been set up and colorful banners hung. Eighteen bright lanterns were already up, swaying gently in the wind, unlit but quite beautiful.

He glanced at Qin Xian'er. The capital had been tense these past few days, and he had advised everyone to stay indoors. How could Madam Xiao go out to seek a divination today? If something happened to her on the way, what would they do?

"Husband," Xian'er understood his concern and unconsciously lowered her head, saying apologetically, "I tried to dissuade her, telling her to wait a few more days. But her love for her daughters was too strong, and she couldn't wait to find a solution for the Xiao family. I couldn't persuade her, and you were nowhere to be found. I had no choice but to accompany them."

Lin Wanrong had firsthand experience of Madam Xiao's stubborn temperament, even more so than Eldest Miss. He couldn't blame Xian'er for this. Grabbing her hand, he smiled and said, "Silly girl, when have I ever blamed you? You are my wife; whatever happens, I'll bear it with you."

Xian'er gave a sweet smile and held his arm tightly. Eldest Miss saw their intimacy and couldn't help but hum in contentment. Setting aside her previous disagreements with Lin San, she softly said, "This lantern has yet to be lit. According to tradition, it should be lit by a grown man of the Xiao family. However, our family lacks a male figure—"

"I know, I know," Lin Wanrong eagerly interrupted with a smile, "I'm half a son-in-law, so it counts if I light it."

Eldest Miss's pretty face flushed and she retorted, "Wishful thinking! My mother is an elder. Although you may be considered half a man of the Xiao family, you're not a full member. Therefore, you and my mother should light this lantern together."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, finding some truth in her words. Madam Xiao glanced at him and gave a subtle nod.

The Second Miss had already instructed Huan'er to bring the candles. Eighteen lanterns were strung together by a fuse, making lighting them quite simple. Xian'er and the two sisters from the Xiao family stepped back. Lin Wanrong and Madam Xiao each held a torch. Perhaps standing too close, Madam Xiao's face took on a hint of blush; even Lin Wanrong could feel the warm air emanating from her radiant complexion.

The two of them lit the fuse, and in a short while, the eighteen lanterns were illuminated one after another. The soft glow of the lamps created a warm atmosphere.

Madam Xiao stood bathed in the dim yellow lantern light. Her white dress tightly wrapped around her beautifully sculpted figure, and her exquisite face shimmered with a faint glow. Her neckline flushed with a beautiful red hue, her chest rising and falling softly, revealing glimpses of her ivory-like skin. Her demeanor was noble, almost divine, and seemed beyond reproach.

Each woman stood amidst the red lanterns on the ground, exuding their unique charm. Lin Wanrong was dazzled, unsure of where to look.

Madam Xiao bent down to put the torch away, her mature figure drawing an enchanting curve. Lin Wanrong, standing beside her, felt momentarily dazed. Sensing his gaze, Madam Xiao's neck flushed even redder and she quickly straightened up.

"These lanterns are so beautiful," the Second Miss pointed at the lanterns and giggled. "The monk from Grand Prime Minister Temple really didn't deceive us."

"Where, what are you talking about?" Lin Wanrong felt a sudden pang of anxiety. He had grown wary of Grand Prime Minister Temple.

Yushuang smiled sweetly, "Where else could it be but Grand Prime Minister Temple? You bad man, you wouldn't know. The monk there is miraculous; he not only guessed our names but also knew our mother's background. The lanterns he bestowed upon us are not ordinary either. They're heavy and worth double the usual ones. It took two carts to bring them back. The monk assured us that once lit, they would shine as bright as autumn leaves."

Overjoyed, the Second Miss chirped happily, leaving Lin Wanrong shocked. Unable to consider anything else, he quickly embraced Madam Xiao who was standing beside him.

"Lin San, what are you doing?!" The women of the Xiao family screamed in unison. Madam Xiao was a mixture of shame and anger, delivering a sharp kick to Lin Wanrong's shin.

Wincing in pain, Lin Wanrong's eyes reddened as he shouted, "Xian'er, take the young ladies and run—"

Before he could finish his sentence, a series of thunderous explosions resounded like firecrackers, shaking the earth and sky. In that moment, a burst of red light illuminated the heavens...

Chapter 467 Buried

Qin Xian'er had unconditional trust in him. Though she didn't understand his intentions when he spoke, she didn't hesitate for even a moment. Swiftly grabbing the arms of the two women beside her, she burst forward like a swallow skimming the water, a flash of light and a streak of fire followed.

Before the trio could even steady themselves, a tremendous explosion erupted behind them. Broken bricks and shards of tiles flew toward them like a swarm of locusts. The deafening roar seemed like it would burst their eardrums.

"Bad man—"

"Mother—"

Ignoring the flying debris, they hastily turned around to witness a heart-wrenching scene. Explosions echoed one after another, and the spot where Lin San and Madam Xiao stood appeared to be the epicenter. Fragments of brick filled the sky, clouds of smoke billowed up, and the intense heat scorched their faces as if they were leaning into a furnace.

Amid the noise, flames erupted everywhere. The wooden lantern holder had been close to the Xiao family's cloth storage, and beyond the courtyard wall was a four-story tavern. With a thunderous "boom," surrounding buildings were leveled, shaking the tavern to its foundation. It began to collapse, bricks and beams hurtling through the air. Thick smoke and dust filled the sky, making it impossible to see anyone within a several dozen-foot radius, let alone find Madam Xiao and Lin Wanrong.

"Husband—" Qin Xian'er's eyes were bloodshot as she dashed toward the epicenter of the explosion.

Another round of "booms" resonated as the hidden explosives within the lanterns ignited. A massive shockwave rolled through, enveloping Qin Xian'er. A stifled cry escaped her lips as if she'd been struck in the chest. Blood trickled down from the corner of her mouth, and her petite body was hurled back through the air.

"Sister Xian'er—" Xiao Yushuang let out a mournful cry, and along with Eldest Miss, they both lunged forward to catch her. The impact threw all three women to the ground with a hard thud.

Explosions continued, one after the other. The crackling sound of fire accompanied the noise of crumbling walls, piercing the soul. Tiles and eaves fell all around them. Xiao Yuruo felt as if her heart was being torn apart, completely oblivious to the looming danger.

"Bad guy—Mother—" The Second Miss wailed, scrambling to her feet, ready to dash into the lingering flames. Her cry snapped Xiao Yuruo back to reality. With tears in her eyes, she tightly gripped her sister and said, "Yushuang, what are you doing? Don't be reckless!"

Second Miss stared blankly at her for a moment, then suddenly broke into sobs and threw herself into her sister's arms. "Sister, where are the bad guy and Mother? Will they die? I... I don't want to live anymore."

"No, they won't. They absolutely won't. You know him, he's so terrible that even the King of Hell wouldn't take him." Xiao Yuruo caressed her sister's hair, speaking softly to comfort her. However, her own body couldn't stop trembling, and tears poured down like rain. Though she had always been strong and independent, today's disaster had far exceeded her imagination. Especially Lin San and her Mother—they were the two most important people in her life. Just moments before, they had been laughing and joking, but in the blink of an eye, they were swallowed up by the smoke and flames right in front of her. Faced with such a tragic scene, how could her heart not break?

"Is it true?! They won't die, will they, Sister?" Second Miss's gaze was vacant, murmuring as she lay in her sister's arms. It was as if she was asking her sister and also reassuring herself, her eyes filled with a lifeless gray.

"My dear sister, they won't," Eldest Miss replied, tears streaming down her face. She held Yushuang tightly and whispered, "Mother and he won't die. Even if they do, we will be with them. We are a family. We'll never be separated."

"Sister—" Xiao Yushuang let out a startled cry and clung to her tightly, overcome with grief. Her body grew colder and colder, and she eventually fainted from crying.

Recalling how she had just been joking around with Lin San moments ago, and how everything had turned uncertain within an instant, Xiao Yuruo felt so heartbroken she could barely breathe. But she had managed the Xiao family for years and was not easily defeated. Now was the time when her composure was needed the most, as the fates of her mother and Lin San were still unknown. R

Qin Xian'er slowly woke up from her unconscious state. The first face she saw was that of Xiao Yuruo, her expression both resolute and beautiful. She coughed lightly, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. She murmured, "Sister... Sister Xiao, where is my husband? Have you seen him?"

Tears welled up in Xiao Yuruo's eyes, but the corners of her mouth lifted into a smile of strength. She gently wiped away the blood from Qin Xian'er's mouth, "Don't worry, he's fine. You're injured and need to rest. Otherwise, he'll be heartbroken when he sees you."

Qin Xian'er struggled to her feet, her eyes sharp despite her injuries. The explosion had subsided, and the smoke slowly dissipated, leaving the air filled with the smell of burnt things. The grand courtyard of the Xiao family, along with the surrounding walls and buildings, had been flattened. There was no sign of Lin Wanrong or Madam Xiao; the place where they had been standing was now covered with a pile of rubble that was several yards high.

Among the ruins, a corner of a garment protruded, stained a vivid red by blood. Eldest Miss's face turned pale, and she wobbled on her feet, her fists clenched so tightly that her teeth broke the skin on her lips.

"My husband!" Qin Xian'er cried out, spotting the cloth, and lunged forward like a madwoman.

Xiao Yuruo quickly grabbed her, and they pressed close together as they moved forward, their heartbeats audibly racing. Eldest Miss bent down and, her hands trembling, gently touched the fabric. Tears silently fell, and after a long while, she pulled at the cloth. It moved easily, revealing itself to be just a torn corner, its stains of blood clearly visible.

Qin Xian'er stood beside Eldest Miss, forgetting even to breathe as she looked at that bloody fragment. Unable to bear the agony any longer, she suddenly collapsed and frantically began to tear away the rubble with her hands, crying out, "My husband, where are you? Xian'er is coming to find you!"

Xiao Yuruo was startled and quickly grabbed her hands, "Sister Xian'er, stop! This isn't helping him; you're endangering him!"

Qin Xian'er paused, "Sister, what did you say?"

Eldest Miss sighed, "This area is covered in rubble. If Mother and Lin San are really buried underneath, we don't know their exact location. Acting recklessly will only exacerbate the collapse of the rubble, ultimately endangering them."

Upon hearing this, Qin Xian'er froze, unable to move. She hurriedly grasped Xiao Yuruo's hand, her eyes shining with tears and a flicker of hope. "Sister, are you saying that he will be alright? Is that what you mean?"

Even though she knew that Qin Xian'er was merely comforting herself, Xiao Yuruo was no different. She wiped her tears and said with a sorrowful laugh, "Don't you know him? A scoundrel like him wouldn't leave us until he's had his fill of tormenting us."

Qin Xian'er nodded, seemingly invigorated by her sister's words. Wiping away her tears, she said with pride, "You're right, Sister. No one can harm him. Our husband is the strongest—"

Before she could finish, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the distance. Hundreds of robust men rushed toward them. The one in the lead fell to his knees, kowtowing and crying, "I deserve to die! I have failed in my duties and couldn't protect Lord Lin and the others. I deserve the worst punishment! Please, Princess, grant me a swift death!"

"Would your death bring my husband back to life?" Qin Xian'er, infuriated, her face cold and her eyes wet with tears, retorted loudly, "I will exterminate your nine generations, wreaking havoc on your lineage for eighteen generations!"@@novelbin@@

Although she was a princess, she had grown up within the White Lotus Sect and had been educated by An Biru. She was a fearless witch by nature. Seeing her husband in danger, murderous intent flooded her eyes, which had become swollen from crying, as she reverted to her natural ferocity.

Xiao Yuruo, regaining her composure, quickly grabbed Qin Xian'er's hand and spoke softly, "Xian'er, revenge can wait. Our immediate concern should be saving people."

Qin Xian'er huffed, her eyes red, "You all better hope nothing happens to my husband. If even a single hair on his head is harmed, I'll cut off each of your legs. When I say something, I mean it."

Gao Qiu, feeling guilty, bowed his head and remained silent. Xiao Yuruo wiped the tears from her eyes and recounted what had just happened. She sighed and said, "Mr. Gao, according to your experience, do you think that Lin San and my mother are under these ruins?"

Gao Qiu slowly approached the pile of debris, examining it carefully and sniffing the air. He was taken aback by the strong smell of gunpowder. The explosion had occurred within the courtyard of the Xiao family, in a confined space; its force could only be imagined. He bowed his head, paused for a moment, and softly said, "The remains of Madam Xiao and Lin San should be beneath this—"

"What did you say?!" Qin Xian'er's eyebrows shot up, her tears glistening like diamonds, almost as if she were grinding her teeth. Xiao Yuruo too staggered, her face pale as death, almost fainting.

To survive such a powerful explosion and the weight of the rubble was nothing short of a miracle. Gao Qiu's eyes welled up with old tears. He didn't dare to cause the young ladies further pain. Realizing there was no other option, he bellowed, "Bring the hoses quickly!"

The guards had already connected the hoses. Gao Qiu ordered water to be poured on the rubble to cool it down, aiming to prevent any further burning or heating that might suffocate the people trapped beneath.

Seeing the people start to take action, Qin Xian'er felt slightly relieved. She tightly grasped Xiao Yuruo's hand and said, "Sister, when will they start rescuing them? The delay is unbearable, how can my husband and your mother endure being trapped underneath?"

"There's no rushing this," Xiao Yuruo sighed helplessly. "The rubble all over the ground could collapse again at any moment. The speed of the water stream cannot be too fast. We have to clear the debris manually. If there's another collapse, even if mother and Lin San had ten lives, they wouldn't survive."

Qin Xian'er clenched her teeth, closed her eyes devoutly, and brought her palms together at her chest. Two crystalline tears slowly slid down her cheeks.

The Eldest Miss felt a pang in her heart. She hugged Qin Xian'er's arm and gently rested her head on her shoulder. The two women clung tightly to each other, providing mutual comfort.

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"Where am I?!" Lin Wanrong slowly opened his eyes, only to find himself engulfed in endless darkness.

Silence filled his ears; not a single noise could be heard. Every now and then, a faint crackling sound arose from an indeterminate direction. The air was thick with the smell of gunpowder, making it hard for him to even open his eyes. A searing heat radiated near his face, as if charcoal fires were burning around him.

"Where is this?" He asked himself again. He tried to stretch out his hands but found himself completely unable to move—his whole body hot and in pain. A simple movement exhausted all his strength. He let out a groan; his throat was so dry it felt as though it would catch fire, his voice weak and hoarse, barely audible even to himself.

Gasping for air, his arms hung limply by his sides. Beneath him seemed to be a soft sandbag; the texture was remarkably pleasant. Subconsciously, he pressed down again. Strands of fine hair brushed past the corner of his mouth, and a faint fragrance filled his nostrils.

The strong scent of rose perfume made him praise involuntarily. Just as he was about to take another whiff, he suddenly froze.

Madam! It's Madam Xiao! His sluggish brain snapped back to reality. The scenes during the explosion flashed before his eyes. A fiery wave had struck, and all he remembered was shielding Madam Xiao beneath him. Then, everything went black.

'An explosion? And I'm still alive?!' The more intense the pain, the happier he felt. Such vivid pain was proof that he was alive. Emotional tears filled his eyes. 'I want to burst into song!' With a hoarse voice, he let out an indistinct cry, resembling the sound of spring rain hitting the soil.

'Is Madam still alive?' His heart gradually cooled. Madam Xiao's soft body was pressed tightly against him, as smooth as fine silk. Her skin was as flawless as milk.

The two were pressed closely together. Usually, facing the beautiful and mature lady, he would seize the opportunity to flirt. Now, however, he seemed to have become noble. Somehow, in this life-or-death situation, he became much calmer, and there was not a shred of irreverent thoughts in his mind.

Madam Xiao's body was icy cold, devoid of any signs of life. Lin Wanrong's heart trembled violently. Ignoring the pain that enveloped him, he mustered all his strength to stretch out his arm and grab her hand. That small hand was as cold as a block of ice, devoid of any warmth.

Lin Wanrong stared blankly, immobilized. A wave of intense sorrow, unlike anything he had ever felt before, suddenly overwhelmed him. He let out a loud scream, as if trying to vent all his anguish. His broken voice rustled like a silkworm munching on mulberry leaves, and those two trails of tears could no longer be held back—they fell freely.

"Where, where is this? Is it raining?" A soft and weak voice faintly echoed in his ears.

"Madam, you—you're alive?" Lin Wanrong's words came out haltingly, choked by the sudden joy that filled his heart. Though he couldn't make out her face in the darkness, her voice sounded like celestial music, irresistibly pleasant and captivating.

"Are you... Lin San?" Madame Xiao shifted slightly. She felt a weight on her, as if a heavy mountain pressed against her body. Waves of a man's warm breath reached her from behind, causing her cheeks to flush, yet also sending a comforting warmth through her.

"Madam, it's me, it's me," Lin Wanrong responded, the tears of happiness falling down his face. "We're alive, we didn't die."

His voice was raspy, and had Madame Xiao not been so close, she would not have heard him clearly. Drops fell in the darkness, landing warmly on her face.

She suddenly remembered the moment of the explosion—it had been Lin San who had shielded her with his body. Choking back a sob, two lines of clear tears rolled down her cheeks. "Lin San, thank you."

"What is there to thank? As long as Madam doesn't think I've taken advantage of you, that's all that matters," Lin Wanrong sighed, his tone a mixture of seriousness and jest.

He shouldn't have mentioned it. The moment he did, Madame Xiao felt her cheeks burn even more. There they were, tightly entwined, a young man and herself in such a compromising position. If anyone saw them, even the Yellow River couldn't wash her reputation clean. Trained from a young age in the strict etiquette between men and women, she felt uncomfortable being this close to him. She clenched her teeth and started to move away, but the moment she did, Lin San groaned softly. His teeth were clenched so hard they made a grinding noise, and his voice weakened considerably.

Madame Xiao was startled and stopped moving. "Lin San, what—what's wrong with you?"

Sweat rolled down Lin Wanrong's forehead. Even without looking, he knew how pale his face must be. Clenching his teeth, he gasped, his voice feeble, "I'm fine, continue—"

His voice was completely different from the buoyant Lin San she was accustomed to, and Madame Xiao felt uneasy. Over time, she had become somewhat accustomed to the darkness. Though she couldn't see clearly, she could make out vague shapes.

They were hiding in a crater created by an explosion, so cramped that it could barely fit one person. Lin Wanrong had protected her body with his own, and they had fallen into the hole. A large wooden frame had collapsed across the top, preventing any large rocks from falling in.

The narrow, shallow pit had wedged them tightly together, immobilizing them. Scattered around them were pieces of wood, bricks, and tiles, all hot as boiling water and emitting suffocating smoke that stung her cheeks. She coughed several times, finding the air increasingly thin. Her breathing became rapid, and her head began to feel dizzy.

"Bend down—" Madame Xiao lowered her head, and an arm reached up to her mouth. Lin San's raspy voice sounded in her ear, tinged with an undeniable firmness, "Bite my arm —"@@novelbin@@

In a state of extreme oxygen deprivation, Madam Xiao felt dizzy and her consciousness began to blur. Upon hearing Lin Wanrong's words, she slightly opened her mouth and bit down on his arm.

"Bite harder!" Lin Wanrong shouted, enduring the pain. Her teeth sank into the flesh of his arm. Agonizing pain shot through him; he clenched his fist but said nothing.

As Madam Xiao's jaw opened, she instinctively took a deep breath. A rush of fresh air filled her nostrils and mouth. She gasped for breath and felt immediately relieved. When her consciousness returned, she realized she was biting tightly onto Lin Wanrong's arm. Shocked and embarrassed, she quickly let go and her cheeks flushed red.

Lin Wanrong knew her temperament. He shook his head and sighed, "Madam, don't blame yourself. It's just a small trick for self-preservation when oxygen is low. If you feel dizzy again, just take another bite."

‘Another bite? You make it sound like braised pork knuckle,’ Madam Xiao thought, her cheeks still flushed. The darkness hid her expression. She just hummed in acknowledgment and said nothing more.

"Madam, you can't fall asleep," Lin Wanrong said anxiously after a long silence. "The air isn't circulating well under this debris, and oxygen is scarce. If you pass out, you may never wake up again."

"I'm not asleep," Madam Xiao softly replied, though a hint of weariness tinged her voice—a common symptom of oxygen deprivation.

"Madam, you mustn't sleep. You have to hang in there. If you fall asleep, I will take advantage of you. You'll suffer a big loss, so you must hang on," Lin Wanrong warned urgently.

His threat was so laden with roguishness that Madam Xiao's cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red. She hummed in agreement but felt uncomfortably close to him. She slowly shifted away, her movement causing pain to Lin Wanrong's leg. He groaned, and beads of cold sweat dripped down his face.

"Lin San, what's wrong?" Madam Xiao was alarmed. Her shaking hand reached out in the darkness and touched his cheek, only to find it wet and icy cold with sweat.

"I don't know. Maybe my leg is broken," Lin Wanrong gasped heavily.

Trapped beneath him, Madam Xiao could not turn her body. Her fingers traced down from his cheek to his shoulder and eventually to his leg, only to find it wet and sticky. She withdrew her hand tremblingly, the faint scent of blood filling the air. "Lin San, your leg—"

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile. "Being alive is already good enough. Who cares about a leg? It's probably just broke."

Struggling, Madam Xiao managed to look back and saw that a large rock had smashed through the wooden frame above and landed on Lin Wanrong's leg. The bright red of blood had already soaked through his clothes. Broken bricks and rubble lay across his back, as if he'd been embedded alive into the debris. Then she looked at herself, unharmed except for her tattered clothes and a few minor scrapes on her arm, all because he had protected her. She stared in a daze for a long while, tears blurring her vision.

"Madam, don't be too moved," Lin Wanrong said, sweat dripping down his face as he grinned carelessly. "I'm taking your money to eliminate disasters for you. Your monthly wages aren't given to me for nothing."

Seeing him still making sarcastic remarks in this state, Madam Xiao was both angry and annoyed. She wanted to rebuke him, but her lips quivered for a long time without uttering a word. Tears began to fall like beads from her eyes.

From above her, Lin Wanrong could feel her delicate body trembling slightly. In the darkness, he couldn't see her face clearly. Assuming she felt embarrassed due to their physical closeness, Lin Wanrong gave a faint smile, "Madam, rest assured. Though I may be greedy and lustful, I would never engage in deceitful acts. In this ruin, I won't take advantage of you. If I break this vow, may I be struck down by heaven and earth."

"What nonsense are you spouting?!" Madam Xiao interrupted him, visibly shocked and embarrassed. "When did I ever say you were taking advantage of me—never mind, why are we even discussing such nonsense?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, then clenched his teeth and arched his body. With great effort, he moved his broken legs, enduring a piercing pain that made him tremble from head to toe. His jaws clenched tightly, sweat rolling down his face, he managed to create a small gap beneath him.

As the sweat landed on both him and Madam Xiao, she tremulously asked, "What are you doing?"

With his right arm, Lin Wanrong pulled Madam Xiao away from him. She let out a surprised gasp, her body instantly moving a few inches away from his. At the same time, drained of energy, Lin Wanrong leaned to his left with a roar. With a crunching sound, the large rock loosened, and he used the last of his strength to move his broken legs. Debris and dust fell on his back, but he clenched his teeth, not uttering a sound.

With this movement, Madam Xiao was able to move off him, and they found themselves face to face, though still intimately close. Despite the closeness, it was a more respectable arrangement than before. In the small crater created by the explosion, this was the most physical distance Lin Wanrong could manage.

Madam Xiao was stunned. This proud Lin San was unlike the man she knew, who was usually playful and never serious. Despite people getting mad at him and cursing him, he had never shown anger. Who knew that deep inside, he was more stubborn and proud than anyone else?

Their faces were close, his breath gently brushing her face. Madam Xiao's eyes filled with tears, her chest trembling rapidly. Even Lin Wanrong could feel the waves of her emotion. "Lin San, what are you doing? Do you have a death wish?"

Lin Wanrong gave a faint smile, "Life is important, of course. But perhaps in Madam's eyes, there are things even more important than life. So, I have to oblige."

Tears fell like rain from Madam Xiao's eyes. "Are you insulting me? At a time like this, when even our lives are at stake, would I still care about minor details? Am I some backward, inflexible person? Are you the only noble one, while I can only be despicable?"

Madam Xiao's words came out like rapid-fire, melodious but piercing, leaving Lin Wanrong dizzied and rueful. Women are truly hard to please. Madam used to scold him for being despicable; now she complained he was being too noble. He really felt like Zhu Bajie [TL: A character in the novel Journey to the West] looking into a mirror—neither human nor beast.

A faint fragrance wafted into his nostrils, and the breath she exhaled tickled his face. Lin Wanrong listened to her tirade with a smile, but his mind was surprisingly calm. In this pitch-black ruin, the oxygen was slowly depleting, and he didn't know whether the two of them could last until they were found. Fortunately, he wasn't alone; he had someone to talk to.

The Madam finished her rant in one breath, her face flushed, feeling dizzy and short of breath. Having been educated by Lin San, she knew it was due to the thinning air. Just as she began to feel anxious, an arm stretched towards her mouth, "Bite down—"

"I don't want to—Mm—" She resisted stubbornly, but the arm had an irresistible force, pushing against her mouth and making her open it.

In the darkness, she couldn't see Lin San's expression or discern his thoughts. Strangely, she felt this Lin San before her was both proud and pure.

Both remained silent in the cramped, narrow pit, feeling intensely alone. Facing each other, they could smell each other's breath and hear each other's heartbeat, feeling a sense of vastness, as if the world had receded. The Madam's heart thumped wildly, yet she sensed that Lin San had no impure thoughts whatsoever.

What was the matter with him? Was he really so pure now? Her face flushed; she had grown accustomed to his taking liberties and was now disoriented by his changed demeanor.

"Madam, do you have a mother?" Lin San's voice echoed softly in the boundless darkness, raspy yet distant, as if coming from far away.

‘What kind of question is this? Do I look like I sprang from a rock?’ The Madam responded softly, "My mother passed away a long time ago. What about you? Are your parents still alive?"

Perhaps it was an illusion, but Lin San's voice seemed to choke, "They should be, along with my sister—I really miss them."

Their bodies were so close that she could feel the trembling of his palm. Lin San, who was always unscrupulous and cunning, also had this vulnerable side. Her heart trembled, and she gently held his hand, soothingly saying, "If you miss them, go back and visit. Take Yushuang and Yuruo with you."

'Go back? Easier said than done.' Lin Wanrong shook his head with a bitter smile, a montage of faces flashing before his eyes—parents, sister, Qingxuan, Xian'er, An Biru, Ning Yuxi... Face after face floated past him, sometimes blurry, sometimes clear. Unwittingly, from a lone wolf, he had gained so many emotional ties. The changes in life were truly unpredictable; he couldn't help but sigh softly.

"What are you thinking about?" Lin San had suddenly transformed before her eyes, becoming profound and thoughtful, making her feel restless. Strangely, she missed the simpler Lin San of the past.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I was thinking about my experiences." He clicked his tongue and shook his head, "Sometimes I find it strange—did I really do all those things? Am I really that great a person?"

"Blowing your own horn, are you?" The Madam chuckled softly. Though her face was hidden, her laugh gave the impression of a gentle spring breeze. "What extraordinary feats have you accomplished? Do share."

Amid the ruins, survival was a game of fate. Lin Wanrong smiled faintly and began recounting his story from Jinling, sharing his adventures one by one.

His experiences were so diverse that no one else in the world could compare. Whether it was poetry competitions, fierce battles against the bandit leader of White Lotus Sect, solving riddles at Lingyin Temple, or vying for the top merchant positions, his stories included both familiar and unknown tales that left the Madam trembling, her eyes wide and mouth agape. She had initially considered him merely a carefree rogue; little did she know his life could fill volumes of legendary tales.

Many of these stories he had never shared with anyone. Seeing the Madam listening so intently, a sense of unprecedented calm arose within him. He felt no urge to hold anything back. Even his

interactions with Qingxuan, Eldest Miss, and others, as well as his emotional history with Ning Yuxi, were laid bare.

His most astonishing story involved a life-and-death love affair with Fairy Ning, captivating and soul-stirring. The Madam gasped in shock, "You were involved with Miss Xiao's master? How could this be allowed?"

"What's wrong with it?" Lin Wanrong retorted calmly.

She shook her head repeatedly, "Fairy Ning is Miss Xiao's master. What you're doing defies social norms; it's unacceptable."

"Fairy Ning is Qingxuan's master, true. But she's also my Fairy Sister. Both are correct," Lin Wanrong snorted. "I am unmarried, as is she. We share no blood relations and our feelings are mutual. Why is this unacceptable? I intend to marry her, to love her, to protect her. What can anyone do to me?"

At a loss for words, the Madam found herself speechless.

Lin Wanrong grinned, "Madam, have you ever been in love?"

She gasped and quickly withdrew her hand, her face flushing as she chided, "Why do you ask? My marriage was arranged; my husband and I respect each other. We're not as audacious as you."

"Ah, so you've never been in love," Lin Wanrong sighed, nodding his head. "No wonder. You haven't experienced that kind of heartbeat, so naturally you can't understand."

Heartbeat? What kind of heartbeat? She glanced at him, asking softly, "How old are you this year?"

"Nineteen," Lin Wanrong answered earnestly.

She chuckled, "You look more like thirty-nine to me. Even a man of fifty-nine would not possess your experiences."

"I'll take thirty-nine, then. Age has never concerned me much," Lin Wanrong laughed.

"Thirty-nine, thirty-nine... Why couldn't you be thirty-nine?" The Madam sighed quietly, her eyes welling up with tears.

"Madam, what did you say?" Lin Wanrong asked, as if he hadn't heard her words.

"Never mind," the Madam chuckled, wiping her tears. "My thoughts are rather chaotic today, and I can't even remember what I've said. Let's keep this as our little secret. You're not allowed to tell anyone." She extended her delicate little finger, hooking it around Lin Wanrong's, her face flushed with a charming rosy hue.

"Our secret," Lin Wanrong smiled softly, hooking his finger around her delicate one. A warm, soft sensation filled his heart...

Chapter 469 Guo Junyi

The explosion had kicked up dust and debris, enveloping the surrounding area of the Xiao family's shop. Numerous soldiers, armed with blades and arrows, stood guard nearby, keeping the crowd of onlookers at a distance. The ruins left by the explosion piled up several meters high, and fearing a second collapse, people hesitated to use any tools. They were forced to clear the debris by hand, making for slow progress.

Qin Xian'er clutched Eldest Miss's hand tightly. Her pretty face was devoid of color. Xiao Yuruo fought back her tears, quietly comforting her. Aside from the noise of soldiers shifting bricks and rubble, the scene was eerily silent.

Gao Qiu wiped away his sweat hastily and ran over, falling to his knees: "Reporting to Princess Nishang, Miss Xiao, Princess Chuyun has arrived—"

Before he could finish speaking, a small sedan chair appeared in the distance. Its curtain was lifted, and three disheveled, haggard women rushed out.

"Big brother—" Ning'er and Qiaoqiao called out softly, tears falling like pearls cut from their strings. They choked up as they ran toward the ruins, their faces illuminated by the flickering fires around them. Their expressions were so forlorn that even the Gao Qiu couldn't help but shed tears.

Xiao Yuruo was familiar with Qiaoqiao, and she had also known Miss Luo from her time in Jinling. Seeing the two women crying to the point of fainting, she thought of Lin San and felt a suffocating sense of heartbreak. She grabbed their sleeves and whispered through her tears, "Sister Qiaoqiao, Miss Luo, he... he will be alright—"

In the midst of her tears, Luo Ning suddenly looked up. Her tear-streaked face shone with anger as she choked out, "Eldest Miss, does your family have a vendetta against my big brother? Why do terrible things always happen around your family? Last time he was captured, this time he was ambushed. Is this how you treat him?!"

Anger overrode any calm Luo Ning might have had. Eldest Miss was at a loss for words, her heart feeling like it was being pierced by needles. She let out a soft cry and collapsed into Qin Xian'er's arms, muttering, "It's my fault, Sister Xian'er, I've doomed him—"

Having spent the last few days with the sisters, Qin Xian'er had gotten over her initial reservations and established deep emotional bonds with them. Especially just now, in the face of crisis, they had depended on and comforted each other. Seeing Luo Ning angrily confront Xiao Yuruo, she couldn't help but raise an eyebrow and scold, "Miss Luo, what happens between Sister Xiao and my husband is none of your concern, nor is it your place to comment."

"What did you say?" Luo Ning trembled with rage. She was a proud person, and with the uncertainty surrounding her big brother's condition, she could no longer contain her anger, saying, "Your husband is also my spouse, as my father promised me to him, with Lord Xu Wei as the matchmaker. How could this have nothing to do with me?"

Qin Xian'er's face turned icy. "A promise? It seems more like you're clinging to my husband shamelessly—"

"You—" Luo Ning had never been subjected to such disdain, her chest quivered with anger, and she was at a loss for words, tears streaming down her face.

"Both of you, please stop arguing," said Qiaoqiao, who was already feeling sorrowful. Listening to the two women bicker made her even more desolate. "You are the people closest to Big Brother. If he saw you arguing, wouldn't he be even more heartbroken?"

Qiaoqiao was gentle and charming. Qin Xian'er had gotten along well with her when they were in Jinling. Hearing her speak, Qin Xian'er was reminded of Lin Wanrong, whose fate was unknown, and she choked back a sob. Luo Ning's eyes also reddened, and tears fell freely. Neither of them spoke further.

The woman walking behind Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning stared at Qin Xian'er for a long time before she couldn't help but softly sob, "Xian'er, is it you?"

Qin Xian'er's expression was icy. She didn't even look at her and said, "So what if it is me? What, you want to fight me? My master isn't afraid of yours, so why should I be afraid of you?"

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head gently, tears mixing with her smile. "All of that was a misunderstanding. You are my sister; how could I fight you? If I had known the truth earlier, we would have recognized each other back in Jinling. We would have been a reunited family, offering our filial piety to our father. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Sister?" Qin Xian'er looked at her slightly protruding belly, bitterness filling her heart. She scoffed, "Don't make it sound so nice. When you were seducing my husband, did you think about the fact that I was your sister? Weren't you chosen as the successor of the Fairy Hall, committed to the heavenly path and caring for the world? How did you end up carrying my husband's child? My master was right; the so-called Fairy Hall is full of sanctimonious hypocrites. They dare not love, they dare not hate; they are a hundred times more hypocritical than ordinary people. Your master is like that, and so are you."

The harshness of her words was such that even Eldest Miss couldn't bear to listen and hurriedly tugged at Qin Xian'er's sleeve. But Qin Xian'er remained fearless. Having grown up in the White Lotus Sect under An Biru's guidance, she had developed such a devil-may-care attitude that even Lin Wanrong couldn't handle her, let alone Xiao Qingxuan.

Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed, then paled. Although Qin Xian'er spoke harshly, her words were true. When it came to being candid, daring to love and hate, neither she nor Ning Yuxi could compare to Qin Xian'er and her master.@@novelbin@@

"Well, call me a hypocrite then," Xiao Qingxuan gently wiped away a tear and said softly, "But the blood ties between us can never be severed. Whether you acknowledge me as your sister or not, you will always be my sister."

"Who cares," Qin Xian'er snorted softly, her eyes misty as she quickly turned her head away.

Xiao Qingxuan had understood Qin Xian'er's character back in Jinling and had nearly fallen for her tricks last time. She knew that rushing wouldn't get her anywhere; having a peaceful conversation with Qin Xian'er was already a significant step forward. She sighed and looked at Xiao Yuruo with a slight smile, nodding, "Eldest Miss, it's been a while. How have you been?"

Upon seeing Xiao Qingxuan, Xiao Yuruo couldn't help but think of what had happened on Mount Dangtu. Her cheeks flushed as she lowered her head and mumbled, "Thank you for your concern, Your Highness. I've been well, and I haven't yet had the chance to thank you for saving me before."

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head and smiled, "If we're talking about gratitude, I should be the one thanking you. You played the role of a matchmaker for My Dear and me. He's mentioned it several times, saying that we should express our gratitude to you."

Xiao Yuruo felt a shy thrill at Xiao Qingxuan's meaningful words. She lowered her head slightly and gripped Qin Xian'er's small hand tightly.

The atmosphere in the scene was exceptionally quiet. The few young women standing there had invisibly divided themselves into two factions, and neither group was to be trifled with. Gao Qiu, after listening to their conversation and observing their expressions, had a pretty good idea of what was going on. In this world, if there was a man who could subdue all these young women, it would be Lin San.

"Officer Gao, is my My Dear hiding here?" Xiao Qingxuan's elegant eyebrows flickered as she glanced at the pile of rubble, her voice trembling.

Gao Qiu respectfully replied, "Master Lin and Madam Xiao should be buried under this rubble. Please rest assured, Princess, I will do my best to rescue Master Lin as soon as possible."

Xiao Qingxuan gently nodded, tears glittering in her eyes, as she softly sighed, "You, my troublesome husband, never giving people peace of mind."

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After conversing with Madam Xiao for a bit, Lin Wanrong shared everything he had been holding back—things said and unsaid. Feeling much lighter, he laughed and said, "Madam, I have never told anyone else these things. Not even Qingxuan knows about them. Now that you're aware of eighty percent of my secrets, you could be considered my confidante."

In this dark world where they couldn't see each other's faces, they could still feel each other's warmth—a truly comforting feeling. Madam Xiao gave a light scoff and said shyly, "Who's your confidante? Be careful or someone will hear you and toss you into a pigsty."

Lin Wanrong chuckled nonchalantly, "Madam, I'm not easily scared. Given the purity of our relationship, we are far from deserving a dip in a pigsty."

Madam Xiao sighed softly, "Lin San, why do you become a different person here compared to when you're outside? If we really escape from here, will you revert back to your former self?"

Such a profound question left Lin Wanrong at a loss for words. He gave a wry smile and countered, "Madam, do you wish for me to revert back?"

Madam Xiao was silent for a moment, pondering the complexity of the question. After a long pause, she sighed, "I never understood why both Yuruo and Yushuang were smitten with you. It's only now that I somewhat understand. Lin San, you said I know eighty percent of your secrets. What about the remaining twenty percent? Can you share it with me?"

"No," Lin Wanrong smiled, "Some secrets are mine alone and cannot be shared. Although sometimes, it makes me feel very lonely."

His tone was light, yet it masked an indefinable sadness that seemed to overshadow the surrounding heat. Perhaps influenced by him, Madam Xiao suddenly felt an oppressive sensation. In the hazy atmosphere, even his heartbeat seemed exceptionally clear.

After an indefinite period of silence, he felt wetness on his arm as warm droplets fell. Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Madam, what's wrong? I didn't take advantage of you."

Madam Xiao shook her head, wiping away her tears, "Do you hate me?"

"Hate you? Hate you for what?" Lin Wanrong was genuinely puzzled.

"Do you truly not know, or are you just pretending to comfort me?" Madam Xiao sobbed, her eyes shining with tears. "If I hadn't insisted on going to Grand Prime Minister Temple to pray today against Xian'er's advice, you wouldn't have fallen into this trap or ended up stuck here. I know you have many things left undone, and an unborn child. It's all my fault! If something happens to you, I will never find peace."

Madam Xiao's voice gradually grew louder, her emotions suddenly becoming more intense. Choked with sobs, tears flowed freely, staining the fabric of his shirt on his chest and dripping onto his arm, turning from warm to cold.

Lin Wanrong reached out firmly, gently patting her tender shoulders, and sighed, "This has nothing to do with you. Someone is targeting me. If anyone is to blame, it's me for involving you. Ah, why are you biting me?"

"The air is getting thin. If I don't bite you, who should I bite?" Madam Xiao said irritably, her eyes filled with tears. "Why do you always take all the blame onto yourself, as if doing so will make me feel any better? Are you so noble that I'll be forever indebted to you? It's infuriating; I've never met someone as stupid and awful as you!"

Madam Xiao seemed genuinely angered, her chest heaving rapidly, pressed against Lin Wanrong's. She then turned her head away, refusing to speak.

‘What is going on?’ Lin Wanrong was bewildered. One moment she was crying, the next she was laughing—so different from her usual composed self. And she said he had changed; little did she know she was the one who was different.

In this ruined place, there were only the two of them. When one person stopped talking, the other naturally had nothing to say. Lin Wanrong quickly tugged at her arm, to which Madam Xiao huffed angrily, "What are you doing? Go on, be your noble self and don't touch me!"

‘Noble or shameless, both are my faults,’ Lin Wanrong thought bitterly. The previously warm atmosphere was now frozen in tension.

The ruins grew increasingly dark, the air thinner, an oppressive feeling flooding his mind. Lin Wanrong's breaths quickened, his heartbeats audible, his eyelids growing heavy.

The sound of Madam Xiao's hurried breathing rang in his ears, jolting Lin Wanrong awake. He tightly embraced her waist and patted her face energetically, "Madam, you can't fall asleep! Wake up! I haven't taken advantage of you yet. Wake up!"

That shout drained all his energy. He gasped for air, drawing in stale atmosphere into his lungs. The sensation of suffocation intensified, his eyelids feeling like they weighed a ton, and he was on the brink of falling asleep.

"Lin, Lin San," Madam Xiao panted, her trembling chest pressed tightly against his, her voice hoarse, "Are we— are we going to die?!"

"No, we won't die," Lin Wanrong's eyes moistened as he shook her vigorously, his limbs trembling, "Hold on, Madam. Let's talk. I promise I won't be noble anymore. In fact, I've always wanted to be a despicable person."

Madam Xiao's face flushed red as she coughed violently, the sensation of suffocation making her feel increasingly lightheaded. Tears trickled down her cheeks, "Lin, Lin San, is your name Lin Wanrong?"

"Yes, yes it is," Lin Wanrong nodded hastily.

"Lin Wanrong, Lin Wanrong—" Madam Xiao gasped for air, attempting to take in deep breaths but inhaling more stale air instead. Her eyes felt incredibly heavy as she mumbled, "I don't like that name; I prefer calling you Lin San. Do you know my name?"

Her body grew increasingly limp, and with every breath, he could hear the tremor in her lungs. The immense pain rendered her voice incredibly weak: "My name is Guo Junyi. You—you won't remember—" Her body suddenly tensed, her breathing becoming intensely erratic for a moment, and then gradually, it slowed until there was no sound at all.

"Guo Junyi, Guo Junyi—" Lin Wanrong embraced the body that was growing cold, tears cascading down his cheeks.

With a heart-wrenching scream, he let out a roar that seemed to reach the heavens, holding Guo Junyi's body tightly. Like a helpless child, he broke down into uncontrollable sobs.

A delicate 'ding' resounded, followed by the ecstatic voice of a woman: "My Dear, My Dear—"

Chapter 470 The Rescue

"Qingxuan!" Lin Wanrong was overjoyed, hurriedly wiping away his tears and shouting, "Qingxuan, I'm here, I'm here!"

Darkness pervaded the rubble around him. Xiao Qingxuan's voice echoed for a moment and then vanished. The last traces of warmth were slowly leaving Guo Junyi's body cradled in his arms; her delicate form was growing rigid.

Memories of laughing and joking with the Madam flooded his mind. He had never imagined that one day she would die right before his eyes. Lin Wanrong felt a lump forming in his throat; an unbearable pain surged through him. Gathering his last bit of strength, he let out a scream, "We are here—"

Suffering from extreme lack of oxygen, his voice was weak and hoarse, almost powerless. His breathing became increasingly rapid. Faintly, he could hear the sound of air churning in his lungs, and his consciousness began to waver.

‘Am I going to die?’ His mind was drifting, memories rushing back—the sweetness of leaning on each other with Eldest Miss and Qingxuan in Dangtu Mountain, the warmth of boating in Weishan Lake with An Biru and Xian'er, the steadfast commitment of facing life and death with Fairy Ning.

His nose tingled; he wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. Holding Guo Junyi's stiffening body tightly against him, he felt her gradually fading warmth and a strange sense of peace washed over him. ‘Is this it? Am I going back to where I came from? Qingxuan, Xian'er, goodbye forever! Fairy Ning, Sister An, I miss you!’

"My Dear, My Dear—" Xiao Qingxuan's soft, weeping voice echoed in his ears, almost inaudible but incredibly clear, "Can you hear me? Respond to me, respond to me!"

His eyelids felt as if they weighed a ton; his consciousness was fading. Hearing that familiar voice, he mustered all his strength, took a breath, and slowly opened his eyes. A sliver of light was projected from the rubble above, illuminating the pale cheeks of Madam Xiao. Her delicate eyebrows were slightly furrowed, her expression peaceful, as if she were a sleeping fairy.

It was a narrow iron tube, hollow in the center, forcefully inserted through the debris above. The light came through the hollow middle. Lin Wanrong was ecstatic. He squeezed his way to the tube; a barely perceptible breeze brushed his cheeks. Though feeble, it was precious to him.

"Madam, wake up, wake up," tears flowed down his cheeks as he forcefully slapped Guo Junyi's pale and delicate face, "We're saved, we're still alive, wake up. Wake up!"

Guo Junyi lay limply in his arms, her body cold and rigid, lifeless. The grief in Lin Wanrong's heart surged like a torrential river, impossible to contain. "Ah—" he screamed frantically, shaking Madam

Xiao's tender body, tears rolling down his face. "Wake up, Guo Junyi, wake up! If you don't wake up, I will take advantage of you; I mean what I say—"

No matter how much he shouted and called, Madam Xiao's body remained limp, as if she were asleep; her breathing had long since ceased.

Tears streamed down his face, his sobbing unrestrained. Bending down, he pinched Guo Junyi's delicate nose and pressed his lips forcefully onto her luscious red lips. Her lips were soft and fragrant, carrying a faint sweet scent, but her mouth and teeth were icy cold; he couldn't find a trace of breath.

Lin Wanrong took several sharp breaths, lifting his head to exhale the stale air from his lungs before taking another breath. This cycle repeated, each inhalation pulling in the pitifully limited air available through the iron pipe. Without a moment's hesitation, he passed his own breath into Guo Junyi's mouth.

In that moment, he felt like an innocent child, nursing from his mother, his mind devoid of any other thought but one heart-wrenching realization: he must save her. There was no time to take a full breath for himself, fearing that any lapse on his part would extinguish Guo Junyi's last hope for survival.

Madam Xiao, however, seemed almost hypnotized; her breathing was growing fainter and her cold body showed no response.

"You can't die; you must not die!" Lin Wanrong muttered feverishly as he assisted her breathing. His cheeks had gone numb from the effort, and each breath caused a tearing pain in his lungs. His mind grew increasingly cloudy; his vision darkened. He no longer knew what he was doing, mechanically repeating the breathing action in a daze.

Beneath the extreme physical and emotional strain, he felt as if his soul had detached from his body. It was only his unwavering conviction that enabled him to continue the repetitive motion, again and again.

In his semi-conscious state, Lin Wanrong had reached the limits of his strength and awareness. He was like a puppet on strings, utterly manipulated. The soft body in his arms shifted slightly, but he noticed nothing.

"My Dear, My Dear, speak to me!" Xiao Qingxuan's anxious voice came through the iron pipe, followed by a slow trickle of water that splashed onto their faces.

Madam Xiao's eyelashes quivered, and her lips parted slightly as she struggled to open her eyes.

The cool water on Lin Wanrong's face snapped him back to his senses. Seeing Guo Junyi's trembling eyelashes, he was stunned for a moment before shouting ecstatically, "Madam, you're awake, you're awake! Cough, cough—"

A searing pain erupted in his lungs, but he had no time to care. Holding Guo Junyi tightly, he broke into uncontrollable sobs, feeling as if they had been reborn through fire.

The thin air coming through the iron pipe gradually normalized Madam Xiao's breathing. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Under the faint light, she saw Lin San's face. His hair and cheeks were covered in dust and grime, yet the streaks left by his tears were clearly visible.

"Lin, Lin San," Guo Junyi gasped, tears gushing forth, "Did we die?"

"No, we didn't die," Lin Wanrong grinned, half his face black and half white from the mingling of dust and tears, looking for all the world like a mischievous monkey. "We're saved, we're saved."

His eyes were clear as crystal, filled with an innocence she had never seen in Lin San before. Guo Junyi could only stare in amazement.

It was as if she sensed the fervent joy in his heart, a feeling that transcended mere desire. Madam Xiao's eyes brimmed with tears, a warmth spreading through her. She gently smoothed her sleeve to wipe away the tears on his face and smiled, "You're a man. How can you cry so easily? What would others think if they saw you?"

Her demeanor was both gentle and natural, like a sister, yet also like a mother. Lin Wanrong grunted in agreement, wiping away his tears and laughing, "These are not tears; they're dewdrops from the sky. You know, I'm a capable and intelligent person; nobody can bully me. How could I cry?"

Guo Junyi softly hummed, grasping his hand, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Seeing her pale face and dazed expression, Lin Wanrong hastily slapped a shining metal pipe and exclaimed, "Madam, look, what is this?"

Hearing him call her 'Madam' had once felt so natural, but now it made Guo Junyi slightly uncomfortable. She stared blankly for a moment before finally saying, "It looks like a piece of metal pipe. Where did it come from? I didn't see it earlier."

Lin Wanrong sighed with emotion, "Madam, without this thing, we both would have lost our lives here. The air you breathed earlier came from this."

"What breathed air? I don't understand!" In the dim light, a light flush crept up Guo Junyi's pretty face. She turned her head away, her voice trembling.

"Never mind. What I mean is, this pipe allows us to talk so freely now," Lin Wanrong chuckled, glossing over the subject. In the case of a chaste widow like Madam Xiao, who valued her reputation more than life itself, it was better to keep some matters hidden, buried under the debris.

Guo Junyi lowered her head and softly hummed, her eyes moistening.

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath from the pipe, and a cool breeze wafted in. He felt immediately refreshed, though his head was still a bit muddled; he was nonetheless far better than before.

"Does it still hurt?" Seeing him greedily breathe in the air, Guo Junyi sighed softly. Her delicate hand gingerly touched his injured thigh, which was pressed tightly against her body. Blood stains had seeped onto her clothes, making them rough and coarse, yet incredibly real.

Lin Wanrong's forehead broke into a cold sweat as he gritted his teeth, "A little, yes."

Madam Xiao suddenly cried out, "Don't ever be so foolish again. Your life is as precious as gold and gems. How can you risk it to save others? If Yushuang and Yuruo found out, they would hate me!"

"I am but a worthless life, I've already died countless times. I am not as precious as gold and gems," Lin Wanrong said, comforting her. "Not just you, if even a cat or dog were in trouble, I would save them too."

"You might as well belittle me," Madam Xiao sighed deeply, murmuring, "I would rather you save that cat or dog than save me." Her words became increasingly incomprehensible, even to him. Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed, choosing not to engage her any further. He had been stirring up trouble for quite some time and was already extremely exhausted. As he was yawning, he suddenly felt a small hand groping around on his body. Startled, Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Madam, what are you doing? Men and women should not touch so freely!"

"What nonsense are you talking about?!" Guo Junyi said with a laugh. With a ripping sound, she tore a piece of cloth from his tattered clothes. Crouching down with all her might, she finally reached his thigh and carefully bandaged his injured leg.

Lin Wanrong grumbled, "Madam, I have clothes on, and you have clothes on too. Why did you have to tear mine?"

Guo Junyi glared at him, her face flushed. "I am a woman. How could I tear my own clothes?"

The ruin they were in had been dark, making it difficult to see. Now, with the faint light available, Lin Wanrong took a quick look. He saw that Guo Junyi's clothes were already in tatters, like strips of cloth wrapped around her body. As she crouched, glimpses of her full bosom and slender jade-like legs became visible, her skin luminous. Lin Wanrong immediately understood; her clothes really couldn't be torn any further.@@novelbin@@

"What are you staring at?" Guo Junyi quickly looked away, speaking feebly. The space was so cramped that the two of them were pressed tightly together. Even if he wanted to do something more out of line, it would be all too easy.

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said nothing. Seeing his silence, Guo Junyi stole a glance at him. His eyes were tightly closed, looking as if he had fallen asleep. Recalling the vows he had made earlier, she felt uneasy and said apologetically, "I was just joking with you; don't take it to heart."

"It's fine," Lin Wanrong replied nonchalantly, "I'm used to being treated as a villain."

Petty! Seeing his childlike, pouty lips, Guo Junyi couldn't help but shake her head and smile, a warm maternal glow spreading across her face.

"My Dear, where are you? Answer me, answer me!"

This must have been the umpteenth time Xiao Qingxuan had called out. Lin Wanrong had been so preoccupied with rescuing Madam Xiao that he had forgotten about it. He hurriedly moved to the pipe and shouted, "Qingxuan, I'm here! Respond if you hear me!"

Hearing his voice, Xiao Qingxuan burst into tears of joy, "My Dear, I heard you, I heard you! Wait for me, I'm coming to rescue you."

How embarrassing. Lately, it seemed like he was always being rescued by his wife. He sighed but felt a hint of pride. 'My wife is capable, always rescuing me. But I am even more capable, for I found such a capable wife!'

As he was lost in his triumphant thoughts, he realized that the pit had fallen silent, devoid of Guo Junyi's voice. Looking down, he saw her head lowered in silence, lost in thought.

"Madam, don't worry. We will be able to leave here soon," he immediately comforted, assuming she was worried about their fate.

"Is that so?" Guo Junyi glanced at him lightly. "Are you happy?"

'What kind of question is this? I'll be seeing daylight soon and will be reunited with Qingxuan; how could I not be happy?' Seeing his puzzled look, Guo Junyi smiled charmingly, "I was just teasing you; I'm quite happy too!"

It was a peculiar turn of events; in the past, he was the one making light of her. Now, the tables had turned, and she was teasing him. Lin Wanrong turned serious, "Madam, I haven't told Qingxuan about my relationship with Fairy Sister yet. Please keep it a secret for now. When I return from the North, I'll tell her everything."

"You're just a coward who has the guts to act but not to speak!" Guo Junyi berated.

From above came the sound of loosening tiles and rubble, followed by a wave of voices. Seeing Lin San's expression light up, Guo Junyi sighed, "Lin San, do you remember my name?"

"I do, Guo Junyi! Madam, why do you ask?" Lin Wanrong, hearing the sweet call of Yushuang from above, was already restless and eager to return.

"Nothing," noticing his distracted demeanor, Guo Junyi smiled, "Just testing your memory!"

With a clatter, the bricks and rubble above were moved aside. "Bad guy, Mother—" The Second Miss cried softly and leaped straight into their arms.