

Finest 471

Chapter 471 I'm Dead

Her body was delicate and soft as she fell into the arms of Guo Junyi and Lin San, the three of them tightly huddled together. A warm sensation instantly enveloped them all.

"Yushuang—" Madam Xiao cried out sorrowfully, tightly hugging her. Tears poured down her face like a floodgate had opened. The Second Miss held Lin San with one arm and her mother with the other, sobbing so hard she couldn't catch her breath, a truly touching scene.

Lin Wanrong, wounded all over, felt pain surging through every part of his body from the pressure. Seeing the two women crying heartily, he couldn't help but give a bitter smile. "Second Miss, let's save the idle talk for later. I really need some sleep."

Hearing this, Madam Xiao suddenly remembered something and quickly wiped her tears away. "Yushuang, get up quickly. He's seriously injured; don't press on him."

Second Miss nodded, somewhat embarrassed, and lifted her head. She saw Madam Xiao almost clinging onto Lin San, both covered in blood. Startled, she noticed that Qin Xian'er had already rushed over. Seeing Lin Wanrong's state, she let out a sob and embraced him, "Husband, Husband, how are you?"

Lin Wanrong nestled into her chest, nudging his head forcefully. The depletion of both his physical and mental energies had drained him completely. The soft, comfortable feeling made him utterly relaxed. He gasped for air; his consciousness blurred and his vision foggy. He muttered, "Xian'er, save the Madam first. She's frail; I fear she won't last long."

Tearfully, Qin Xian'er nodded and with great effort lifted Madam Xiao from his arms, dashing out. Guo Junyi looked back at him and saw Lin San's face weak and tired, but still managing a smile for her.

"Big Brother—" Ning'er and Qiaoqiao ran over frantically, navigating through the ruins. Xiao Yuruo, supporting Xiao Qingxuan, followed them, her eyes shimmering with tears.

"You all came?" He grinned with chapped, pale lips. His voice was so faint it was almost mosquito-like. An overwhelming sense of exhaustion flooded him. As he looked at their teary yet beautiful faces, his mind gradually clouded over and darkness closed in. An indescribable exhaustion overcame him, and finally, he couldn't resist anymore. He lay in the Second Miss's arms and fell into a deep sleep...

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"Little Brother, what are you doing? Why haven't you come to find me these days?" An Biru moved gracefully toward him, laughing softly. Her mature, voluptuous figure lightly quivered like waves. She pressed her cheek to his chest, her voice clear and melodious, yet tinged with an indescribable melancholy.

"Sister An." Lin Wanrong was overjoyed and quickly grabbed her hand. "How did you get here?"

"You heartless little thing." An Biru feigned anger and annoyance, tapping him gently on the forehead with her jade-like finger. "If you don't come looking for me, am I not allowed to come looking for you? Be careful, I might tell Xian'er you've bullied her master, and bullied her badly at that. I'm still hurting!"

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong felt a warmth in his heart. He pulled her into his arms and chuckled, "Look at what you're saying. Even if I dared to bully everyone in the world, I would never dare to bully you, Sister."

"Really?" An Biru giggled flirtatiously, casting a seductive glance at him. "So, it's alright for you to bully my senior sister? Don't forget, she is the master of Qingxuan!"

Fairy Sister? Lin Wanrong was stunned for a moment. An Biru's fox-like cheeks momentarily transformed into Ning Yuxi's extraordinarily beautiful face. Fairy Ning smiled softly, her expression melancholy. "You scoundrel, have you forgotten me? Why haven't you come to pick me up from the mountain?"

"Yuxi—" He called out in a daze, gripping her hand tightly. "Wait for me, I'll be right there!"

"Really?" Ning Yuxi's face grew colder. "You speak to Junior Sister An in the same way, don't you? Men who are unfaithful are all the same. It seems I misjudged you."

A faint, desolate smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. She turned away, her skirt fluttering, floating away like a feather-light immortal.

"Fairy Sister—" Lin Wanrong cried out in desperation, reaching to grab her sleeve, but grasping nothing but air.

A gentle voice sounded in his ear, "My Dear, My Dear, what's wrong? Were you having a nightmare?"

Lin Wanrong slowly opened his eyes to find Xiao Qingxuan's fairy-like face before him. She looked somewhat pale, her eyes red and swollen, as if she had been through much, but this did not diminish her breathtaking beauty. Instead, it added a touch of vulnerability that invited compassion.

He blinked, swallowed, and took a few deep breaths. "Qingxuan, where am I?"

Seeing his confused state, Xiao Qingxuan's eyes brimmed with tears. She wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and cheeks with her sleeve, softly saying, "Fool, you're in our home, of course. Don't you see, this is Ning'er's chamber?"

"Big Brother, I won't forgive you." Luo Ning nestled beside Xiao Qingxuan and burst into tears of joy upon seeing him awaken. "You don't even recognize Ning'er's room. You've really angered me. Once you're better, you're staying in my room for a full month. If you don't memorize every inch of it, I won't let you leave."

Ning'er's chamber? So, both An Biru and Ning Yuxi were just figments of a dream? He glanced quickly around the room; the furniture, curtains, embroidered quilts, and bed all felt familiar. They had been handpicked by Ning'er and Qiaoqiao when they decorated the bridal chamber. The three had even shared an intimate moment here; how could he forget? Seeing Luo Ning's face wet with tears of joy, her beautiful smile blooming like petals, he couldn't help but laugh. "How could I forget? I was just a bit groggy from sleep. This is our haven."

Luo Ning blushed, softly responding with a hum. "You've slept for quite a while. Big Brother, were you dreaming earlier? Why did I hear you calling someone else's name?"

"Really? Whose name did I call?" Lin Wanrong was shocked and quickly glanced at Xiao Qingxuan. Miss Xiao took his hand and smiled gently.

"It sounded like some 'fairy,' some 'sister.' I was too far away to hear clearly. Sister, did you hear it?" Luo Ning chuckled and leaned over, carefully tucking in the corner of his quilt.

"I was just half-asleep; how could I have heard clearly?" Xiao Qingxuan shook her head slightly. She looked at him with concern and gently said, "My Dear, you're injured. You shouldn't leave your bed. You need to rest more. Ning'er and I will stay here to keep you company."

Upon hearing that he was injured, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered and hurriedly looked down at his body. He was completely unclothed; layers of gauze were wrapped around his chest, back, and legs. He had been turned into a giant dumpling of sorts, with a faint smell of medicinal herbs emanating from the wrappings. Hastily stretching his leg, he winced and let out a cry of pain.

Xiao Qingxuan's heart ached for him. She quickly grabbed his hand. "Don't move around. I just changed your dressing; the medicine is still taking effect." She paused, and then softly sighed, "I don't understand how this could have happened. You're usually so agile. How did Madam Xiao come out unscathed while you ended up like this?"

Seeing that Luo Ning was looking at him eagerly, he realized that this girl and Xian'er were similarly cruel. Not daring to reveal that he had been injured while saving Guo Junyi, he awkwardly chuckled without saying a word.

Miss Luo seemed to have guessed his thoughts and pouted. "Big Sister, I think Big Brother was injured so badly because he was trying to save Madam Xiao. You saw it too. When we found Big Brother and Madam Xiao, they were tightly embracing each other. Madam Xiao used to be a renowned beauty—"

"Ning'er, don't talk nonsense," Xiao Qingxuan lightly scolded, helpless against Luo Ning's straightforwardness. "Madam Xiao has shown great kindness to My Dear. Without her, we wouldn't have had a good relationship with him. If he got injured while saving her, it just means he's an honorable man, repaying kindness with kindness. We should trust the character of both My Dear and Madam Xiao, and not make baseless speculations."

Ning'er made a face but said nothing. Lin Wanrong wanted to recount his ordeal under the ruins with Guo Junyi, but considering it could tarnish the Madam's reputation, he stifled the impulse. Smiling, he said, "I'm a well-known gentleman. Don't you know that, Ning'er? What I want to know is, who took off my clothes? Did anyone take advantage of me?"

"I certainly didn't take advantage of you," Luo Ning said with a gentle smile, her eyes filled with tenderness. She slowly rested her head on his leg, her cheeks flushing. "You are my husband. If I want to take advantage of you, I don't need to do it covertly. I would do it openly."

Miss Xiao lightly tsked, her ears turning red. Seeing Lin Wanrong resuming his usual jovial interaction with Ning'er, she felt a sense of joy as if something precious had been regained.

Lin Wanrong laughed for a while, but the laughter brought a new wave of pain to his body. Though it was considerably milder than before, it was still agonizing. Luo Ning tenderly wiped the sweat off his face and asked tearfully, "Big Brother, does it still hurt?"

'Pain in the leg is a good sign; it means the nerves are functioning normally,' Lin Wanrong sighed. "The pain is a minor issue. The real problem is that the army is soon to depart to resist the nomad invaders, and here I am with a broken leg. Bone and muscle injuries take a hundred days to heal. By the time I recover, the war at the front would likely be over."

"Why are you worrying about those matters when you're injured like this?" Miss Xiao looked at him with concern. "Last night, Father came to visit you in person. I've already mentioned to him that you're injured and need to recuperate. You won't be going north this time."

"How can that be?" Lin Wanrong cried out anxiously, "A man's worth is in his word. Had I not promised, that would be one thing, but I've already given my word to Xu Wei and General Li, as well as Du Xiuyuan, Hu Bugui, and all those old brothers in Shandong who are counting on me. How could I not go? I would never be able to face them again."

Xiao Qingxuan was a woman of great wisdom. She knew that although her husband was often playful and jovial, he took his promises extremely seriously. He could be flippant about many things, but when it came to keeping his word, he was steadfast. This was the foundation upon which he conducted himself.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's worried expression, Ning'er lightly laughed, "Silly big brother, Sister was just teasing you. While it's true that bone and tendon injuries require a long time to heal, have you considered who she is? The Emperor has sent numerous precious medicines, and the elixirs I use are far from ordinary. With daily treatment to improve your blood circulation and overall health, you should be up and about in less than ten days, and as agile as ever in about twenty."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong's eyes lit up with joy.

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head helplessly and smiled, "I didn't tell you this because I was afraid you'd think these were minor injuries and act recklessly in the future. You saved Madam Xiao this time, but who knows who it might be next. My husband, you are now the pillar of our family." Tears began to fill her eyes as she snuggled against him, weeping silently.

A feeling of both sweetness and sorrow filled Lin Wanrong's heart. Having married such a gentle, virtuous, and intelligent wife, he felt that he must have accrued good karma over multiple lifetimes. Gazing at Xiao Qingxuan's weary face, his heart ached. "Qingxuan, I promise you, once I return from the north, I'll stop gallivanting around and will spend my days happily with you and our family."

Getting him to settle down was no small feat—arguably as difficult as asking for his life. Xiao Qingxuan was touched and softly hummed in response.

Grinning, Lin Wanrong took her hand and pulled her into bed, "Qingxuan, you must be tired too. Come, rest for a while. And let's not forget about our son."

Xiao Qingxuan blushed deeply, "Don't be ridiculous, you're still injured, and Ning'er is here."

Ning'er giggled, "Sister, why be formal with me? You've been busy all night without a moment's rest. Let big brother take care of you."

They were sisters, after all; there was no need for propriety. Besides, considering Lin Wanrong's injuries, it's not like anything inappropriate could happen. Qingxuan bashfully agreed and slowly took off her outer garment, nestling into his arms.

The faint scent of orchids filled his nostrils as he held his wife's soft body, feeling the pulse in her belly beat in unison with his own heart. Lin Wanrong's eyes gradually moistened. Being alive felt incredibly good.

United in love, Qingxuan seemed to sense the turbulent emotions stirring within him. The sensation filled her with an exciting tremor, wishing she could be by his side forever.

Noticing Ning'er looking at them enviously, Xiao Qingxuan's cheeks flushed as she softly invited, "Ning'er, come join us."

"Thank you, Sister." Luo Ning's face showed a trace of complaint. "But if someone doesn't invite me, I dare not come." She stealthily glanced at her big brother, Lin Wanrong, her eyes both tender and charming.

Lin Wanrong felt his heart soften at her look. Lifting the corner of the blanket, Luo Ning giggled and crawled in, tightly wrapping her arms around his neck. Although she was beaming, tears of happiness trickled down her cheeks.

"Hey, don't touch me randomly, I'm injured—" Lin Wanrong exclaimed. His hand was already caressing Luo Ning's well-endowed chest, shouting as if he was the victim. All three of them—husband and wives—laughed and cuddled into a ball.

"Hmm, where is Qiaoqiao?" Lin Wanrong wondered, suddenly recalling that since he had woken up, he hadn't seen her. He knew how close Qiaoqiao, Qingxuan, and Luo Ning were to him.

Luo Ning hesitated for a moment before gently speaking. "Big Brother, don't be anxious when I tell you this."

"How can I not be anxious hearing you say that?" Just as he was about to inquire further, Qingxuan softly placed her jade-like hand over his lips and sighed, "It's about Xian'er."

"Xian'er? What happened to Xian'er?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

Luo Ning huffed in annoyance. "I just don't understand. Both are princesses, real sisters. Why is there such a big difference between Miss Qin and Sister Xiao? After rescuing you the other day, she's been holding onto you. Apart from the sisters from the Xiao family and Qiaoqiao, she won't allow anyone else near you. She only reluctantly agreed to let us take shifts taking care of you, because Sister is carrying the Lin family's bloodline. Qiaoqiao has it the hardest. She's close to both us and Miss Qin, so she's mediating between the two sides. She didn't want you to feel uncomfortable when you woke up and saw this situation, so she's over there persuading Miss Qin."

Lin Wanrong's head started to ache. He knew full well the matters between Qin Xian'er and Xiao Qingxuan. Given the current situation, this was to be expected.

Xiao Qingxuan softly spoke, "Luo Ning, you don't understand her temperament. My sister is not a bad person; she's just a bit willful. Her affection for my husband even surpasses mine. My Dear's rapid recovery is due to her spending all her spiritual energy to stimulate his vitality. When I entered the room, she was lying on him, crying. It really touched me."

At that, Lin Wanrong felt his heart soften. He couldn't bring himself to blame Xian'er. In the end, any grievances between Qingxuan and Xian'er were unintentional results of other people's conflicts.

Through the gauze window, a faint light heralded the dawn. Lin Wanrong, cuddling the soft bodies of Qingxuan and Luo Ning, inhaling their gentle fragrance, couldn't fall asleep no matter what.

"Qingxuan, what did you say? Last night?" Lin Wanrong suddenly felt alarmed and asked urgently.

"Yes," Luo Ning cuddled his arm and softly spoke, "Big Brother, you've been asleep for a whole day and night. We've already changed shifts with Miss Qin twice."

"This is not good." Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, attempting to sit up but was met with a body full of aching pain. Luo Ning hurriedly helped him lie back down. Xiao Qingxuan said with a pained expression, "Tell me what you need. You just had your medicine changed; don't move recklessly."

Lin Wanrong groaned in pain, "Qingxuan, send someone to summon Xu Wei quickly. Tell him that I am dead."

Chapter 472 Time to Leave

"What?" Ning'er exclaimed, her small hand quickly covering his mouth. "Big Brother, don't think foolishly. Our good days are still ahead of us."

"It's not foolish thoughts." Seeing Luo Ning's pale, anxious face, Lin Wanrong was touched. He quickly held her cold hand. "Don't worry, if I don't live to be at least 180 years old, I absolutely won't die."

Luo Ning snuggled tightly against his chest and whispered, "Even at 180, you're not allowed to die. I, along with Sister and Qiaoqiao, will be your wives forever, never to be separated."

His heart warmed at her words. Lin Wanrong gently patted her soft shoulder, feeling her sincere and passionate affection. Xiao Qingxuan pondered for a moment and softly asked, "My Dear, are you trying to lure the person behind all this into revealing himself?"

"Whether they reveal themselves or not, I can't judge now," Lin Wanrong snorted. "These past few days when I've been in trouble, I'm afraid things have been chaotic for Old Xu as well. Hopefully, he will be more cautious and not fall into the trap set by that person behind the scenes. Qingxuan, find someone clever to send a message to Xu Wei, and make the act as convincing as possible. Since that person has set such a cunning trap for me, if I don't survive, it would be too disappointing for him. Heh heh."

Xiao Qingxuan was exceptionally clever; she understood his words immediately and nodded slightly. After some thought, she couldn't find a servant in their house clever enough for this. Luo Ning thought for a moment and laughed, "I doubt we have anyone in our household clever enough to handle this. But I think the Xiao family might have a couple of candidates. Yesterday, Eldest Miss Xiao assigned a servant named Si De to go to the market to get medicine for you. He was quite efficient. I observed his behavior and it seems he has received quite a lot of instruction from you. He's as crafty and slippery as an eel."

Ning'er was teasing him. Miss Xiao chuckled quietly, and Lin Wanrong happily said, "Si De is here too? This kid does have my style. Let him go then."

"He's naturally at our home," Ning'er giggled. "All the buildings of the Xiao family collapsed, resulting in great loss. They don't even have a place to stay now, so Sister invited them all to live with us. Both Misses from the Xiao family and Madam Xiao have come. Our house is now quite lively."

Qingxuan was the sensible one. Lin Wanrong was touched and held her hand sincerely, "Qingxuan, thank you."

"Why thank me for such trivial matters? Do you consider me an outsider?" Xiao Qingxuan smiled, half playful, half serious. "Since you've already taken advantage of the two Misses Xiao and received Madam Xiao's permission, our two families are now related by marriage. I was originally planning to visit them personally in a few days to propose marriage to both Misses. Although this incident has caused some delay, it's still a joyous occasion with two families becoming one. I've met both Misses from the Xiao family. Eldest Miss is strong and calm in crises, and the Second Miss is innocent and lively, gentle and charming. Neither of them is selfish. It would be quite appropriate to have them as sisters."

"That's true, that's true." Getting Qingxuan's approval for the happy event, Lin Wanrong was overjoyed and couldn't help nodding continuously. However, when Qingxuan mentioned that neither of them was selfish, was she indirectly referring to Xian'er?

Lin Wanrong was severely injured and was now treated as a rare, protected species. Qingxuan was also heavily pregnant, making it hard for her to move around. So the tasks fell on Miss Luo.

Upon seeing her big brother unharmed, Luo Ning was ecstatic. She giggled as she left the room. Not long after, hurried footsteps could be heard from outside the door. "Husband, Husband, are you awake?!"

Hearing this voice, Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed red instantly. She struggled to sit up. Before she could even put on her clothes, the door burst open with a bang, and Qin Xian'er dashed in.

"Sister, you're here," said Xiao Qingxuan softly.

Noticing that Xiao Qingxuan was disheveled and sitting on the bed with a faint blush on her face, Qin Xian'er couldn't help but snort disdainfully. As if not seeing her, she sidestepped and joyfully lunged toward the bed. "Husband, how are you?"

Having not seen him for just two days, Qin Xian'er seemed to have lost some weight. Dust stained her clothes, and although her face was weary, her eyes shone with immense joy. Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, gently stroking her hair. "I'm fine. You must've had a tough couple of days."

Qin Xian'er nodded softly, her eyes brimming with tears. "Husband, it's my fault for not protecting you well. If anything happened to you, I couldn't go on living."

"Silly girl, what could happen to me?" Lin Wanrong said with a smile, wiping away the tear from her eye. "I'm perfectly healthy. I was thinking, once my injuries heal, I'll take you and Sister An to revisit Weishan Lake."

"Really?" Qin Xian'er cried out in joy, burying her head tightly into his chest. "Husband, you're so good."

Seeing the intimacy between Qin Xian'er and Lin Wanrong, Xiao Qingxuan felt a bit sour yet somewhat relieved. Just as she was getting lost in her thoughts, she felt someone take her hand. Turning around, it was Lin Wanrong. "Xian'er, you know Qingxuan as well. No wonder you both are equally beautiful; you're biological sisters. Had I known this earlier, I would have introduced you to her back in Jinling."

"I dare not reach such heights," Qin Xian'er huffed. "She's a noble and beautiful fairy from Jade Virtue Fairy Hall, while I'm a wicked witch from the White Lotus Sect— we're not of the same ilk."

As she spoke, she noticed Lin Wanrong's face turning pale, sweat trickling down his forehead, and cried out in alarm, "Husband, Husband, what's wrong?!"

Lin Wanrong took a few shallow breaths, his face ashen. "I'm fine," he sighed, "I just lost a leg and have a few broken ribs. Give it three to five years and a few thousand ginseng and bird's nest, and I'll be as good as new. Don't worry."

Tears fell from Qin Xian'er's eyes. "That won't happen, Husband. Don't let your imagination run wild. I took your pulse last night; you should be much better in less than twenty days. Then, we'll call upon my master, and all of us will go back to Weishan Lake. I'll play the zither, you'll compose poems, and Master will dance. We'll boat on the lake together, inseparable."

'Sister An can dance? Why hasn't this vixen mentioned it to me? But with her magnificent figure, a few pole dances would be...' Lin Wanrong's thoughts started to wander, displaying his lascivious tendencies.

"Husband, what's going on?" Seeing him with bright eyes and a sly grin at the corner of his mouth, Qin Xian'er asked, puzzled.

"Oh, never mind, never mind." Lin Wanrong coughed violently, his face flushed and he shook his head with a wry smile. "Let's not talk about whether I'll live long enough to go back to Weishan Lake. Even if I do, I doubt I'll be in the mood for it. Things have changed. There are so many matters at home to attend to, and then there's your attitude towards Qingxuan. How could I be at ease?"

Listening to him act out the whole drama just to mediate between her and Xian'er, Xiao Qingxuan felt both amused and touched. Silently, she tightened her grip on his hand.

Qin Xian'er was no fool. Hearing his words, she understood his intentions. Seeing the tearful look in Xiao Qingxuan's eyes, she felt disoriented for a moment before she hummed and lowered her head.

"Xian'er, as the saying goes, 'Sisters should not carry grudges overnight.' Even if you two didn't know before and had your squabbles, that's fate. Now it's different. You two share the same bloodline, and your children will as well. If not for yourselves, think about our children. And if not for them, think about me, your husband. You and Qingxuan are like two great mountains in our family, awe-inspiring. How can our family prosper if you two are constantly at odds? Moreover, I've thought it through. You two don't really have any deep-rooted hatred, but rather a genuine blood connection. Why can't you coexist peacefully and make our family flourish?" He spoke fluently,

leaving even Xiao Qingxuan a little dizzy. He strung together children, mountains, and family affairs as if they were all related. Truly, only he had such a talent.

Qin Xian'er's face flushed as she softly said, "I don't want to have children. Husband, you're aware of the issues between me and this... this Miss Xiao. My Master had a relationship with her Master that was closer than real sisters, but what happened in the end? I owe so much to my Master; if I were to forget her teachings and befriend this Miss Xiao, how could I face her? Husband, how could I do that?"

‘Clever girl, invoking the name of Master An to win her case,’ thought Xiao Qingxuan. She felt a newfound respect for this younger sister.

Lin Wanrong was delighted. He chuckled and said, "So you admit, Xian'er, that besides the issue with Sister An, you don't actually harbor any deep grudges against Qingxuan?"

It seemed to be the case. Qin Xian'er pondered for a moment and reluctantly hummed in agreement, then immediately shook her head. "No, she also stole you, my husband!"

Lin Wanrong was dripping with sweat. This girl really had a character. "Well, she didn't exactly steal me. It's more like sharing; the dew falls on every blade of grass," he said, laughing awkwardly. Both Qin Xian'er and Xiao Qingxuan's faces flushed, and they both let out a small 'hmph'.

"Xian'er, I'll ask you seriously: if Sister An and Fairy Ning make amends, will you stop being at odds with Qingxuan?" Lin Wanrong said gravely.

‘Make amends? Is that even possible?’ Qin Xian'er thought for a while and then slowly nodded. "As long as she stops trying to take you away from me, I won't hold any grudges against her anymore."

Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes. Qin Xian'er also felt that the situation seemed unrealistic at the moment. She pondered briefly before huffing, "Then you can only spend one day a month in her room, but ten days in mine."

This young lady really dared to say anything. Xiao Qingxuan's face flushed, and she nodded shyly, "Sister, if you can tolerate this scoundrel, then keep him as you wish."

Hearing the hidden meaning in her words, Qin Xian'er's face also turned red. She understood what Xiao Qingxuan was hinting at, being truly married to Lin Wanrong.

'I'm angry, angry. What does this mean? Am I some kind of bargaining chip in your sisterly negotiations?' Lin Wanrong grimaced, about to explode. Xiao Qingxuan secretly squeezed his hand, glancing at him disapprovingly, and whispered, "Don't you know my sister's personality by now? She talks tough but is soft-hearted. If I make peace with her, we can negotiate everything."

"Everything is negotiable?" Lin Wanrong, being naturally lascivious, immediately began thinking about other matters, his eyes lighting up.

"You scoundrel!" Xiao Qingxuan lightly spat, her ears turning as red as fire. She knew her husband too well; he was capable of any shameless act.

"Ah, Qingxuan, where has your mind wandered off to? I am not driven by lower instincts." Seeing his wife's irresistible blush, Lin Wanrong playfully pinched her hand, "I simply can't bear to be apart from you and wish to hold you every night."

Hearing her husband's sweet words and feeling his tender touch, yet still under her sister's watchful eye, Xiao Qingxuan couldn't help but feel weak all over. She was fully aware that he couldn't spend every night with her alone. Yet, she loved hearing him say those things. It must be fate's cruel joke, she thought shyly, feeling a wave of happiness wash over her.

"Only 'ten days'? Why wait a whole month? I can accomplish it in one night. Even double that," Lin Wanrong muttered triumphantly, his words falling right into Xiao Qingxuan's ears. Her sense of happiness vanished, replaced by a wave of embarrassment, and she jabbed him hard in the arm.

Qin Xian'er had been watching their playful exchange. Though her heart was bitter, she had to admit that driving Xiao Qingxuan out of the Lin family was an impossible task.

"Sister, don't listen to his nonsense. We are blood sisters; we should get along well and not be the subject of others' ridicule," Xiao Qingxuan gently said, grabbing Qin Xian'er's hand.

Qin Xian'er lowered her head silently, her hand struggling slightly, when a rough, large hand intervened, firmly gripping both of their smaller hands. A clever move from her thoughtful husband, thought Xiao Qingxuan, smiling contentedly.

This time, Qin Xian'er didn't resist; she had no choice but to let their hands hold hers. With a sigh of resignation, she said, "Husband, can you really resolve the longstanding grudge between my Master and Fairy Ning?"

The situation was far more complex than resolving the issues between Xian'er and Qingxuan. At least, the two princesses were wives he had won for himself; he could shape their opinions as he pleased. However, Fairy Ning and An Biru were entirely different—one as haughty as a celestial being and the other as cunning as a fox; neither was easy to deal with. Even though he had some ambiguous relationships with both, God only knew what could happen if these two incompatible women crossed paths.

"Husband, Husband—" Qin Xian'er noticed that he was lost in thought and softly called out to him.

"Of course, it can be done. Have you ever seen me fail in any undertaking?" Gazing at the hopeful eyes of Xian'er and Xiao Qingxuan, Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth and boasted. "For the everlasting prosperity of the Lin family and life as long as heaven, no difficulty is too great! What are An Biru and Fairy Ning in the face of that? I am better at handling women than enemies."

Xiao Qingxuan knew of his capabilities and joyfully said, "Sister, every word My Dear has ever said has come to pass. Now we can finally be together forever."

Qin Xian'er wanted to retort but caught the smile in Lin Wanrong's eyes and ultimately lowered her head, remaining silent.

Finally having a moment's peace, Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. Indeed, family matters were difficult to resolve, far more challenging than killing enemies on the battlefield.

"Bad man—" Two women entered from outside, the one behind was Qiaoqiao. Her eyes reddened upon seeing Lin Wanrong, but she bravely held back her tears. The one leading was Yushuang. Her eyes glistened with tears as she held a porcelain bowl, a faint fragrance emanating from it.

"Ah, Second Miss, you look even more beautiful than when I last saw you," Lin Wanrong teased upon seeing Yushuang's delicate face. When Qiaoqiao came near, he stealthily took her hand. "Big Brother—" she softly uttered, her eyes brimming with tears yet also full of smiles.

"Stop it," Yushuang bashfully chuckled. Seeing Qingxuan and Xian'er, she quickly bowed, "Greetings to both princess sisters."

The young girl was charming; Xiao Qingxuan laughed and helped her up, "Sister Yushuang, what is this? It smells so fragrant."

"This is black chicken ginseng soup. My mother commanded me to bring it over when she heard you had awakened," Yushuang said, tears falling from her eyes as she noticed Lin Wanrong was unharmed. "Bad man, this chicken soup was personally prepared by my mother. She hasn't cooked for many years, yet she spent all of yesterday making it. The soup has been simmered for an entire day and night; she said it would greatly benefit your injuries."

"Is that so? Then I must have a taste," Lin Wanrong smiled. "By the way, how is Madam? She was quite shocked that day."

"The Madam is fine, just caught a cold the night before last but was better by yesterday," Qiaoqiao softly smiled. "This soup was painstakingly made by her; she's also prepared many pastries that will be sent over later. Big Brother, only today did I realize that her culinary skills surpass mine a hundredfold."

"My mother's culinary skills have always been renowned far and wide," Second Miss said, her face radiant with joy as she listened to Qiaoqiao praising their mother. Gently, she scooped a spoonful of chicken soup and fed it to Lin Wanrong. "When I was younger, there were even gourmets from the capital who wrote articles praising my mother's cooking. However, as domestic affairs piled up, she stopped cooking."

The chicken soup warmed Lin Wanrong from the inside out as its rich fragrance filled his senses—it was extraordinarily delicious. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but marvel, "I never expected Madam to possess such culinary skills. I am indeed fortunate."

Yushuang's expression dimmed, her voice soft as she said, "Bad man, could you please persuade my mother?"

"Persuade her about what?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

Yushuang's face turned even more somber as she said, "Mother is leaving."

"She wants to leave?" Lin Wanrong was stunned. "Where is she going?"

The Second Miss looked down, her expression somber. "Mother wishes to return to Jinling. My elder sister is still trying to persuade her, but no matter what we say, she seems resolute."

"Why return to Jinling?" Struggling to sit up, Lin Wanrong let out a groan. Pain shot up his leg. Xian'er and Qingxuan hurriedly pushed him back down. Qingxuan softly said, "You're seriously injured; why don't you stay still? Just lie down and listen to what Yushuang has to say. There must be a reason why the Madam is so eager to leave."

"Exactly," Lin Wanrong grimaced through the pain. "Both the Eldest Miss and Second Miss are here in the capital, and the Madam has been happy living here. What could she possibly have to do in Jinling? She won't even have anyone to talk to, she'll be so lonely."

Yushuang nodded, her brows furrowed in worry. "My sister and I tried to make the same argument, but Mother insists that the roots of the Xiao family lie in Jinling. No matter how good the capital may be, it's not where she belongs long-term. She said she has been away for quite some time and it's about time to go back. Last night, she even wrote a letter to Cousin Guo, instructing him to come to the capital as soon as possible to discuss the rebuilding of our shops."

Roots in Jinling? Lin Wanrong glanced at the young women around him—Qiaoqiao, Xian'er, Qingxuan, and the Second Miss. Hadn't they all met in Jinling? The Madam had built her life there, living for many years; it was natural for her to have such thoughts. But why choose to leave at such a chaotic time? The Xiao family in the capital was in dire straits; this was when they needed her most.

Madam Xiao wasn't someone who acted without reason. If she decided to return to Jinling at a time like this, she must have her reasons. Lin Wanrong took solace in this thought after pondering it for a while.

Setting aside the chicken soup, the Second Miss took his hand and began to softly weep. "Mother said that your severe injuries are her fault, as she acted impulsively. She's been feeling guilty and says she can't face you, so she insists on returning to Jinling. Bad guy, I can tell she's going through a lot, although she won't talk about it with my sister and me. You are the person she values the most; please try to persuade her to stay in the capital with us. Will you?"

'Me, persuade her?' Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile. He knew Madam Xiao's character well—stubborn and strong-willed, even more so than Xiao Yuruo. Once she made up her mind, it was unlikely that anyone could change it.

"Husband, please give it a try," Qin Xian'er implored. She had grown fond of Madam Xiao during the few days they spent together.

Sighing, Lin Wanrong said reluctantly, "I can try, but I doubt it will make much difference. When the Madam gets stubborn, even I have to tread carefully around her."

'You mean you usually don't?' The sisters in the room all smiled at his words, lightening the heavy atmosphere considerably.

"Qiaoqiao, help me up. I should go see the Madam. If I wait any longer, she might be packed and ready to go, leaving no room for any discussion," Lin Wanrong concluded after some thought.

The women in the room were startled. Qingxuan scolded softly, "How can you move in your condition? Madam Xiao isn't heartless. If she decides to return to Jinling, she will certainly come to bid you farewell."

"Indeed," seeing his anxiousness, Yushuang felt a pang of pity and quickly said, "Mother is currently busy in the kitchen. It's not a good time to talk. She'll come to see you once she's free."

Being injured was indeed inconvenient; there was nothing one could accomplish. Before Lin Wanrong could speak, a long wail came from the courtyard, "Little brother Lin, little brother Lin, just days ago we were still toasting and talking joyfully. How could you just leave like this—" The voice choked on sobs, its mournful cry unbearable to hear, "—it's rare to find a true friend in life; you're abandoning me, this isn't the act of a gentleman! How could you be so heartless? Little brother Lin, come back, even if it kills me—"

A thud followed, the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. Immediately after, Si De's voice echoed in grief, "Lord Xu, what's wrong, what's wrong? Please restrain your grief! Someone come, Lord Xu has fainted. Brother San, how could you just leave like this—"

Lin Wanrong felt his whole body bristle with goosebumps. 'Please, guys, if you're going to act, at least be professional about it. Don't just wail. Start by sounding the gongs and drums and putting on mourning clothes; otherwise, how will everyone in the capital know that I've died?'

The young ladies exchanged glances. Even though they knew it was an act, the sounds were still unpleasant to hear. The Second Miss pouted and snorted, "What nonsense is Si De spouting? He just died. Don't good people always die young while the wicked live on? Doesn't he know this?"

Everyone knew Xiao Yushuang was genuinely adorable. Unable to contain their laughter, the young ladies burst into giggles, clearly delighted.

‘Children say the darnedest things,’ Lin Wanrong chuckled and lightly touched Yushuang’s rosy cheek, as if to regain his composure.

This room was full of women. Seeing that Xu Wei was about to arrive, it was time for them to leave. Xiao Qingxuan held Qin Xian’er’s hand gently and smiled, "Sister, you can stay here and look after My Dear. He enjoys talking to you."

Qin Xian’er wanted to argue but found herself speechless, so she lowered her blushing face.

"Little brother Lin, little brother Lin," Xu Wei staggered in, his clothing covered in dust, his face streaked with tears, sobbing uncontrollably, "What happened to you?! I, this damned person, am still alive while you, in the prime of your life, have left us? Where should I look for such a good and loyal friend like you? Ah, I don’t want to live anymore—"

Annoyed, Qin Xian’er muttered from behind the curtain, "Husband, what kind of person is this Xu Wei, so false and insincere, utterly unworthy of his reputation!"

"That’s just the kind of person he is," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Back in Jinling, he tricked me into attacking your White Lotus sect, even claiming he would make me an adviser general. In reality, I was just in charge of transporting provisions. I’ve long seen through his act. Ah, Mr. Xu—"

Qin Xian’er slowly pulled back the curtain. Xu Wei saw Lin Wanrong lying on the bed, wrapped up like a rice dumpling, and took three steps back in astonishment. After a moment of stammering, tears streaming down his old face, he exclaimed in joy and surprise, "Little brother Lin, you’re... you’re not dead?!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Look at what you’re saying. If I were dead, could I summon you? I wouldn’t do something so unfilial."

Xu Wei seemed unable to believe what he saw. He walked closer and rubbed his eyes forcefully. Then he patted Lin Wanrong a few times. "Ah," Xu Wei exclaimed, pulling Lin Wanrong’s hand. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he trembled with emotion. "Little brother Lin, you’re really not dead? Thank God, this is such great news for our Great Hua Empire!"

‘This old man has quite a grip. Doesn't he know I'm seriously injured?’ Lin Wanrong thought, grimacing. Just as he was about to speak, Si De whispered in his ear, "Brother San, when Miss Luo sent me to find Mr. Xu, she said the act must be convincing. How to be convincing? I thought about it and decided to tell him you had passed away without mentioning you were still alive. He believed it and has been crying all the way here. Look, he didn't even have time to put on his shoes properly. Isn't the act convincing?"

"You clever boy," Lin Wanrong said, chuckling. He glanced down and saw Xu Wei was indeed in a sorry state: one foot was in a cloth shoe while the other was merely socked.

‘It was a misunderstanding. I didn't expect Old Xu to be genuinely concerned about me.’ Lin Wanrong felt guilty and quickly raised his fists in a respectful gesture. "Mr. Xu, I apologize for the inconvenience caused. Xian'er, quickly bring a stool for Mr. Xu."

"Oh no, I couldn't accept such treatment," Xu Wei hurriedly bowed deeply. "I pay my respects to Princess Nishang."

"Mr. Xu, please, no need for formalities. We're in my private residence; there's no need for such ceremonial gestures," Qin Xian'er said, waving her hand and smiling graciously.

Si De brought over a chair, inviting Xu Wei to sit beside Lin Wanrong's bed. Xu Wei sighed deeply and wiped away his tears. "Little brother, you scared me to death when you sent the news of your supposed death. If something were to happen to you, especially at this difficult time for our Great Hua, it would be an irreparable loss."

‘Do I really matter that much?’ Lin Wanrong wanted to joke, but when he saw the old man's snow-white hair and the tears still on his face, he sensed the genuineness in Xu Wei's emotions and decided to hold back.

"Little brother, is this act of yours meant to draw out the snake?" Xu Wei, experienced and cunning, quickly realized Lin Wanrong's intentions upon seeing him alive.

"I don't care if the snake comes out or not; either way, I intend to strike it," Lin Wanrong said, grinding his teeth. He never liked being on the losing end. Not only had he nearly lost his life this time, but he had also almost dragged the Xiao family's mother and daughters into it. His fury was far from quelled.

Xu Wei chuckled. "You really scared me this time. I've already sent for General Li Tai. I don't need to tell you how highly he thinks of you. He's probably just as scared as I was. When he sees you're fine, his stubborn nature will kick in, and he'll surely accuse me of falsely reporting military intelligence."

Seeing Xu Wei in good spirits, Lin Wanrong nodded gravely. "Mr. Xu, how are things at Grand Prime Minister Temple? Has there been any movement?"

Hearing talk of serious matters, Xu Wei's expression instantly turned solemn. "Little brother Lin, on the night I heard you were in trouble, I knew something was off. I immediately had the Grand Prime Minister Temple surrounded. The troops outside the city also withdrew ten li according to your instructions. Just as expected, that very night, several hundred suicidal warriors suddenly appeared in the southeast corner outside the city—"

"Did Prince Cheng escape?!" Lin Wanrong's face paled in shock, regret filling his heart instantly.

"If he had dared to truly flee, that would have actually been convenient. I've been vexed about not having a proper reason to act," Xu Wei said, a chilling murderous intent flashing in his eyes as he scoffed.

"It wasn't Prince Cheng?" Lin Wanrong furrowed his brows in query.

"It was the Dongyin!" Xu Wei snorted. "These hundreds of suicidal warriors were highly skilled in martial arts and extremely ruthless. We lost three hundred soldiers before we managed to kill them all. Yet, we didn't find anything useful among them."

"Dongyin?" Lin Wanrong was deeply puzzled. "They appeared out of nowhere and gained nothing. Did they really come just to sacrifice a hundred warriors?"

"That may not necessarily be the case," Xu Wei stood up and paced a few steps. "They might have been trying to test our defenses or perhaps to assist someone."

What exactly were these Dongyin trying to do by suddenly appearing? To plant suicidal warriors in the heartland of Great Hua was a crime deserving of death! Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth and hummed, "Mr. Xu, where is Prince Cheng? What is he doing?"

"He's been quite calm," Xu Wei dryly chuckled, "spending these last two days fasting and praying in the Grand Prime Minister Temple. On the day you got into trouble, he even invited the Emperor to listen to the master's teachings in the abbot's room."

"The Emperor went as well?" Lin Wanrong was more and more perplexed. What was Prince Cheng up to if he didn't use this chaos as an opportunity to escape? Had he suddenly come to his senses? Fat chance! Were the explosives at the Xiao family dropped from heaven?

Xu Wei nodded, "He claimed it was to pay homage to the late Emperor and to propagate Buddhist teachings. How could the Emperor, as a son, not attend? When I learned the root of the trouble at the Xiao family was at the Grand Prime Minister Temple, I had it surrounded that very night. However, with the Emperor inside, a royal decree came down, and I couldn't act rashly."

This Prince Cheng really had some guts. Plotting in the dark while making merry with the Emperor, this man needed to be eliminated, or he would become a major problem. Lin Wanrong sneered, "Mr. Xu, in your opinion, what is Prince Cheng trying to do? He has no troops and is heavily surrounded by us. How can he be so at ease?"

"At ease?" Xu Wei laughed, "I think he really wants to escape. If my guess is right, those hundreds of suicidal warriors were sent to probe our actual situation. If we had been disorganized that day, he might have already fled to the nomad camp."

Lin Wanrong pondered for a while before asking, "Mr. Xu, are you saying that he is trying to feign an attack in one direction and escape in another? Not to join the Dongyin but the nomads?"

"Only this could explain why those hundred suicidal warriors threw themselves into the net; he wanted to divert our attention," Xu Wei nodded in agreement.

'Is that really the case? Prince Cheng's diversionary tactics are as shallow as my faked death scheme!' Lin Wanrong, always priding himself on his cunning, couldn't completely fathom Prince Cheng's intentions. But there was one thing he could do. A sinister grin spread across his face, his eyes filled with murderous intent. "No matter where he runs, if we strike first, he'll have no chance. Mr. Xu, why don't we just—"

He menacingly gestured with his hand, but in doing so, he aggravated his leg wound. He grimaced in pain, breaking into a cold sweat. Qin Xian'er hurriedly massaged his temples, slightly alleviating his discomfort. But thinking of the main culprit only increased his murderous resolve.

"That's not advisable," Xu Wei urgently shook his head. "While Prince Cheng is undoubtedly wicked, he has not revealed this to the public. He's the only one apart from the Emperor with royal blood. Skilled in deception and rallying public sentiment, he has a fair amount of prestige both in court and among the commoners. With the impending war in the north, our Empire is in a critical state. Acting rashly without evidence could, at best, ignite resentment from both officials and the populace, destabilizing the military; at worst, it could lead to the disintegration of the Empire. We must not act hastily."

‘What resentment from officials or the populace? What about destabilizing the military?’ Lin Wanrong sneered. ‘Though Xu Wei has led troops, he's still too much of a scholar, considering things too minutely. Whoever strikes first seizes the initiative. Even if we bear temporary infamy, who will remember it after ten or twenty years of stability and prosperity? I understand this very well. Plus, Prince Cheng and I are like oil and water; waiting for him to attack isn't my style.’

"Mr. Xu, what does the Emperor have to say?" Seeing Xu Wei waver, Lin Wanrong decided not to argue and gently asked. He had full confidence in the old Emperor, who wasn't a person of mere kindness. If he could be both stern and lenient with his own son-in-law, what about Prince Cheng, who harbored ulterior motives? The Emperor had been biding his time for twenty years, waiting for this day. To think the Emperor would merely stand by— he would never believe it.

Xu Wei nodded, "After your incident, the Emperor has been in his study. Late at night, he sent a six-word decree: 'Present the evidence, set things right.'"

"Present the evidence, set things right?" Lin Wanrong laughed. "Excellent! The old Emperor thinks just like I do."

Xu Wei seemed puzzled. "The decree is easy to understand, but finding the evidence is extremely difficult. Prince Cheng is as cunning as a fox; he won't easily expose his weaknesses. If I had such evidence, I would have acted long ago, rather than waiting until now."

‘How could you become so obtuse, failing to understand the subtext in the Emperor’s words after all these years in court?’ Lin Wanrong chuckled slyly. "Mr. Xu, how do I even describe you? You're just too upright. If that old fox doesn't expose himself, can't you fabricate evidence against him?"

"I know I'm too upright, not really suited for manipulating politics," Xu Wei shook his head with a sigh, looking very dignified.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, beckoning him to lean closer. After whispering a few words, Xu Wei was shocked and immediately shook his head, "How can I do that? After reading the teachings of the

saints and sages for so many years, how could I commit such a deed? If people found out, my reputation would be tarnished forever."

"Don't worry about it. How could someone as upright as Mr. Xu ever come up with such a bad idea?" Lin Wanrong casually waved his hand and chuckled, "Just put it on my account; everyone knows I'm unscrupulous anyway."

Xu Wei shook his head and sighed, suppressing a smile. He cupped his fist in his hand and said, "You're quite the strategist, little brother. I've truly broadened my horizons under your leadership. Please pardon me, for this was not my idea."

Seeing the cunning look on the old man's face, Lin Wanrong suddenly exclaimed inwardly, 'Ah, damn it, I've been had! He gets the credit for the good idea, and I get blamed for the bad one! This old man isn't foolish at all; he's clearly playing the fool to catch the wise!'

Chapter 474 Temptation

"Little brother, in your opinion, when should we take action?" Xu Wei broke into a smile before asking.

Lin Wanrong chuckled darkly, "The sooner, the better. Of course, it also depends on when you, Mr. Xu, can have everything prepared. In my view, it would be best to catch them off guard. This lesson is learned from my own experience—look, I got hit by an explosive without any warning at all. The effect was, ah, exceptionally good." He clenched his teeth, stretched his arms, and shook his legs, a torrent of resentment bubbling within him, without an outlet.

Seeing Lin San's laughter "etched in his bones," Old Xu understood his intentions. Provoking Lin San meant that even if Prince Cheng had three heads and six arms, he would still be doomed. The two men meticulously plotted their plans. Xu Wei took on the responsibility of preparing everything. Lin Wanrong felt quite assured with the older man's competence.

"There's one more thing," Xu Wei blinked mysteriously at the end, "Little brother, will you inform Zhiqing about your injury?"

"What? Miss Xu doesn't know about my situation?" Lin Wanrong was somewhat surprised. The Xu family lived next door; how could they not know when there had been such a commotion here?

Xu Wei shook his head and gave a wry smile, "General Li Tai's army is set to move soon. Zhiqing entered the military camp the evening before last to discuss strategies with the commanding general and hasn't returned since. When I sent someone to summon Li Tai earlier, I specifically instructed them not to inform Zhiqing about you. The girl has suffered for many years, and finally, she has someone she favors. I fear she won't be able to handle it if something suddenly happens—Ah, little brother Lin, are your eyes uncomfortable? You're blinking so fast!"

'You old man, can't you understand my hints? Don't you know there's a little jar of jealousy right next to me? You're going to ruin everything!' He coughed hastily a couple of times but before he could speak, Qin Xian'er preemptively huffed and said, "Mr. Xu, what about your precious daughter? What do you mean by 'someone she favors' and 'can't handle it'? Does it concern my husband?"

"Ah, well—well—" Xu Wei stammered, his old face turning red. However thick-skinned he was, he didn't dare to make a match for his daughter in front of Princess Nishang.

"Don't misunderstand, please don't misunderstand," seeing the little jar of jealousy changing her complexion, Lin Wanrong hastily smiled, "Xian'er, you've heard of Miss Xu, haven't you? She's knowledgeable in physics and skilled in strategy, acting as the think tank for the anti-nomad forces. Your husband also has a minor reputation for intelligence. She invited me to join the army and fight the nomads in the North. That's why Mr. Xu said she takes a liking to me; it's all about her recognizing my skills. Just think, if someone as promising as me were to encounter trouble, it would indeed be a significant loss. So, she would find it hard to handle it. Mr. Xu, isn't that what you mean?"

"Ah, yes, yes!" Old Xu nodded rapidly this time, giving Lin San a covert thumbs-up.

"Where did I misunderstand?" Qin Xian'er's face bloomed with a radiant smile. She playfully said, "I was just asking casually. Who knew you would hasten to explain for so long? If an unrelated person heard it, they might think you and Miss Xu have some sort of secret affair."

"We shouldn't be making such remarks," Lin Wanrong quickly put on a serious face and said earnestly, "It doesn't matter if you talk about me, but Miss Xu is a virtuous young lady. Spreading such talk could ruin her reputation. Mr. Xu, Xian'er was just joking; don't take it to heart."

Frustrated by Lin Wanrong's shamelessness, Old Xu could only heave a sigh. He thought to himself, 'Such bad luck meeting people like this.'

After a bit of small talk, Xu Wei saw that Lin Wanrong was unharmed and had important matters to attend to. He stood up to take his leave. No sooner had he left than Luo Ning rushed in, breathless, "Big Brother, the Emperor is here!"

"The Emperor, my father, is here?" Qin Xian'er was ecstatic. Clutching Lin Wanrong's hand tightly, she said, "Husband, with my father backing us, there's nothing to be afraid of. Whoever harmed you, I swear they'll pay a hundredfold."

Upon hearing that the Emperor himself had come, Lin Wanrong was overjoyed. 'What an honorable father-in-law, visiting his son-in-law twice in three days. His affection for me is almost as good as my biological father.'

"Quick, let him in—wait," he hastily gestured, then corrected himself, "No, no, help me up to receive him."

Seeing his excitement, Luo Ning hesitated for a moment before carefully saying, "Big Brother, don't be too eager. The Emperor's palanquin has already arrived at the door."

'If the palanquin is at the door, why shouldn't I be eager? When someone gives you face, you should return the courtesy.'

"Big Brother, please hold on," Luo Ning pressed him back gently, seeing that even Qin Xian'er was getting impatient. "The Emperor did come, but listen, you mustn't get angry."

"Angry? Why would I be angry if the Emperor came to see me?" Lin Wanrong nodded with a smile.

After hesitating a moment, Luo Ning softly said, "The Emperor has sent hemp and white gauze, three thousand lengths of it. His palanquin stopped outside because... he has come to pay his condolences to you."

"Condolences? What an odd term! I'm not dead, why such a grand gesture with all this gauze and hemp?"

"What is my father doing?" Qin Xian'er huffed angrily, "My husband is perfectly fine; there's no need for condolences. He must have been misled by some cunning people. I'll go find him right now."

'Cunning people? My father-in-law is the most cunning of all,' Lin Wanrong thought, grabbing Xian'er's hand and smiling, "No need to look for him. Whether I'm alive or dead, I bet the old man knows better than I do."

Qin Xian'er paused and thought for a moment, then suddenly laughed, "I get it, Husband! My father is just like you, putting on a show. How annoying, he's as cunning as you!"

Embarrassed, Lin Wanrong thought, 'When it comes to cunning, I can't hold a candle to him.'

A subdued laugh echoed from outside the hall, "Xian'er, how could you speak ill of your father behind his back?"

Two figures slowly entered from outside, both in plain green robes and sandals, appearing like ordinary folks. The older man in front had a strong nose and thick eyebrows. His pale cheeks bore a slight flush of illness, but his eyes shone with brilliance. Despite his slow steps, he carried a natural air of authority, commanding respect without needing to express anger.

"Father!" Qin Xian'er's face was a mix of astonishment and joy as she ran toward him like a fledgling returning to its nest. She began to kneel, but Eunuch Gao, the eunuch following the Emperor, quickly helped her up.

The old Emperor took her hand and scrutinized her from head to toe with his piercing eyes. Noticing the telltale signs of her becoming a married woman, he grunted, "Nishang, my daughter, has anyone mistreated you? Speak, and let me deal with them!"

Even the fearless and rebellious Qin Xian'er was startled by the Emperor's commanding aura. She hurriedly waved her hands, "No, nobody has mistreated me. My husband treats me very well; he's never been unfair to me."

Feeling slightly embarrassed, Lin Wanrong was touched by how Qin Xian'er defended him.

"Is that so?" The Emperor's tiger-like eyes briefly scanned the figure lying on the bed. Lin Wanrong quickly waved his hand and loudly proclaimed, "Commoner Lin San greets Your Majesty. Long live the Emperor! Your Majesty, you look a bit off today. You should rest and avoid staying up late."

The Emperor snorted coldly, "Your bow lacks sincerity. Never mind such formalities. Moreover, you lie there while I stand; the master-servant etiquette seems rather lacking."

The Emperor's tone was icy and full of authority. Luo Ning, standing to the side, looked afraid. Lin Wanrong subtly took her hand and said, "Your Majesty, it's not that I lack manners, but by the rules, it is you who should be standing this time."

Eunuch Gao secretly stuck out his tongue behind the Emperor. Only someone like Lin Wanrong would dare to be so audacious. Anyone else would have been subjected to severe punishment.

"Why should I be the one standing?" the Emperor asked languidly.

"Your Majesty, you're here to offer your condolences to me," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "If I were to sit up, no one would believe it. So, it makes sense for you to stand while I lie here."

Qin Xian'er burst into laughter, recognizing her husband's way of undermining the Emperor's intent to pay his respects. Rare were the individuals who dared to turn the tables on the Emperor like that.

The old Emperor also couldn't help but smile. Whenever he encountered this young man, he always managed to come up with an unassailable rationale. The Emperor grunted and said to Qin Xian'er, "Fine, then lie down. Nishang, my daughter, come back to the palace with me. I've selected a prince consort for you; we'll set a date for the wedding—"

"What?!" Qin Xian'er's face changed dramatically. She hurriedly stepped back and clung to Lin Wanrong, "Father, I won't marry! My marriage to my husband has already been arranged, and I, Qin Xian'er, am forever his!"

"Are you sure you won't marry?" The Emperor grinned slyly, "Don't regret it. The prince consort I've chosen for you is—"

"Marry, let's marry!" Lin Wanrong, lying on the bed, hastily raised his hand.

"Darling (Big Brother)—" Qin Xian'er and Luo Ning both yelled out, as Qin Xian'er's eyes filled with tears and her body trembled with anger.

"How can we not marry?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "The Emperor is right. Finding another young, promising man like me would indeed be difficult. Princess, you'll just have to settle."

"What?!" Catching sight of the Emperor's enigmatic smile, Qin Xian'er suddenly understood. Her cheeks flushed a deep pink as she lightly scolded, "Father, you're so naughty, even making jokes about your daughter."

The Emperor nodded and smiled, "Nishang, come to your father."

Qin Xian'er hummed in agreement, her steps light as she moved to stand beside the Emperor. The old Emperor's eyes were gentle as he lightly stroked her hair. "Life is but a fleeting moment, much like a white steed passing a crack in the wall. As I age and reach the twilight of my life, there are many regrets that weigh on me. Your mother perished saving me, and you, my own flesh and blood, were lost in the world for over twenty years. Nishang, the deepest regrets of my life concern you and your mother."

The Emperor's voice wavered with emotion. Qin Xian'er's tears flowed freely as she hugged him tightly, "Father, I don't blame you. It wasn't until today that I understood why my mother did what she did. For the man I love, I am willing to sacrifice myself."

"Foolish girl," the Emperor grunted, "You are a princess of our great empire, the most precious of our lineage. Who is worth such a sacrifice from you? Is it him?" He pointed at Lin Wanrong, and Qin Xian'er nodded shyly, her eyes filled with emotion.

"Why would you choose him?" The Emperor sighed, "He's neither handsome nor particularly learned. He knows nothing of governing a country. Other than being quick-witted, I find no merits in him."

'The old man is just trying to bring me down, no matter, I'll just interpret it the other way around,' Lin Wanrong consoled himself.

Seeing her father belittling her chosen man, Qin Xian'er grew anxious, "Father, how can you say he has no merits? Who in the world could compare to his handsomeness? Who could match his wisdom and talent? As for governing a nation, how would you know he's incapable when he hasn't even tried? In my opinion, he has the talent to rule. When it comes to understanding people's hearts and employing strategy, who in the world can compare to him? Apart from being a bit frivolous, he's perfect in every way!"

Lin Wanrong felt quite pleased by her praise, until the last sentence made him laugh and cry at the same time. Has Xian'er been raised in a vinegar jar since she was young?

The Emperor chuckled, "You naturally think highly of your own choice. His looks and wisdom are subjective matters, but as for governance— I don't think he even has the guts for it."

"Who says he doesn't?" Qin Xian'er was about to retort when Lin Wanrong suddenly cried out, "Ouch, it hurts!"

"Big brother, where does it hurt?" Luo Ning exclaimed.

"Everywhere hurts," Lin Wanrong said, grimacing.

The old Emperor's gaze was piercing. He saw through Lin Wanrong's act but could do nothing about it. He nodded slightly, his voice grave, "Nishang, if you've chosen him as your husband, I won't oppose. But let me be clear— my daughter is the epitome of grace and beauty, and she must not suffer any grievances." He slowly moved toward Lin Wanrong, fixing his gaze on Miss Luo and asked ominously, "You're Luo Min's daughter?"

Luo Ning didn't dare to meet his eyes and quickly knelt down, "I am Luo Ning, daughter of Luo Min. I pay my respects to Your Majesty."

The Emperor gave her a cold look, "You're not without talent, but you've chosen the wrong place. The Lin family is not your home. I will select a suitable family for you in the court and marry you off."

"Your Majesty—" Luo Ning gasped in horror, her whole body shaking as she clung to Lin Wanrong's hand, tears rolling down her cheeks.

‘Again?’ Lin Wanrong was irate. This old man had targeted his weak spot. His expression suddenly turned cold. "Your Majesty, are you planning on going back on your word? I remember very clearly what you told me that day."

"Going back on my word?" The Emperor sneered. "You've accomplished the matter in Goryeo, and even Princess Chuyun pleaded with me on your behalf. I've already pardoned the Eldest Miss Xiao. How have I broken my word? I granted you my daughters with the expectation that you'll treat them well, but you disregard my words. On the peak, you acted ambiguously with Ning Yuxi, and now

you're getting too close to the young lady from the Xu family. Do you think I'm easy to bully? Take Luo Ning away and choose a day for her to be married off—"

"Big Brother—" Luo Ning cried out in despair.

Lin Wanrong's eyes narrowed in fury. In his anger, he sat upright despite a piercing pain shooting through his leg. "Who dares?"

"Husband—" Qin Xian'er cried out as she threw herself at him, her tears falling like rain.

Lin Wanrong's face was stern, a man who had been to battle, who feared neither life nor death. He stared directly into the Emperor's eyes without backing down, his imposing aura making even the guards outside hesitate to act.

"Father, please do not blame him," Qin Xian'er suddenly knelt and pleaded tearfully. "I have not been mistreated. I am very happy with Sister Luo Ning."

Luo Ning was moved. Despite her initial animosity towards Qin Xian'er, seeing her willing to endure so much for Lin Wanrong, she clenched her teeth and softly said, "Thank you, Sister Xian'er."

Qin Xian'er stubbornly nodded, "Don't thank me. I'm doing this for him."

Understanding her hard-headed but soft-hearted nature, Luo Ning smiled through her tears, holding onto her hand and not letting go.

"Lin San, are you defying me?" The Emperor seemed to have ignored Qin Xian'er's plea, his eyes falling on Lin Wanrong. Seeing the young man's fearless demeanor, he spoke calmly.

'So this is why this old man came to pay his respects. If the explosion didn't kill me, he would.' Lin Wanrong snorted and calmly said, "Your Majesty, Qingxuan, Xian'er, and Ning'er and I are truly in love. What's wrong with that? Why are you so insistent on breaking us apart? Just because Qingxuan and Xian'er are princesses, they must be put above everyone else, unable to mingle with common folk? Is this your idea of authority?"

"Authority?" The Emperor laughed. "At least you know this word. This Empire is mine, my word is law. Who dares to defy me? Now do you see the benefit of power? It elevates you above the masses, earns you respect, allows you to do as you please. Who dares to oppose you, even if you break every moral law? Millions desire such power; why don't you? You despise power? Fine, let me show you how it feels to be oppressed. Yes, this is my authority. What will you do about it?"

The old Emperor stood tall, his expression brimming with haughty pride. His piercing gaze bore down on Lin Wanrong, the corner of his mouth lifted in a mocking smile.

It was undeniable. Although this old man was domineering, his words hit the mark. He wielded the power over life and death, enough to drive anyone mad with desire. Before Lin Wanrong could even speak, the old man chuckled, "Think about it carefully! With such power, whoever you like, whoever you want to marry, who could stop you—"

The words seemed infinitely tempting. Lin Wanrong's heart suddenly began to pound, throbbing like a drum!

Chapter 475 Life is Like Flowing Water

Seeing Lin Wanrong deep in thought, seemingly considering the offer, the old Emperor faintly smiled and gestured to Gao Ping. Eunuch Gao understood, and gently helped Qin Xian'er up, respectfully saying, "Princess, Miss Luo, His Majesty has important matters to discuss with Mr. Lin. Would the two of you please leave with me?"

Qin Xian'er glanced at the Emperor worriedly and said, "Father, my husband has severe injuries. Please do not make it difficult for him."

"Difficult?" The Emperor chuckled and gently caressed his daughter's hair. "Do you know how many people in this world wish that I would trouble them in such a way? Yet, he is hesitating. He truly doesn't know how fortunate he is."

Once Eunuch Gao had led the two young ladies out, the room became exceedingly quiet with only the two men left. The Emperor slowly took a seat, his face relaxed. He closed his eyes for a moment to rejuvenate, appearing completely at ease.

After pondering for a while, Lin Wanrong swallowed hard and cautiously asked, "Really, I can do whatever I want, marry whoever I want?"

"Yes!" The old Emperor's smile was slight, but his tone was resolute and firm.

"And what about Sister An, and Fairy Ning—"

"Yes!!!" The Emperor interrupted, as if reading his mind, giving a decisive answer before Lin Wanrong could finish speaking.

"Even that is possible?" Lin Wanrong hesitated, then cautiously added, "What if there are some actions that go against morals and public decency?"

"Go against morals and public decency?" The Emperor burst into uproarious laughter, declaring loudly, "What is morality? What is decency? Why do you believe in the judgments of common folk? When you stand at the pinnacle of Mount Tai, with the lands and the people at your feet, who will question your morality or your decency? Your every word, your every action, will be the unbreakable rule of law. Who would dare to oppose you?"

"That... seems to make some sense," Lin Wanrong felt greatly moved.

Seeing that the young man seemed tempted, the Emperor was secretly delighted but did not show it. He dusted off his sleeves and calmly said, "So, have you made your decision? I have many state affairs to attend to and can't wait around for you."

Lin Wanrong nodded, smiling, "I've considered it, but I'm afraid you might not like my decision."

"What?" The Emperor was infuriated. All his kind persuasion had only resulted in this? His face flushed red with anger. "You dare to mock me? Guards, drag Lin San out—"

"Wait, wait." Seeing that the Emperor was genuinely angry, his booming voice causing the window curtains to flutter, Lin Wanrong quickly interjected, "Please, don't be hasty. Let me finish speaking."

"What more is there to say?" The Emperor coldly chuckled, "You are very bold, aren't you? Do you think that with the protection of Nishang and Chuyun, I wouldn't dare to touch you? You have not yet seen what I'm capable of. Guards, guards—"

"Your Majesty, it's a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding." Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly, sensing the Emperor was about to take serious action, "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" The Emperor's eyes shimmered with intense light as he fixed his gaze on Lin Wanrong, continuing to huff in irritation.

‘You know, for an old Emperor who'd been on the throne for quite some time, he did have a certain intimidating aura about him.’ Lin Wanrong couldn't withstand his gaze and hurriedly lowered his head, chuckling. "The truth is, Your Majesty, you know me well. I'm by nature a free-spirited man who can't stand too many constraints. As for the matters you mentioned—if I manage to accomplish them, then that's all well and good. But if I mess things up, not only would it endanger the prosperity of the Empire, but it would also tarnish your legendary reputation, wouldn't you agree?"

The Emperor snorted. "Don't try to dodge the issue. I know your capabilities better than anyone. You're just making excuses because you don't want to serve me."

‘Ah, this old man, always harping on my thick skin.’ Lin Wanrong chuckled audibly. "Look at you, making assumptions. We're all family here; why wouldn't I help you? I'm not making excuses; I'm actually considering other options—"

"What options?" The Emperor looked indifferent, calmly asking.

"Your Majesty. Xian'er and Qingxuan are both your daughters, correct?" Lin Wanrong glanced mysteriously toward the outside and lowered his voice.

Was this even a question? Observing Lin Wanrong's sly and enigmatic manner, the old Emperor felt both amused and irritated. If it weren't for the fact that Lin Wanrong was injured, he would've probably kicked him right then and there.

"They are your daughters, and at the same time, my wives. Moreover, Qingxuan is—" Lin Wanrong patted his own belly a few times, mimicking a round shape. The Emperor burst out both laughing and cursing, "How dare you bring that up? My Princess Chuyun was like a goddess, admired and loved by countless young talents across the world. And you, you scoundrel, not only did you desecrate her, but you also got her pregnant. You've disgraced and scandalized the royal family, and I haven't even settled the score with you yet!"

‘The fact that a goddess-like girl like Qingxuan is pregnant only proves how capable your son-in-law is. It's just a little ahead of schedule; if this happened after the wedding, there wouldn't be any issue.’ Of course, he was unashamed about it. Instead, he was pleased, chuckling, "Your Majesty,

Qingxuan being pregnant is a good thing. Think about it, this child will not only inherit the excellent genes of my Lin family but more importantly, he'll carry your royal bloodline—" ǎ

"You, what did you say?" The Emperor trembled, asking eagerly.

Lin Wanrong's expression instantly became incredibly serious. "Your Majesty, Qingxuan is your daughter, carrying the most exalted royal bloodline. The child in her belly—doesn't that mean he has the royal bloodline as well?"

The Emperor gave a bitter smile and shook his head. "What's the use of having my royal blood if his surname is Lin, not Zhao?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Whether his surname is Lin or Zhao, aren't we all one family? If you're feeling lonely, why don't you ask Qingxuan and Xian'er to work a little harder and have a few more children? In the future, we can name two boys 'Zhao.' Problem solved!"

"You, are you serious?!" The Emperor shook with emotion, his facial muscles twitching. His beard even bristled. "Lin San, you better not go back on your word!"

In this era, aside from special cases like Qin Xian'er and Xiao Qingxuan, following the matrilineal surname was a great taboo. Even adoption would only happen within the same clan; adopting children with different surnames was absolutely forbidden. Someone as liberal as Lin Wanrong was truly rare under the heavens.

"What's true or false about it?" Lin Wanrong chuckled carelessly. "Whether they take their father's surname or their mother's, they're still my children! Of course, Qingxuan and Xian'er have to agree to it; I have no objections."

"Good, good, you said it yourself," the old Emperor mumbled excitedly, his hands trembling. This was an unexpected gain he had not anticipated. No wonder Lin San had been so reluctant; he had already thought of a way out. This young man was indeed cunning, leaving the difficult decisions for his descendants to handle. He held real power, yet remained free and unburdened—truly the best of both worlds.

The Emperor was elated for a moment, but then his face suddenly darkened as if remembering something. He sighed softly, "I fear it's still impossible. Though you are willing, I simply don't have the time left—"

"Your Majesty, please don't say such things," Lin Wanrong said solemnly. "The most important thing in life is to be happy. If one spends their days sighing and worrying, even a healthy person can't last long. On the other hand, even if one is sick, as long as they live a fulfilling and joyful life, what's the harm in it being short-lived? Take yourself, Your Majesty. Despite your poor health, once Qingxuan and Xian'er give birth and the royal bloodline is secured, you'll spend your days happily doting on your grandchildren. Your body will naturally become robust. To speak plainly, with your imperial majesty, what's stopping you from borrowing a few more years from Heaven? Do you not even have the courage for that?"

"What a flattering yet truthful remark!" The Emperor looked deeply at him and then burst into hearty laughter. "Good, good, Lin San, you're absolutely right. After weathering so many storms, what's stopping me from borrowing a few more years from Heaven? Who would dare refuse me?"

Lin Wanrong was overjoyed, "So does this mean, Your Majesty, that you agree to my suggestion?"

"Agree? Agree to what?" The Emperor chuckled mischievously, "You've pushed all the responsibility away quite cleanly. Rare to see such a father. However, your idea is indeed to my liking. Let's settle it then. If the Princess gives birth to a male heir, he will take the surname Zhao and be my legitimate grandson. Hahaha! Heaven has finally opened its eyes; I, Zhao Yuanyu, finally have descendants!"

So the Emperor's name was Zhao Yuanyu. Seeing his excited demeanor, Lin Wanrong understood, but couldn't help but find it amusing. With this and his promise to Madam Xiao, the Lin family was truly branching out—into three clans!

"Your Majesty, then do you still object to my matters with Ning'er and the others?" Lin Wanrong seized the opportunity to ask as Zhao Yuanyu was in high spirits.

Zhao Yuanyu snorted softly and spoke slowly, "You think you can win me over with the promise of a grandson? Such a thing won't come easily. However, in consideration of your filial piety, I'll make a concession. You can marry the Princess and then marry Miss Luo; I won't interfere. But whatever responsibilities that should belong to you, you must take them all on."

"Impossible," Lin Wanrong shouted, his face a portrait of misery. "Old man, haven't I already found a solution for you? Why are you still after me?"

"Do you take me for a fool?" Emperor Zhao Yuanyu gave a cold laugh. "Ignoring a perfectly good candidate in favor of a child who isn't even born yet? What if that child turns out to be a righteous person? Where would I go to complain then? So, you see, you are the most reliable option, which also saves me from worry." Lin Wanrong was at a loss for words. So, the old man valued not his talents but his lack of integrity!

"However, you don't need to be too afraid." The Emperor patted Lin Wanrong's shoulder, grinning wickedly. "I will guide you well, and of course, my virtuous grandson too. Ah, this is the happiest moment I've had in years!"

Lin Wanrong was fuming inside. He finally understood that when it came to cunning and craftiness, he was no match for Zhao Yuanyu. The old man had fooled him again.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's sullen face and knowing he had gotten a great deal, Zhao Yuanyu waved his hand and chuckled, "Well, let's discuss this matter later. Now, there's something I need to ask you."

'Do I have to answer just because you ask?' Lin Wanrong hummed inwardly, his expression unfriendly.

The old Emperor sighed softly, "I heard that Miss Guo is returning to Jinling. Is that so?"

Lin Wanrong was shocked. How did the Emperor know news he had just found out himself? Was there a spy in his house?

"You don't have to be surprised," Zhao Yuanyu seemed to see through his thoughts and waved dismissively. "I don't necessarily have to keep an eye on you. You've even refused what the whole world desires, what would I be worried about? The maids and servants in your house were personally selected by me for their loyalty. It's not a big deal that I knew some news." He paused and sighed, "Why is Miss Guo suddenly leaving for Jinling? Do you know?"

'Nonsense. I just found out too. How could Madam, so strong-willed, tell me why she wants to leave?' Lin Wanrong snorted, "I don't know. I just heard about it."

Zhao Yuanyu gave him a long look, stood up, and began pacing the room. For a long while, he didn't speak, and the sound of his footsteps rustled on the floor.

Growing impatient, Lin Wanrong was about to speak when the old Emperor quietly asked, "Did you offend her?"

‘Offend her? I’ve saved her, actually. As for minor bumps and scuffles, those were things of the past.’ He shook his head firmly, "No!"

"No?" The Emperor suddenly approached him, his gaze as sharp as lightning, his face icy, and his voice raised, "Are you telling the truth?"

‘Suspicious old man! Even if I did offend her, would I tell you?’ Lin Wanrong’s stubborn streak surged, and he met the Emperor’s gaze fearlessly, "Your Majesty, do I have a reason to lie?"

The old Emperor looked at him for a long time before sighing, "Even if you didn’t offend Miss Guo, her sudden departure must have some reason! I know Miss Guo’s temperament. At such a crucial time for the Xiao family, she wouldn’t leave without good reason. Considering all the people she’s met, you’re the most suspicious when it comes to being cunning and crafty!"

‘Accused of what? I had a golden opportunity to take advantage while buried under rubble and even that I let go. I’m cleaner than tofu, for heaven’s sake.’ Lin Wanrong sneered inwardly, but of course, he couldn’t say this out loud. "Your Majesty, instead of asking me, why don’t you ask the Madam herself? That would clear everything up."

His words struck a nerve in Emperor Zhao Yuanyu. "If I could ask Miss Guo, why would I be seeking you out?" The Emperor huffed. "Your handling of the Xiao family affair was a mess. You couldn’t even take care of your own household. How could you handle anything else? If it weren’t for your timely actions, this could have been a lifelong regret for you."

Though the Emperor’s words were harsh, they were also true, and Lin Wanrong had to grit his teeth in acceptance. "Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this. Not for anyone else, but for Xian’er, for my wives, and for myself!"

"Four days until the army deploys—" Emperor Zhao Yuanyu nodded slightly, speaking softly. "Do what needs to be done and take care of yourself. Don’t let your carelessness trip you up again. And don’t misunderstand; I’m not concerned for you, but I don’t want to see my two princesses heartbroken."

"Understood, understood," Lin Wanrong nodded, smiling. "I will give you a satisfactory answer."

"What did you say?" The Emperor's face changed. "What answer do I want? I swore before my deceased father—I know nothing of what you do!"

‘When will I ever get as thick-skinned as this old man?’ Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly, full of admiration.

Gao Ping hurriedly entered and whispered a few words into the Emperor's ear. Zhao Yuanyu nodded, glanced at Lin Wanrong, and said, "I need to return to the palace; we have a message from Goryeo. Oh, and about that young palace maid of yours—"

Young palace maid? Seo Jang Geum? Lin Wanrong was stunned. Could she really be pregnant? If so, the Lin family would be set for life.

"Don't ask; even if you do, I won't tell you. Focus on the tasks at hand," the Emperor chuckled, patted Lin Wanrong on the shoulder, and walked away.

As he reached the doorway, he paused, lingering in thought. "Lin San, take good care of Miss Guo."

‘Take good care? In what manner?’ Lin Wanrong was puzzled, but then heard the Emperor sigh, "If you can convince her to stay, that would be ideal. If she truly wishes to leave, see her off warmly and tell her that Mr. Zhao will never forget those days."

With those words, he hurriedly left. Lin Wanrong stood there, contemplating. Even someone as powerful and wealthy as the Emperor had unattainable desires. Who could claim a perfect life? His mind wandered to a myriad of past events, and his expression grew increasingly somber. Sister An was trapped in the Miao village, Fairy Ning was alone in the mountains, and now even Madam Xiao was leaving. Life was like a flowing river, and who could stop its currents?

Hours dragged on until dusk set in. Yet, sleep eluded him, leaving him agitated. "Xian'er, I want to go for a walk. Xian'er, Xian'er—"

He called out several times, but there was no response. Just as he was about to call again, a subtle fragrance drifted through the air, and a soft female voice resonated beside him, "Where are you going?"