

## Finest 476

### Chapter 476 Matters of Great Importance

"Thinking of taking a walk in the garden—eh, Eldest Miss, is that you?" Lin Wanrong looked up and saw Xiao Yuruo standing quietly in front of him. She was dressed in a goose-yellow gown, her slender waist reminiscent of young willows in early spring. Her curvaceous figure traced an enchanting curve.

Eldest Miss Xiao looked gently at him, her willow-like eyebrows slightly arched, radiantly beautiful. Her long eyelashes flickered slightly, and her bright red lips were as inviting as newly-ripened cherries. A subtle touch of rouge gave her face a faint pink glow, as radiant as peach blossoms in March. Her clear, distinctly black-and-white eyes seemed as pure as a lake in autumn, free from any blemish.

"Why can't it be me?" Xiao Yuruo let out a soft sigh, sat down beside him on the edge of the bed, and tightly grasped his hand. "Does it still hurt?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "I was a bit sore, but now that I've seen you, I feel all better. If you could bless me with a sweet kiss, I would recover even faster."

In the past, joking with Eldest Miss would invite a coy scolding from her, but today was different. Xiao Yuruo stared at him blankly before her tears began to flow. "You're such a shameless scoundrel. You're already injured, yet you still harbor mischievous thoughts. While you're feeling all right, you've scared the wits out of others!"

She lifted her sleeve to wipe away her tears, but they only fell faster. As if recalling some sad affair, she gave a soft sob and covered her cheeks, crying.

"Eldest Miss, please don't cry," Lin Wanrong, noticing her ceaseless tears, hurriedly took her hand and said, "I'm the one who's injured, I'm the one in pain, yet I'm not crying. Why are you shedding tears instead?"

Having spent the most time with Xiao Yuruo and endured most of her caprices, Lin Wanrong's feelings for her were quite special. From Jinling to the capital, they had experienced many misunderstandings and separations, yet his memories of her were vivid. He loved her strong-willed nature and was captivated by her gentle demeanor.

Xiao Yuruo wiped her tears and huffed, "I didn't want to cry. Since meeting you in Jinling, you've constantly tormented me and never let me live a peaceful day."

"I haven't been living peacefully either," Lin Wanrong smiled, playfully scratching her palm. His expression was mild, but his tone was resolute. "But the times I spent with you have always been the happiest."

"I, I'm also very happy." Hearing his gentle words, she felt an unprecedented warmth. She smiled but soon started crying again, and gave his arm a good punch. "You scoundrel, always making me cry."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, bearing her light punishment. In the room, just the two of them, Eldest Miss tightly held his hand, looking at him with affection. Neither spoke. The tender moment seemed to hark back to the time they spent alone in Jinling, serene in its peacefulness.

"What have you done to my mother?" Lin Wanrong was relishing this long-absent intimacy with Miss Xiao, eyes closed in contentment, when he suddenly heard her sigh in a melancholic tone close to his ear.

"What, what did you say?" Lin Wanrong was so stunned that he could barely articulate his words. "Eldest Miss, you can't just make wild accusations. I'm innocent. What could I possibly have done to the Madam?"

Xiao Yuruo stared intently at him, her beautiful eyes misting over slightly. She pinched his wrist hard enough to hurt. Faced with her piercing gaze, Lin Wanrong became alarmed. First, it was the old Emperor's questions, and now this from Miss Xiao. Had he actually committed some unforgivable act? Damn, why couldn't he remember anything?

The time he'd spent buried under the rubble had been the purest since he had come to this world. He'd had no inappropriate thoughts then—how could he have wronged the Madam? He didn't argue, just met Xiao Yuruo's eyes in quiet acceptance.

Finally, she looked away, exhaling softly. Her voice broke as she said, "Do you know? My mother is leaving!"

"Um, I heard a little from the Second Miss," he said, blinking away the tears forming in his eyes. "Eldest Miss, why is Madam leaving?"

Xiao Yuruo gave a bitter smile and shook her head. "If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you. Before the incident, my mother was quite happy and never mentioned returning to Jinling. But after you all were rescued—a time that should have been joyful—her demeanor changed. She became much more reserved. She used to love talking to me." R

This puzzled Lin Wanrong too. He had treated the Madam with the utmost respect while they were trapped, avoiding her as much as possible. What could she be unhappy about? Why was she insisting on going back to Jinling?

"What really happened when you and my mother were buried under that rubble? Can you tell me?" Xiao Yuruo's grip on his hand tightened, her voice full of hope.

Why hide it? Lin Wanrong smiled and recounted the events of that day, glossing over certain details that might harm Madam's reputation if they got out.

Hearing that he had maintained his manners—even risking the pain of a broken leg to keep his distance from her mother—Xiao Yuruo eyed him suspiciously. "Really? Since when have you become so well-behaved?"

"Eldest Miss, what are you talking about?" Lin Wanrong retorted, indignant. "When have I ever been ill-mannered?"

She harrumphed, lowering her head. Her cheeks flushed a rosy hue, contrasting beautifully with her immaculate skin.

He was utterly entranced. Grasping her hand, he chuckled, "Well, I might be a bit rough sometimes, but that's only when I'm with you, Eldest Miss. Otherwise, I'm absolutely proper."

"You rascal!" She felt his hand sliding upward along her delicate wrist, turning her face even redder. She scolded him, yet couldn't bring herself to stop him. Remembering she hadn't finished questioning him, she managed to stammer out, "Wait, stop, I still have questions for you."

"What else? Just ask," Lin Wanrong gently stroked her soft waist, the touch as smooth as silk, causing his heart to tremble. He grinned cheekily, "You ask your questions, and I'll do my thing; neither will interfere with the other."

"How annoying." Xiao Yuruo quickly removed his mischievous hand and pouted, her cheeks flushing red. "Apart from this, you really haven't done anything wrong to my mother?"

"I, Lin Wanrong, swear to the heavens." Lin Wanrong earnestly raised his right hand, "If I have done anything in that ruined building that night to dishonor your mother or you, may I choke to death while eating, drown while drinking, or be crushed to death by banknotes—"

"That's enough of your rambling." Seeing him sweating profusely, seemingly in intense pain as if touching upon his wounds, Xiao Yuruo felt her heart ache. She gently lowered his hand and said softly, "Why are you swearing? Isn't it enough that I believe you? Haven't you ever done anything to disappoint my mother on other occasions?"

Lin Wanrong was about to raise his hand to swear again when a gentle, warm hand covered his mouth. "Enough with your oaths; I believe you. You seem to have no regard for your own injuries. You're going to worry me to death," Eldest Miss said, her eyes brimming with tears and annoyance.

Feeling ashamed, Lin Wanrong chuckled twice. How could he truly swear? He had had his moments of levity with the mature and beautiful Madam.

"Yuruo, you must believe me. After your reminder the night before last, I've been strictly disciplining myself, being alert at all times, and not doing anything inappropriate. Ah, speaking of which, what did you mean that you would 'take care of me' before the accident?" He changed the subject smoothly while maintaining an earnest expression.

Xiao Yuruo's cheeks turned crimson, radiant as if about to drop dew. "Take care? What take care? I don't remember!"

Her alluring figure and gorgeous face coupled with her shy smile made her look like a begonia blossoming in an autumn night, causing Lin Wanrong to feel an overwhelming heat surge through him. Had it not been for his impaired mobility, he would have proceeded to resolve the matter entirely.

"Why are you laughing?" Seeing the cunning smile on his face, Xiao Yuruo seemed to sense something, her body softening as she tremulously asked.

"I'm not laughing," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "I was just thinking about when we could pick a good day for you to 'take care of me.'"

"Ugh!" Eldest Miss lightly spat, her cheeks flaming. Lin Wanrong held her hand and felt the tremor in her heart, overwhelmed by warmth. All his amorous feelings subsided, and he fully savored the joy of mutual affection.

"It is strange indeed," Xiao Yuruo finally said, her mood much improved after their banter. "If you didn't do anything wrong, why is there such a huge difference in my mother's behavior before and after the incident?"

"Maybe it's menopause," Lin Wanrong lazily yawned, speaking without thinking.

Xiao Yuruo furrowed her brow, clearly puzzled by his words. "What did you say? What's menopause?"

This was a bit tricky to explain. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "What I mean to say is that Madam has reached middle age. With many concerns on her mind, it's understandable if she occasionally acts in ways that baffle us."

"What nonsense about reaching middle age," Eldest Miss huffed in dissatisfaction, shooting him a look. "My mother is mature and beautiful, in the prime of her life. She doesn't have any of these issues you're talking about."

"Yes, yes," Lin Wanrong laughed. "Both Madam and Eldest Miss are as beautiful and youthful as the peonies in the garden. Year after year they bloom, and each season they are lovely! I'm but the diligent gardener, watering by day, irrigating by night!"

"Stop talking nonsense," Eldest Miss scolded, though she couldn't conceal her smile and no longer pressed him about her mother. She let out a long sigh, leaned her head into his chest, and began to weep silently. "Lin San, my mother is leaving, our home is gone. What should I do?"

She closed her eyes, her face a picture of sorrow and despair. Lin Wanrong, moved, patted her fragrant shoulder gently. "What do you mean gone? This is our home, isn't it?"

Eldest Miss slowly shook her head. "I still miss the days when we were at home, with my mother, my sister, and you. There were many moments I can't forget—even the days when you bullied me were days I felt happy."

Xiao Yuruo had been committed to restoring the glory of the Xiao family since she was young. Now, their homes and properties in the capital had vanished. Her years of effort had come to nothing. Lin Wanrong was touched by her words and laughed aloud, "Don't worry. As long as we're safe and sound, we can start all over. When the Xiao family is re-established, I'll marry you and Yushuang and make this your home as well."

Xiao Yuruo let out a shy but delighted hum. "Will you also come back to our family?"

"Of course I will," Lin Wanrong replied solemnly. "If I don't, where else can I find another young miss to bully?"

"You're annoying!" Hearing him tease her, Xiao Yuruo felt both shy and delighted, gripping his hand tightly and not letting go.

Having opened her heart, Xiao Yuruo detailed her plans to rebuild the Xiao family's estate in the capital to Lin Wanrong. She knew where the shops would be, where the warehouses, gardens, and embroidering rooms would go; everything was planned. Most surprisingly, within the garden, she had arranged for three wooden rooms, nestled among a variety of flowers—simple yet harmonious. Lin Wanrong thought for a moment and then suddenly realized. "Eldest Miss, is this where I stayed in Jinling?"

Xiao Yuruo hummed in confirmation, offering a tender smile.

The Eldest Miss's thoughts touched Lin Wanrong deeply. Those few wooden rooms, though simple, were places he'd never forget. Memories of the Eldest Miss, the Second Miss, and Qingxuan flooded back.

"What are you thinking about?" Seeing his expression turn serious for a moment before becoming strange again, Xiao Yuruo couldn't help but ask.

"I wasn't thinking about anything in particular," Lin Wanrong grinned. "I just hope that once these wooden rooms are built, they can be used for some great endeavors."

Second Miss shook her head and chuckled lightly, "Is there something so grand that it must be done in this wooden cabin?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled in response, nodding toward Yuruo. Eldest Miss playfully chided him before leaning in, her ear close to his mouth, to listen to what he had to say.

A faint fragrance emanated from her. She had a slender physique; her collar slightly ajar, revealing her porcelain-white neck. Her skin was as smooth as jade, and her curvaceous body was soft and full. As she leaned on him, her silk-like touch was smooth against his skin. From within the opening of her garment, a hint of a pink undergarment was vaguely visible, her smooth, voluptuous breasts slightly rising and falling, stretching the garment taut. In her hurried breaths, a sultry allure made itself evident.

Swallowing hard, Lin Wanrong blew a soft breath in her ear and chuckled lasciviously, "Is seducing a young lady in this cabin not grand enough?"

Xiao Yuruo let out a soft moan, her body aflame, her heart tingling. Although the wooden cabin was small, it held special significance. If they could truly become a couple within these walls—oh, the embarrassment! She hurriedly covered her flushed cheeks, her ears red, but her heart was filled with endless longing.

After conversing with Eldest Miss and seeing her coy demeanor, Lin Wanrong felt extraordinarily happy. Reminiscing about their first encounter—how she had been domineering and strong—he chuckled. It felt as if lifetimes had passed. Kissing her cheek, he was overwhelmed by a deep sense of nostalgia. If he survived the northern expedition against the nomads, he vowed to return to Jinling with all his wives.

Everyone seemed to sense his special feelings for the Eldest Miss, giving the two some time alone. Even Qin Xian'er, his jealous little wife, had been quiet for a long time. It was only after Eldest Miss left that she pouted and jumped into the bed, tightly hugging his neck. "Husband, am I good?"

"Good, good," Lin Wanrong genuinely responded.

Tears in her eyes, Qin Xian'er softly said, "Husband, I may be jealous, but it's because I love you so much. Tell me whom you like, and I will lure them to serve you. Don't worry about me; I'll get over it."

Lin Wanrong slapped her rounded buttocks lightly, "Lure them to serve me? What do you think I am, some kind of lecher?"

Wiping away her tears, Xian'er giggled, "My master once said you're a grand lecher, equal to her in skill!"

That sly vixen. Lin Wanrong felt a stirring in his heart, and as he softly caressed Xian'er's behind, he chuckled, "Well, I'll have to conquer this little lecher before conquering that grand lecher."

Xian'er grunted, panting, "I knew you were up to no good, even thinking of conquering my master! Ah, Husband, you're still unwell—"

It was just a thought. With his current broken condition, what could he really do? Lin Wanrong sighed. Seeing his charming wife beside him, knowing he couldn't act upon his desires, he felt terribly frustrated, cursing those who had harmed him in his thoughts.

Awakening in the middle of the night, Lin Wanrong opened his eyes, startling Qin Xian'er who quickly clung to his arm, displaying an infinitely beautiful figure, "Husband, what are you doing?"

With a sly grin and a glint in his eye, Lin Wanrong said, "It's a dark and windy night, the perfect time for murder."

## Chapter 477 The Swaying Palanquin

"Killing is so enjoyable," Qin Xian'er said, clapping her small hands with a smile, showing no sign of fear on her face. "It's been a while since I've killed anyone. I've missed it. Husband, who would you like me to kill? I'll do it for you."

My goodness, Lin Wanrong inhaled sharply. 'My wife really doesn't have any qualms, treating killing as if it's child's play.' But then again, Xian'er was originally a witch from the White Lotus Sect; she feared neither heaven nor earth. What was the big deal in killing a few people? He gently caressed Xian'er's silky hair and chuckled coldly, "Whoever dares to harm me, I will kill them."

A few days ago, Lin Wanrong had been injured, and Qin Xian'er was too anxious to think about who might be plotting against him in the shadows. Seeing that he was now out of danger, her mind started to become active again. She quickly nodded, "Husband, you're still injured. Let me handle this matter. Rest assured, I won't let the person who harmed you get away with it."



Lin Wanrong chuckled darkly, "This is not something that can be done alone. We all need to go together. I love a good group fight." Just as he was speaking, a soft rustling noise came from the courtyard below the embroidered building, followed by the sound of footsteps.

"Big Brother, are you asleep?" A tender voice called out from outside the door.

"No, no," Lin Wanrong hurriedly called out. "Little darling, come in quickly."

Dong Qiaoqiao's face flushed at hearing this, but her heart swelled with sweetness. Lifting the curtain, she entered and saw Qin Xian'er half-dressed, her body pressed tightly against Lin Wanrong's arm. Qin Xian'er's figure was voluptuous and curvy, her long hair cascading like a waterfall over her smooth, delicate shoulders. Her face flushed, she revealed two enchanting dimples. Truly, she was more enchanting than a flower.

"Darling, you're so naughty!" Though Qin Xian'er was bold and unrestrained, this was the first time she had been seen in such an intimate state with her husband by another woman. She couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed. Fortunately, the person was Dong Qiaoqiao, an old acquaintance from Jinling. She had always appreciated this young girl's gentle and obedient nature.

Seeing Qiaoqiao's red face and her eyes constantly scanning both her and Lin Wanrong, Miss Qin smiled gracefully, "Qiaoqiao, come closer. I'll make room for you so that my husband can pamper you."

As she spoke, she lightly tapped the pillow with her tender wrist. Her laughter rippled through the room. The swaying corner of the blanket caught the light, dazzling Lin Wanrong's eyes.

Though Qiaoqiao had served Lin Wanrong alongside Miss Luo, she remained extremely shy. Witnessing such a sensuous scene, she lowered her head and said softly, "Sister Xian'er, I didn't see anything—but Big Brother did."

Though they were like sisters behind closed doors, and seeing each other was no big deal, being teased by Qiaoqiao made Qin Xian'er blush. Her cheeks flushed a deep red as she let out a small whimper and dived under the blanket, feeling both shy and delighted.

Lin Wanrong sneaked a touch on Xian'er's ample bosom and burst into hearty laughter. Grabbing Qiaoqiao's delicate hand, he said, "Little darling, why are you still awake so late? Did you miss me? It's been a long time since I've had the lotus seed porridge you make; I've been thinking about it a lot."

Qiaoqiao hummed in agreement and sat down beside him. "Madam is still busy," she said softly. "She's preparing another pot of ginseng and bird's nest soup for you to eat tomorrow morning. I've been assisting her. Big Brother, would you like some lotus seed porridge? I can make it for you now."

She rose to leave, but Lin Wanrong quickly grabbed her arm. Seeing the bloodshot whites of her eyes, evidence of days and nights without adequate rest, he felt a sudden pang of concern. "Silly girl, you need to take care of yourself. Big Brother loves your lotus seed porridge and wants to eat it for the rest of his life."

"Of course! I will always serve Big Brother!" Qiaoqiao's face lit up with joy, her small hands tightly gripping his. Had it not been for the presence of Qin Xian'er beside them, she would have already thrown herself into his embrace.

Among the women Lin Wanrong knew, Qiaoqiao had the most common background, yet her life experiences were the closest to his own. Compared to all the other young ladies, she was the most reliable and had been by his side the longest, always silently watching over him, causing his heart to ache for her.

A soft warmth filled Lin Wanrong's eyes as he whispered, "My little darling, once my injuries are healed, Big Brother will cook something delicious just for you. And no one is allowed to snatch it from you!"

His tone was firm, not caring that Qin Xian'er was beside them, displaying his deep affection for Qiaoqiao. "Big Brother—" her voice quivered as she burst into tears of joy, unable to restrain herself any longer as she threw herself into his arms. Being able to have a man like Big Brother cook for her made her feel like the luckiest woman in the world, and it made all her hardships worthwhile.

As Qin Xian'er listened to Lin Wanrong speak so affectionately to Qiaoqiao, she didn't feel jealous. She too loved the charming girl, and so how could she blame her husband who was naturally affectionate? Seeing Lin Wanrong's resolute look, a sense of inexplicable emotion welled up within her. She joined Qiaoqiao in his arms and whispered, "Husband, I will also serve you forever."

Despite the pain from his injuries, Lin Wanrong endured it; such blissful moments were rare.

"Oh, Big Brother—" Qiaoqiao suddenly let out a soft exclamation, her body trembling slightly, her face flushed.

Qin Xian'er, who knew her husband well, chuckled softly. "Husband, now is not the time to pamper Qiaoqiao. Wait until you've recovered, then you can do as you please."

"Sister Xian'er, you're so naughty!" Qiaoqiao blushed to her ears, stealing a quick glance at Big Brother before lowering her head in embarrassment.

Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly and reluctantly pulled his hand away from inside Qiaoqiao's blouse. The lingering scent remained on his fingers, but he could only yearn without acting upon it.

"Qiaoqiao, coming to find your big brother so late, did something happen?" After some light banter among the three, Qin Xian'er asked.

Qiaoqiao nodded repeatedly, blushing slightly. She had been so engrossed in talking to Big Brother that she'd nearly forgotten the main issue. "Big Brother, Officer Gao is here. He's waiting for you downstairs."

Qin Xian'er glanced at Lin Wanrong, who nodded thoughtfully without showing any signs of surprise. She instantly understood, "Husband, are you sending Officer Gao on a mission?"

"Don't send him!" Lin Wanrong shook his head emphatically and snorted. "I will go myself."

"No!" Xian'er and Qiaoqiao cried out in unison.

"Husband, you're still recovering from severe injuries. How can you take such risks? Let me go in your stead," Xian'er pleaded.

Qiaoqiao nodded fervently, "Exactly, Big Brother. How can you even think of leaving in your condition? Just tell me what needs to be done, and I'll handle it."

Observing their anxious expressions, Lin Wanrong sighed deeply and shook his head solemnly. "This matter is of great importance. If done correctly, I can journey north without any worries, and you both can live peacefully in the capital. But if things go awry, not only will our family be endangered, but the entire Empire will face calamity. I must go personally to ensure its success."

His tone was so serious that both Xian'er and Qiaoqiao wanted to argue further but were silenced by a stern look from him. Everyone knew Lin Wanrong's character: He was up for all sorts of mischief, but once he made a decision, it was final. The two women exchanged worried glances, uncertain how to convince him otherwise.

"Don't worry," Lin Wanrong said, sensing he had been too stern. "It's not as dangerous as it sounds. I just need to oversee things; I won't be taking direct action. Besides, look at me—do you think I could even if I wanted to?"

Seeing his resolve, Xian'er spoke firmly, "Husband, I will go with you." She felt guilty about the mishap that had happened under her watch; if not for his great luck, he might have lost his life. She was determined not to leave his side.

"It's good that you'll be with me. With your skills, there aren't many who could pose a threat," Lin Wanrong nodded approvingly. At that, Xian'er smiled, her face radiating a captivating charm.

Resigned, Qiaoqiao sighed softly. "Big Brother, should I inform Sister about this?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head. "Qingxuan has been extremely busy these days, and she's pregnant. Let her rest. I'll tell her when everything is sorted."

Qiaoqiao hummed in agreement and, along with Xian'er, assisted him in getting dressed. His most severe injury was to his thigh. Although Xian'er and Xiao Qingxuan had both administered their best treatments, recovery wasn't easy. His leg was braced with thick plaster, making it hard and uncomfortable to move. Fortunately, his other injuries were only superficial.

Qiaoqiao placed a soft cushion under him, and with assistance from both women, he managed to sit up—his leg erupting in sharp pain. Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth and broke into a cold sweat but managed not to cry out. Seeing this, Xian'er gently wiped the sweat from his forehead, her eyes misty. "Husband, if it hurts, don't hold back your cries. There's no one else here."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I've stared death in the face several times and lived through horrors you can't imagine. What's a little pain in comparison? But if you give me ten kisses, I assure you, the pain will lessen considerably."

Qin Xian'er didn't understand the meaning behind his words, thinking he was speaking nonsense as he usually did. While she found it amusing, she was also touched by his enduring spirit. This

stoicism was a stark contrast to his usual jovial demeanor, deepening her affection for him even more.

Gao Qiu had been waiting downstairs for some time. He sent Qiaoqiao to call him up. When he entered the hall and saw Lin San, who was sitting in a large chair wrapped in layers of gauze, Gao Qiu hesitated for a moment. Then, rushing forward, he grabbed Lin San's arm, his voice tinged with excitement: "Brother Lin, are you... are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm doing very well," Lin Wanrong answered with a faint smile. "Apart from a broken leg and a few cracked ribs, everything else is pretty minor."

Gao Qiu suddenly knelt down, his voice trembling with emotion, "Brother Lin, I've wronged you \_\_\_"

"Brother Gao, what are you doing?" Lin Wanrong was startled and quickly reached out to help him up. However, the sudden movement aggravated his wounds, causing him great pain.

Gao Qiu lowered his head in shame, gripping Lin San's arm even tighter, his eyes moistening. "It's my failure that you were injured so severely, nearly losing your life. I owe you an apology. Brother, please hit me. It's the only way I'll feel better—" He swiftly unsheathed his dagger and offered it to Lin Wanrong.

The glinting dagger startled Qiaoqiao, who let out a small cry but said nothing.

Holding Gao Qiu's arm firmly, Lin Wanrong spoke coldly, "Brother Gao, do you look down on me, Lin San? Have you forgotten our time in Shandong, in Jining? If it weren't for you guarding me, I'd be nothing but bones by now. I might be known as cunning and deceitful, but I remember who's been good to me. I never mentioned the life-saving favor you did for me in Shandong, because I felt it was unnecessary. We are brothers who've exchanged lives on the battlefield; what need is there for all this talk? If you truly respect me, if you really consider me your brother, then stand up straight! Damn it, you're squeezing my arm so hard it hurts—"

Jolted by Lin Wanrong's words, Gao Qiu chuckled awkwardly and finally stood up. "Brother, I was wrong. Let me apologize."

"Forget about the apology. Put the knife away. You know I'd never raise my hand against a brother," Lin Wanrong said, laughing as he pushed the dagger back into its sheath. "Brother Gao, it's been just two days, and I see you've learned many tricks. You've made quite the progress!"

Gao Qiu chuckled, somewhat embarrassed, "Being around you, how could I not pick up a thing or two? Otherwise, wouldn't I be the laughingstock of the world?"

'Is he praising me or insulting me?' Lin Wanrong thought, lifting his foot to give the old fellow a kick. But a sharp pain in his leg made him wince and change his expression.

At first, Qiaoqiao had been touched by their brotherly affection. But as she witnessed their playful banter, a smile crept onto her face.

Seeing Lin Wanrong wrapped in thick bandages, Gao Qiu's face turned serious. He whispered, "Brother Lin, since you're injured, let me handle that matter. Don't worry, if I mess it up, I won't have the face to see you again. I'll just slit my throat right at their doorstep."

Eager to redeem his past wrongs, Lin Wanrong smiled nonchalantly, "Brother Gao, you're being too formal. If it were a good deed, I wouldn't compete with you. But for a nefarious task? Without me, Lin San, how could you do it without becoming the laughingstock of the world?"

Gao Qiu burst into hearty laughter, fully aware that Lin San was beyond persuasion. After all, when it came to villainy, who could outdo Lin San? He would indeed feel uneasy without Lin San by his side during such endeavors.

"Brother Gao, have you prepared everything I requested?" Lin Wanrong asked seriously, after they both shared a laugh.

"Everything is ready," Gao Qiu hurriedly nodded, pulling out a large, bulging package from behind him, its contents unknown.

"Good," Lin Wanrong's eyes sparkled as he chuckled. Seeing that it was getting late, he hummed, "The moon is dark and the wind is high; it's a night fit for murder. Let's set off!"

Since he was mobility-impaired, Gao Qiu had already prepared a litter. Lin Wanrong was slowly carried downstairs. The chilly winds of early spring howled, stinging his cheeks. A crescent moon hung in the night sky, its dim light casting an eerie glow, rendering the garden unusually desolate.

Once comfortably seated in the litter, Qin Xian'er snuggled up next to him. Just as he was about to give the order to proceed, he heard Gao Qiu's subdued voice outside, "I, Gao Qiu, pay my respects to the Princess!"

A gentle voice softly replied, "Thank you, Commander Gao. Please rise."

"Qingxuan?!" Lin Wanrong was startled. He hastily lifted the curtain of the litter to see Xiao Qingxuan standing nearby, smiling tenderly at him. Bathed in moonlight, her skin was translucent; her eyes, clear as lake water; her cheeks, lightly flushed. She looked radiant, ethereal, as if a celestial being had descended to earth. Beside her stood Miss Luo, voluptuous and seductive, casting flirtatious glances at Lin Wanrong.

"Why are you here?" Lin Wanrong extended his hand out of the window and grasped her soft, slender palm as Qingxuan gracefully walked over.

Miss Xiao smiled gently, "You're embarking on such an important mission, how could I not come?"

"You knew?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed.

Luo Ning laughed, "Big Brother, I think Sister knows you best. She suspected that something major was afoot when Mr. Xu came to visit you. We've been waiting for you here for as long as it takes to brew a pot of tea."

Lin Wanrong gazed at Qingxuan, whose face was filled with a serene, otherworldly smile. He felt both joy and sorrow. Happy that Qingxuan understood him so well, he thought, 'I've married the right woman.' But he also felt sad because she could read him so easily—what about his secrets concerning Fairy Sister and Sister An?

"What are you pondering so deeply?" Miss Xiao seemed to see through him. Her delicate finger traced a line in his palm as she gently laughed, "What I should know, I will know. What I shouldn't, I won't ask. You needn't worry."

Although her words were laden with deeper meaning, Lin Wanrong, intelligent as he was, couldn't quite grasp it. He hurriedly said, "My good wife Qingxuan, I didn't intentionally keep tonight's matters from you. You've been so exhausted lately; I just wanted you to get some rest tonight."

"My Dear, you're so considerate," Miss Xiao said with a sweet smile. "Go ahead and do what you need to do. We sisters all support you. Just make sure to think of us and not act recklessly."

Lin Wanrong sighed a few times in response. Miss Xiao gently smiled, took off her cloak, and draped it over him. Turning to Qin Xian'er next to her, she said, "Sister, I'm leaving My Dear in your care."

Qin Xian'er hummed, "You needn't worry, he's also my husband—Gao Qiu, let's get going!"

'This girl is just stubbornly soft-hearted,' Miss Xiao thought, giving Lin Wanrong's hand a tight squeeze before letting go. However, that warm feeling lingered in his heart.

"Husband, who do you like more, me or her?" A few steps after the sedan started moving, Miss Qin cuddled close to him and asked, with a bit of a competitive edge.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, about to evade the question, but Qin Xian'er's small hand covered his lips and she hummed, "You're not allowed to say you like both. You must say who you like more!"

'This girl really is domineering,' thought Lin Wanrong, scratching his head. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "When I'm with you, I like you more!"

He was notorious for his slickness, mumbling the first part of his sentence, making it unclear. However, the latter half was clear and concise, even a stone could understand.

Though Qin Xian'er might be fearless and quite the femme fatale, she wasn't as cunning as he was. Overwhelmed by sweet shyness, she only heard the latter half of the first sentence. Her heart filled with sweetness, and she wrapped her arms around his neck to deliver a passionate kiss.

"Uh, why is the sedan swaying? Brother Lin, Princess, are you both alright?" Gao Qiu found it odd and quickly inquired.

"It's fine, it's fine." Seeing that Qin Xian'er's cheeks were flushed and her clothing partially disheveled, Lin Wanrong lightly touched her ivory skin, making her tremble with a whimper. Her smooth arms wrapped around his neck like a snake.



"All is well, then. We're about to leave the estate," Gao Qiu finally breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that no mishap had occurred. If anything happened to Brother Lin again, he'd have to take drastic measures against himself.

Lin Wanrong grunted in response and absentmindedly lifted the curtain to glance outside, suddenly becoming lost in thought.

"Husband, what's the matter?" Qin Xian'er, who was close to him, suddenly sensed that his movements had stopped. In the close quarters of the sedan, though they couldn't fully indulge in their desires, the atmosphere was hot and spicy. When she noticed his pause, she mewed like a kitten, her hot breath evident as she spoke.

Lin Wanrong sighed and didn't say anything, which made Qin Xian'er quickly follow his gaze through the curtain.

Not far from the embroidered tower, there was a secluded cottage where a dim yellow light still seeped out despite the late hour. A mature and graceful woman moved in front of the window. Her figure was enchanting, ineffable, with a full bust and a slender waist. She wore a pale pink silk shirt and her hair was neatly pinned up. Only the silhouette of her profile was visible, showing her long eyelashes and almond-shaped eyes. The faint yellow light illuminated her cheeks, making her skin appear as lustrous and flawless as jade, like a radiant peony flower.

Inside the cottage, a wisp of smoke rose as a faint aroma wafted into the air. The woman bent down repeatedly and then stood up after a short while. In her hand, she held a small, crystal-clear spoon which she occasionally brought to her lips for a taste. Her eyebrows furrowed and she shook her head, bending down again.

"Is that the Madam?" Xian'er exclaimed in surprise. "It's so late. Why hasn't she gone to bed? What is she doing in the kitchen?"

Recalling what Qiaoqiao had told her, Xian'er chuckled knowingly. "Husband, the Madam really cares for you. She's making ginseng and bird's nest soup for you at this hour. Even the young misses of the Xiao family never had such a treat."

"Really?" The sedan chair stopped quietly at that moment, unnoticed by Madam Xiao. Lin Wanrong looked at her bustling around in the kitchen and gave a faint smile.

Xian'er nodded, "Husband, has Madam always been so attentive to you?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled at the memory. "When I first came to the Xiao family, Madam was busy plotting against me, scheming to exploit my worth for her family's benefit. I would have been satisfied even with a cup of hot water, let alone ginseng and bird's nest."

"That's because the circumstances were different," Xian'er, having spent a considerable time with the Madam, naturally defended her. "You saved her life this time and she is immediately reciprocating. You may not know, but even when Master Xiao was alive, the Madam rarely cooked. These past few days, she's been extremely busy just for you. She really cares."

Lin Wanrong smiled dismissively. "She's just grateful that I saved her life. It will go back to normal soon."

Xian'er sighed softly and shook her head, "There's no need to wait for that. Madam is leaving for Jinling soon. If you wish to enjoy this delicious ginseng and bird's nest again, no one can make it as well as she can. Husband, don't you want to talk to her?"

Talk to her? About what? Lin Wanrong shook his head and bitterly smiled. "I've been awake all day, and everyone has visited me except for the Madam. She even mentioned going back to Jinling at this time. Clearly, she doesn't want to see me. I really can't understand her thinking. Her savior seems to have turned into her enemy."

The more he thought about it, the more dejected he felt. "Let's forget it. It's not appropriate to visit her at this late hour. We'll talk another day. Let's go, Brother Gao."

Maintaining secrecy on his journey, the sedan chair arrived quickly and left just as quickly, vanishing into the night. When it was far away, Madam Xiao lifted her head, casting a glance towards the departing sedan. Her expression was somber.

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Leaving the estate, the small sedan chair dashed towards the north. Gao Qiu had already sent men to sweep the area clean, ensuring that no one was around before daring to proceed. Having experienced an accident before, Gao Qiu was naturally much more cautious, not daring to slack off in the slightest.

Upon reaching a small alley, another sedan chair had already been waiting. Xu Wei lifted the curtain and stepped out, quickly walking over, "Little brother Lin, you've finally arrived!"

Xian'er lifted the curtain, and Lin Wanrong smiled and gave a slight bow, "I apologize for my tardiness!"

Seeing that Lin Wanrong was still bandaged and injured, Xu Wei was moved but also relieved, "You're not late; now is exactly the right time." He took a small package from his robe and handed it to Lin Wanrong, lowering his voice, "Little brother, this is an imperial decree for your inspection mission. The Emperor said to act according to the situation and not to stick to formalities. You have the power to execute and then report."

Lin Wanrong took the imperial decree, his palms sweaty. The old man's meaning was clear: kill whomever he wanted to kill and report afterward. It was almost like being the Emperor himself.

"Mr. Xu, have our enemies shown any unusual behavior?" Lin Wanrong asked as he tucked the decree into his robe.

"So far, no. He has been praying in the Grand Prime Minister Temple all day, showing no abnormal behavior," Xu Wei nodded. "However, today news spread that the Emperor personally visited your residence to pay condolences. He heard it and stayed in his room for two hours, which made me quite anxious."

Two hours? Lin Wanrong was startled, "Did anyone enter his chamber during that time?"

"No," Xu Wei shook his head firmly, "He was bathing and observing rituals to worship his ancestors. Nobody could enter his chamber. Moreover, according to my investigation, nobody went in to talk with him today."

Two hours could be long enough to do many things. Was it possible that he just stayed in the room contemplating by himself? What about his entourage?

Finding it all strange and unable to figure it out, Lin Wanrong decided to ignore it for now. "Mr. Xu, according to you, most of our forces are concentrated around the Grand Prime Minister Temple, right?"

Xu Wei nodded solemnly, "The main objective is in the Grand Prime Minister Temple; naturally, this is where our main guard is. Although there are troops at the royal residence, they are comparatively weaker."

"Do you think our enemy knows that we've deployed the majority of our forces around the Temple?" Lin Wanrong asked, his eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"With his keen intelligence and sense, how could he not know?" Xu Wei suddenly looked startled, "Little brother, have you discovered something?"

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile, "Mr. Xu, look at me. Wounded and broken, what could I have possibly discovered? I just find it odd that our enemy is too calm, unnaturally calm. Could he really be innocent?"

Innocent? Xu Wei burst into laughter and shook his head, "I've served with this man in the court for over twenty years; how could I not know his nature? Let's not talk about other things; just the fact that he's been secretly cultivating the White Lotus sect to disturb the peace of the Empire makes him an absolute villain. Not to mention colluding with foreign invaders and betraying his ancestors!"

Lin Wanrong raised an eyebrow decisively. "No matter what, we must handle this situation well. Mr. Xu, the Grand Prime Minister Temple is certainly important, but we can't slack off on the royal mansion either. The manpower we deploy there must be no weaker than here!"

Xu Wei sensed something. "Little brother Lin, are you suggesting—"

Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth. "Ever heard of the saying, 'a clever hare has three burrows,' Mr. Xu? His tranquility within the Grand Prime Minister Temple may just be a diversion."

"Thank you for the reminder, little brother Lin!" Realization dawned on Xu Wei. "I'll go back and arrange it right away!"

"Hold on!" Lin Wanrong stopped him and chuckled, "Mr. Xu, tonight is crucial. You must trap him in the Grand Prime Minister Temple at all costs; he cannot slip away halfway. Once things are set on my end, I'll signal with fireworks. You can then move in to apprehend him; execute on the spot if there's any resistance."

His smile turned cold immediately, the tone icy enough to send a chill down Xu Wei's spine. Hurriedly, Xu Wei nodded, confirming the signal for their respective actions, before turning to depart in his sedan chair.

Seeing everything arranged, Lin Wanrong felt somewhat reassured, but a strange intuition told him that tonight's events would not go as smoothly as expected.

"Husband, what's the matter with you?" Qin Xian'er nudged him gently, seeing him lost in thought.

Lin Wanrong caressed her face and smiled, "Xian'er, do you know who we are dealing with tonight?"

"Mm," Qin Xian'er nodded, aware of Prince Cheng's collusion with the White Lotus sect, having once helped Zhao Kangning fight the government troops on her Master's orders.

"Finally, an end is in sight," Lin Wanrong sighed, "Considering Prince Cheng is your royal uncle, Xian'er, will you be able to go through with it?"

"Husband, you underestimate me," Miss Qin pouted, "Even my father wants him dealt with; what reservations could I have?"

Fair point, she had never felt a sense of belonging to the royal family. Even when there had been misunderstandings, she had once plotted to assassinate her own father. Dealing with such an unreliable royal uncle was naturally of little concern to her.

The sedan chair wobbled its way towards the royal mansion. Commander Gao was extremely cautious, sending guards ahead to scout the way. Only after confirming there was no danger would they continue, a paranoia reminiscent of the saying, "Once bitten by a snake, one is scared of a rope for ten years."

Arriving at an alley opposite the royal mansion, they ducked into a spacious residence and the sedan chair came to a stop. Lin Wanrong noticed that they were in a two-story building quite far from the residence Prince Cheng had passed a few days ago. Xu Wei was indeed very cautious in his arrangements.

The guards at this location, familiar from a previous night, were visibly shocked to see Lin Wanrong's injuries. He waved it off, flashing a brilliant smile at them.

On the second floor, in an empty room, he had a bird's eye view through the window. The massive gates of Prince Cheng's mansion were visible, tightly shut. Two enormous red lanterns were hung high, emitting a faint red glow. Below them stood two ferocious stone lions, their forms menacing and intimidating. The sound of a watchman announcing the time rang out; it was late into the second watch of the night, and the third watch was drawing near.

The moonlight was veiled by dark clouds, and only a few morning stars twinkled faintly in the sky, their light flickering in and out of view. The earth was enveloped in darkness, eerily quiet on all sides. In the distance, lights from homes appeared dim and hazy, like candles floating on water, swaying gently and casting innumerable shadows that were difficult to make out.

Lin Wanrong sat quietly in his chair, the subtle pain in his legs keeping his mind sharply focused. Qin Xian'er placed a soft pillow she had slipped into the room behind him and nestled silently by his side, saying nothing.

"Brother Lin, when shall we make our move?" Seeing Lin Wanrong deep in thought, Gao Qiu had grown impatient and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Wait," Lin Wanrong uttered, resolute in his reply.

"Wait?" Gao Qiu didn't understand Lin's hidden intentions, but seeing him so composed, he knew it was not his place to intervene. Observing the couple in their sweet embrace, he realized he didn't belong here. He gave Lin Wanrong a knowing glance and went downstairs with a smile.

"It's too quiet," Lin Wanrong sighed after what seemed like an eternity.

"Is quiet bad?" Qin Xian'er nestled closer to him, whispering softly, her beautiful face full of tenderness. "Husband, wouldn't it be wonderful if it were just the two of us, forever so peaceful and quiet?"

'Women are emotional creatures,' Lin Wanrong thought; even in a tense moment like this, she was in the mood for romance. He couldn't help but chuckle. He playfully flicked her nose and said, "Behind tranquility often brews a storm, and it's usually the most violent kind. That's not necessarily a good thing."

"What storm? You're so naughty," Qin Xian'er playfully scolded, her cheeks flushing red.

Ah, he didn't mean that, but seeing her misinterpret, Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter, eliciting sweet complaints from Qin Xian'er. The moment was delightfully joyous.

"Brother Lin, did you call for me?" Gao Qiu, who was growing impatient downstairs, hurried upstairs as he heard the laughter.

"It's about time," Lin Wanrong said with a slight smile. "Brother Gao, have you arranged everything?"

Noticing his expression, Gao Qiu instantly grew excited. "Everything is ready. Over a hundred brothers we can trust."

Lin Wanrong pointed at the bundle that Gao Qiu had brought. "Do you know what's inside?"

Gao Qiu shook his head, puzzled. "I have no idea. When Mr. Xu gave it to me, he warned that anyone who peeked inside would lose his head."

"Good," Lin Wanrong chuckled and slowly unwrapped the bundle. It contained several smaller parcels of varying shapes and weights, tightly bound.

Gao Qiu was amazed but kept his curiosity in check. Having served in the palace for many years, he knew better than to ask about matters that could cost him his head.

"Brother Gao, this is the most crucial and dangerous task tonight. It requires someone with the best martial arts skills and the sharpest mind. After considering all the options, it seems I must trouble you to undertake it personally," Lin Wanrong whispered into Gao Qiu's ear, grinning.

Flattered by the high praise, Gao Qiu couldn't contain his joy. He tucked the smaller parcels securely and said earnestly, "Rest assured, if I can't handle this, you won't even have to lift a finger; I'll cut off my own head."

Without waiting for further instructions from Lin Wanrong, he floated down the stairs like a wild goose, disappearing into the gathering twilight.

## Chapter 478 Did You Bully My Master?

"Husband, what task are you sending Gao Qiu off for? It seems like a significant matter; can he handle it alone?" Qin Xian'er asked, puzzled as she watched Gao Qiu move swiftly, agile as a civet, disappearing like a wisp of smoke into the distance.

"He's off to commit a bit of thievery; there's no need for a crowd," Lin Wanrong chuckled, looking pleased. "Brother Gao is highly skilled in martial arts and smart to boot. He's the perfect man for the job."

Seeing that he was beating around the bush and still not revealing what he had sent Gao Qiu to do, Qin Xian'er rolled her eyes in resignation and fell silent. The surroundings were eerily quiet; not a sound to be heard. Across the way, the royal mansion stood in deep tranquility, punctuated only by the occasional distant noise of patrol drums, sounding piercingly crisp in the stillness of the night.

Gao Qiu's form was concealed in the dark corner of an alley, still as a gecko on a wall. Unless someone like Lin Wanrong and Qin Xian'er were specifically looking, nobody would notice him there.

The alley was separated from the royal mansion by only a few dozen feet. Heaven only knows how many pairs of eyes were watching simultaneously. Lin Wanrong's heartbeat quickened; a crucial moment was approaching. Success or failure hinged on the next move.

After a long silence, Gao Qiu suddenly sprang into action. Swift as smoke, he crossed the alley in the blink of an eye and pressed himself against the tall wall of the royal mansion.

'Good!' Lin Wanrong thought, exhaling softly. Gao Qiu hid in the shadows beneath the wall, looked around, and, seeing nothing amiss, vanished as he scaled the wall.

Seeing that Gao Qiu had successfully infiltrated the place, Lin Wanrong finally nodded, gripping Qin Xian'er's little hand, which was already sweaty. Half of the mission was now complete; all that remained was to wait for Gao Qiu's signal.

Leaning back, Lin Wanrong took a deep breath. Just as he was about to flirt with the flower-like Qin Xian'er beside him, he heard a swish-sound twice. Flares burst in the distant sky, cutting through the pitch-black night, blindingly brilliant.

Signal arrows?! Lin Wanrong was shocked. Something's gone wrong with Old Xu!



Before his thoughts could settle, hurried footsteps echoed from below. Several guards rushed up, shouting, "Sir Lin, Sir Lin, something terrible has happened!"

Lin Wanrong recognized two of them as Xu Wei's personal guards. Both were covered in dust and sweat, seemingly having just arrived.

"What's the matter?! Speak!" A sense of dread intensified within Lin Wanrong as he lowered his voice and spoke sternly.

"Sir," the guard at the front clenched his fists, his face filled with regret, "Something terrible has happened. The main target... he has escaped!"

"What?!" Lin Wanrong's face turned pale with shock. He slapped the arm of his chair, intending to stand, but forgot about his injury. A searing pain shot through his leg, and he broke into a cold sweat, collapsing back into his seat.

"Be careful, Husband!" Qin Xian'er cried out softly, quickly helping him sit back down and gently wiping the sweat from his brow.

He had escaped?! Lin Wanrong was indescribably horrified. How could Xu Wei, so astute a man, make such a basic mistake, allowing Prince Cheng to escape right under his nose? Not only were days of preparation ruined, but given Prince Cheng's cunning and deceit, his escape could bring untold calamity upon the Empire.

His grip tightened, and his face wore an unmistakable grimace. Seeing his distress, Qin Xian'er hurriedly took his hand. "Husband, don't worry. We'll find a way."

Lin Wanrong grunted, forcing himself to calm down. Yet his eyes involuntarily sharpened as he fixed his gaze on the guard. "Tell me exactly what happened," he said in a low voice.

The guard saluted. "Sir, the prisoner has been meditating at the Grand Prime Minister Temple, showing no signs of disturbance. We had brothers disguised as monks inside, making rounds near his room every half hour. Today, after Lord Xu Wei returned, we intensified our vigilance, assigning more men to watch him. At first, everything seemed normal; he stayed in his room. But about half an hour ago, we found the room empty; the man had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Lin Wanrong looked perplexed. "You're saying that under our watchful eyes and thorough security, he vanished without a trace?"

The guard nodded, visibly ashamed. "His disappearance was highly unusual; there were no warning signs. Lord Xu immediately sealed off the area surrounding the temple and initiated a search—"

"What good would searching do now? If the Prince had orchestrated this escape so meticulously, he would surely have foolproof plans. Did he grow wings and fly away? Xu Wei is no fool; how could someone slip through his fingers?"

"As we searched the room, we found a tunnel," the guard continued.

"A tunnel?" Lin Wanrong's expression shifted. "Where does it lead?"

"It appeared to have been dug recently and led to a civilian house within the city. Near that house, we found another tunnel leading to a forest ten miles outside the city."

"Hold on, slow down," Lin Wanrong interjected. "So, you're saying these two tunnels aren't connected? Were they dug at the same time?"

The guard shook his head. "The tunnel from Grand Prime Minister Temple to the city is fresh; it seems to have been dug recently. The other one leading out of the city is older, with dry soil. They likely hadn't had time to connect them."

"Tunnels, of course! Damn it, why didn't I think of that?" Lin Wanrong slapped his forehead, frustrated. No wonder the Prince was so audacious; he'd already prepared an escape route.

"What does Lord Xu plan to do now?" Lin Wanrong sighed, seemingly resigned.

"Lord Xu instructed us to inform you immediately. He has already left the city to marshal forces for a search."

Although the tunnel leading out of the city extended ten miles, Xu Wei had already pulled the stationed troops back twenty miles, as per Lin Wanrong's instructions. The Prince would surely be aware of this. Would he still run into the trap? Lin Wanrong fell silent for a moment, as if recalling something, then asked, "How far apart are these two tunnels within the city?"

The guard hastily said, "They're located in two different households, separated by a small alley."

Qin Xian'er pouted as she listened. "If they're so close, why not just connect the two tunnels?"

Lin Wanrong's eyes lit up, and he eagerly grasped Qin Xian'er's hand. "Exactly, why not connect them? Xian'er, if you were in this situation, knowing there's an army outside, would you rush into the trap?"

"I'm not that foolish," Xian'er giggled. "I would think of a way to divert them first, and then make my move."

Forgetting they were in public, Lin Wanrong passionately planted a kiss on Xian'er's cheek. "Oh, you're so clever, Xian'er!"

"Stop it!" Xian'er playfully scolded, her cheeks flushing, her beauty radiant.

"Sir, what should we do next?" Seeing that Lin Wanrong seemed much improved and even found time to flirt with the princess, the guard hurriedly seized the opportunity to inquire.

Lin Wanrong whispered a few words into Qin Xian'er's ear, and she nodded with a smile. Quickly, he instructed a servant to fetch ink and paper. After a few swift strokes, Lin Wanrong glanced over the letter, signed his name, and handed it to the guard. "Take this letter to Lord Xu and tell him to increase the search efforts. Make as much noise as possible; the bigger, the better. Tear the sky open if you can."

"Understood!" The guard acknowledged and hurriedly left.

Qin Xian'er watched as everyone dispersed and whispered, "Husband, how sure are you?"

"Not sure at all," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "If your royal uncle isn't foolish, he should still be in the city. Nobody's better at these kinds of tricks than he is."

"I don't consider him my royal uncle," Xian'er retorted, smiling coquettishly. "Husband, I see you're not much worse at these tricks."

"You're too kind," Lin Wanrong flirtatiously grazed his hand over her curvaceous rear and chuckled lasciviously.

Xian'er let out a soft cry, her cheeks flushed. She whispered, "Husband, answer me honestly about something."

"Absolutely, I'll be honest," Lin Wanrong replied eagerly, captivated by her allure.

"Don't lie to me. Have you ever done anything bad to my master?" Qin Xian'er bit his ear, her fragrant breath warm against his skin, and she gritted her teeth on the last few words.

Startled, Lin Wanrong tensed up and shook his head vehemently. "No, no, absolutely not. Xian'er, if you don't trust me, at least trust your Master. She's always the one mistreating me; when have you ever seen me mistreat her? Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't stand a chance!"

"Really?" Xian'er snorted, her expression enigmatic. "Who was it that said they would take care of the 'little demon' before dealing with the 'big demon'?"

He had thought the matter was behind them, but it seemed she had held it in her heart all along, seeking to settle the score with him now. He chuckled and said, "I was just speaking thoughtlessly, how could you take it seriously? Besides, you're not some little demon; you're my sweet and obedient fairy wife."

As cheesy as the words were, even making his own skin crawl, Miss Qin seemed to be quite pleased. Her face immediately softened, and she giggled, "Husband, there's something I haven't told you. When I was in Sichuan, my Master would constantly criticize you in front of me—calling you glib, a womanizer, and shameless."

"So, Master An knows me so well, listing all of my virtues. How humbling," He responded, unabashed but grinning from ear to ear. "Now you can rest assured. How could I dare to take advantage of her when she speaks so poorly of me?"

Miss Qin hummed and sighed, "You don't understand my Master's character. Although she appears unrestrained, she's actually quite dignified deep inside. To her, all men are insignificant, hardly worth her interest. She may criticize you, but you're the first man she's ever mentioned in all the years I've known her. Doesn't that mean she cares for you?"

What a unique vixen, expressing her emotions in such a peculiar way. Lin Wanrong felt a warmth in his heart, but he dared not reveal a hint to Qin Xian'er. He feigned ignorance, "Really? That's quite special. When I meet Master An again, I'll ask her myself. But discussing this now seems inappropriate, Xian'er. As you know, I'm a man of integrity; there are certain things beasts may do, but I cannot."

She hummed again, "Don't think I don't know that you pride yourself on being worse than a beast."

"How did you find out?" He was truly surprised; he had never told her this saying.

Xian'er smirked, "What you keep hidden will be known, unless you don't do it at all. Sister Xiao told me about what happened between you two in Hangzhou. When will you take me to draw a marriage fortune stick? I want you to explain it for me!"

"Uh, well—" He was sweating buckets, at a loss for what to say. He recalled how the two ladies had been at loggerheads back in Hangzhou. It was Qin Xian'er's sword that had nearly pushed the Eldest Miss to jump into West Lake. Times had changed, and now these two got along so well that even such secrets were shared. Would they exchange notes on the different positions he used with them in bed?

Seeing him with such a lascivious smile, Qin Xian'er twisted his arm in annoyance, "You're not allowed to take advantage of my Master anymore. Let me tell you, she's not one to be trifled with. If you anger her, she might cast a spell on you that will make you impotent for life. You'll regret it then."

"Really?" His tongue felt heavy with fear. Come to think of it, given that sly vixen's character, anything was possible. Xian'er herself showed hints of her. Would a single intimate encounter with Master An condemn him to her control for the rest of his life? What should he do?

## Chapter 479 A Love Letter to Sister An

"Of course it's true," Xian'er purred, pleased with herself. "Husband, you may not know this, but my master has specially prepared hundreds of love bugs for this matchmaking. She told me herself, every man she takes a liking to will receive one. That way, they will be forever loyal to her, never betraying her."

"Hundreds of love bugs?" Lin Wanrong inhaled sharply, fuming. "So you're telling me, Sister An is preparing to select a hundred robust men? Preposterous! Absolutely preposterous! How could she do this to me—to us?"

Sister An was cunning and versatile, fearless of heaven and earth. In her case, there was nothing she couldn't do; the unimaginable was the only limit. Lin Wanrong clenched his teeth in exasperation, wishing he could sprout wings and fly to the Miao village right now, drag that bewitching woman to a bed, and interrogate her ruthlessly.

Seeing his heightened fury, his face flushing red, Xian'er giggled. "Husband, what's the rush? Whoever my master chooses has nothing to do with us. If she picks someone neither of us approves of, we can simply find a way to sabotage them. I doubt she would mind; she loves me the most, after all."

'When there are no men around, she indeed loves you the most. But once men enter the picture, who knows who she'll favor?' Lin Wanrong shook his head. He prided himself on his way with women, fearless whether they were young or old, slender or robust. But Sister An was the exception. She seemed close yet remained distant, elusive like a wisp of smoke, covered in thorns that made her untouchable. He had zero confidence around her.

"No, it won't do," Lin Wanrong grumbled, grabbing Xian'er's small hand. "My darling, write a letter to your master right away. Tell her that selecting her future husband isn't just her business, but the concern of our entire family. As the saying goes, the commands of the parents and the words of the disciple must be respected. She can't make that decision without our approval. We must at least wait until I return from the North and meet this man in person. He must be superior in martial arts, more talented in writing, and smarter than me—and even better looking—bah! Do you think such a man even exists?"

Xian'er thought for a moment, then smiled. "Meeting all those criteria would indeed be challenging, but exceptions might exist. However, in my eyes, no matter how strong or handsome he might be, he will never compare to my husband."

"My wife truly loves me the most," Lin Wanrong said, gratefully rubbing her soft, delicate hand. "In that case, Xian'er, hurry and write that letter. Tell your master we're only looking out for her best interests. Men as exceptional as me are rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns—irreplaceable and incomparable. She shouldn't even think about comparing others to me, not that I'm worried—"

"Really?" Xian'er hummed through her tiny nose, casting him a meaningful glance.

Lin Wanrong was momentarily startled but quickly laughed it off. "I was merely making an analogy. Don't get any wrong ideas, Xian'er. I'm genuinely concerned for Sister An. Imagine if she got entranced by someone's sweet talk and ended up with a worthless man. That would be like sticking cow dung on a beautiful flower. Not only would she regret it, but we'd also feel heartbroken, wouldn't we?"

Xian'er remained unmoved, her beautiful eyes fixed intently on him, as though searching for clues in his words and actions.

Though Lin Wanrong's skin was as thick as a city wall, he found it hard to withstand her piercing gaze. His face flushed slightly, and he chuckled awkwardly, bowing his head. "The moon is too harsh tonight; it's turned my face red. Xian'er, I'll send you some sunscreen tomorrow. It'll come in handy when you're under the moon. I promise, it's something nobody else has used!"

Xian'er let out a cold laugh, "I don't need it. You can give it to someone else."

Lin Wanrong chuckled mysteriously, "Then, I'll give it to Qingxuan—"

"How dare you!" Miss Qin grabbed his arm tightly, her voice filled with menace. Lin Wanrong yelped in pain, his face twisted as if the wound had been touched.

"Husband—" Xian'er was startled and hurriedly loosened her grip, full of remorse. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to."

Lin Wanrong kissed her on the cheek, speaking softly, "Silly girl, you're my little darling. Even if you tore me to pieces, I wouldn't blame you. That sunscreen was specially prepared for you; I wouldn't give it to anyone else."

Miss Qin hummed softly, bowing her head in shame, "Husband, you're so good to me."

'This girl is not easy to manage,' thought Lin Wanrong, amused. His expression suddenly turned solemn, "Actually, I'm not as good as you think. I admit, I had ulterior motives when I spoke to you earlier—"

Xian'er looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears, on the verge of crying.

Lin Wanrong placed his large hand over her mouth, preventing her from speaking, and forced a bitter smile, "Look at you, jumping to conclusions again. Actually, I was worried that you would feel hurt when your master gets married—"

"Why would I feel hurt?" Upon hearing it wasn't what she had imagined, Miss Qin felt a weight lifted off her, gazing confusedly at her husband.

Lin Wanrong spoke seriously, "As the saying goes, a woman marries outward. Xian'er, think carefully. Ever since you've been with me, haven't you grown distant from your master?"

Xian'er pondered and nodded slightly, showing a hint of guilt, "Indeed, before I met you, my master and I were inseparable, sharing a bed every night. But since I met you, she has rarely crossed my mind, and I seldom consider her feelings. I've let her down!"

"That's the point," Lin Wanrong nodded seriously, "It's a natural phenomenon. For a woman will marry one day, and her husband will become her priority. Similarly, if your master marries, her husband will also become her priority, relegating you to a secondary role. She will no longer think of you first when it comes to good things. How would you feel about this shift after two decades of close familial ties?"

Putting herself in her master's shoes, Miss Qin realized Lin Wanrong had a point. She hung her head low, "I don't know, but my master wouldn't be so heartless."

"I hope so too," Lin Wanrong gently patted her shoulder to comfort her, craftily instigating, "My darling, don't worry. Even if you are no longer the number one in your master's heart, you will always be the number one in mine!"

'Ah, Buddha, it's a tie for first, along with Qiaoqiao, Ning'er, the Eldest Miss, Qingxuan, and so on; there's no particular order!' Feeling guilty, he quickly added that sentiment in his mind.

His words were eloquent and vivid, so compelling that even the stones on the ground could bloom. Swept up by his sweet talk, Qin Xian'er considered her own situation and found it increasingly convincing. She burst into gentle sobs and threw herself into his arms: "Husband, I want to be the number one in your heart and also in my master's heart. Help me! Husband, Xian'er loves you the most—"



"This will be difficult to accomplish!" Lin Wanrong, relishing the kiss Xian'er offered, beamed with joy but feigned deep thought as he sighed, "When it rains, it pours, and when Sister An decides to marry, who can stop her?"

"Then I'll make sure Master doesn't get married!" Xian'er defiantly hummed, her eyes shimmering.

Lin Wanrong looked earnestly solemn as he said leisurely, "How can we do such a thing? Your master is seeking her own happiness, which is a natural course of human life. How could we deliberately sabotage that? I'm not that kind of person!"

"That won't do. I want to be with Master forever and cannot allow any other men near her. I don't care; Husband, you must find a way. Otherwise, you're not allowed to kiss me for three hours!" Miss Qin spoke resolutely.

What a terrifying punishment! Lin Wanrong took a sharp breath, held back a smile, and sighed softly, "Xian'er, why must you torment me like this? I really can't think of any way around it—she has to marry someone, doesn't she?"

"Then let her marry you—" In her urgency, Miss Qin said something she shouldn't have. Realizing her mistake, she quickly covered her mouth, her face flushing between red and white, visibly annoyed.

"How could that be possible?!" Lin Wanrong reacted with extreme intensity; had he not been crippled, he would've leaped up. "Xian'er, how could you even think of such a thing? It's horrifying! Even if you're willing, Sister An wouldn't agree—even if she agreed, I haven't considered it!"

He appeared utterly serious and somber, speaking as though he were a moral lecturer. To the uninformed observer, he might have appeared to be a virtuous scholar teaching a lesson on ethics.

Miss Qin glanced at him, a look between smiling and not, and said discontentedly, "Husband, what are you talking about? What's this about willingness? What I mean is, if Master is to marry, she can only marry the person that you and I like, where on earth has your mind wandered off to?"

"Ah—" Lord Lin suddenly found himself dumbfounded. Catching Xian'er's peculiar gaze, he finally realized he'd been played by this wily girl. What an oversight!

Miss Qin was also incredibly clever. Seeing his realistic performance, she secretly scoffed and said leisurely, "Of course, I won't let Master marry some unknown person. But as for the letter you mentioned, as a disciple, how could I possibly write it? It might be more effective if you write it; I believe the outcome would be far better than if I were to write it myself."

'Should I write?' Lin Wanrong felt a stir within him; the idea was indeed tempting. But upon witnessing Xian'er's probing gaze, he realized that she had set a trap for him. This left him in a dilemma. If he didn't write, he would seem guilty; if he did write, how could he produce a love letter that would move both himself and Sister An under the scrutiny of this young lady?

A servant brought ink, brush, and paper. Miss Qin rolled up her sleeves and personally ground the ink, appearing genuinely sincere.

"Husband, will you write or not?" Seeing Lin Wanrong's hesitation, Qin Xian'er pouted her rosy lips, humming softly. Her smooth, jade-like wrist glimmered faintly under the dim light.

"What is there to fear? Thank you for preparing the ink, Princess!" Lin Wanrong chuckled and grabbed the brush. He quickly began to write on the pure white sheet of paper.

His movements were swift, finishing in the blink of an eye. Qin Xian'er glanced at it and found herself momentarily stunned. On the clean paper were only three words—'Difficult to Speak!'

The characters were awkward and crooked, the calligraphy barely better than a child's who was still in school. If not for the few traces of force in his strokes, it would have been no better than a scribble.

'No wonder my husband never uses a brush; it turns out he has never attended school!' Qin Xian'er covered her mouth and laughed. "Husband, who taught you this unique style of writing? It's so distinctive that no one else could possibly learn it!"

"Your praise is too kind. I practiced randomly and ended up like this. As the saying goes, it's not about learning well but marrying well. See, didn't I marry a princess of unparalleled beauty?" Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter, handing the paper to Xian'er.

"Always the chatterbox." Hearing his praise, Miss Qin was secretly pleased and shyly said, "In Xian'er's view, it's not about learning well but marrying well. Am I right, Husband?"

"Right, right. Learning well is not as good as marrying well; you are truly wise," Lin Wanrong playfully agreed. How valuable it was for Xian'er to have this insight!

After a bout of laughter, Qin Xian'er stared at the three awkward words and softly read, "'Difficult to Speak.' Is this all you have to say in the letter? Even I don't understand its meaning; how will my Master?"

"'Difficult to Speak.' If she doesn't understand, then consider it unwritten!" For the first time writing a love letter to Sister An, it may have been ugly, but it was from the heart. Lin Wanrong smiled, his expression a bit wistful.

Unable to decipher the cryptic message, but reassured that he had not written anything inappropriate, Qin Xian'er carefully sealed the letter and instructed someone to deliver it overnight.

"What time is it? Why hasn't there been any movement from Gao Qiu?" Perhaps it was Sister An affecting his emotions, or maybe it was being under Xian'er's watchful eyes, but Lin Wanrong became increasingly restless.

"Sir, since Prince Cheng is no longer in the residence, is there still a need for all this effort?" Xian'er asked, puzzled.

"Not in the residence?" Lin Wanrong grinned, "All the better. The work that needs to be done can't be overlooked. I'll make him regret it—as the saying goes, it's not feces, but it's just as bad!" Hearing this, Qin Xian'er blushed and lightly spat in disapproval.

"Dry weather, be cautious with fire!" As they waited, the sound of the night watchman's call suddenly rang out from the mansion across the street, echoing twice. Lin Wanrong's face lit up with joy. "Success!"

Before the words had even left his lips, a loud "boom" resounded from the side walls of the mansion opposite them. Twin plumes of fire erupted, reaching for the sky and engulfing the area in a thick smoke that rose up into the clouds. The vivid flames illuminated everyone's faces, casting them in a rosy hue, as if the dawn had been reborn.

"It's started!" Qin Xian'er exclaimed, her face a mixture of astonishment and delight. "Gao Qiu has made his move!"

Patting his sore thigh lightly, Lin Wanrong sneered, "You set fire to my family's home; I set fire to yours. Now we're even!"

In the midst of the flames, several bodyguards appeared, asking excitedly, "Sir, shall we make our move?"

"Not yet," Lin Wanrong replied with a shake of his head and a smile. "This mansion is so large, it will burn for at least a few days. Besides, there's real gold and silver inside, and those won't melt easily."

Everyone stared at the roaring fire, feeling its heat even from a distance. They remained silent.

"Water, water! Quickly, put out the fire!" A cacophony of desperate shouts emerged from the mansion, the loudest among them belonging to Gao Qiu.

"Water? Where is the water leaking?" A robust shout followed as thousands of armored soldiers, neatly arranged and exuding an aura of deadly intent, approached. A young junior officer asked loudly upon arriving at the scene.

"General, it's Prince Cheng's mansion that's on fire. Driven by the wind, the flames have spread throughout. If we don't act soon, the fire could spread further. However, the mansion's doors are tightly shut, and we can't get them open!" A scout reported.

The young junior officer quickly waved his hand. "Under the Emperor's watch, how could we let a fire rage in Prince Cheng's mansion? Everyone, dismount! Break down the doors and bring out the fire hoses; follow me to save the Prince!"

A sea of soldiers rushed towards the mansion like a gust of wind. The first wave of scouts began pounding on the mansion's grand, red-lacquered doors, shouting, "Open the doors quickly! We're from the city guard, here to put out the fire!"

After what felt like an eternity, a trembling voice from inside finally responded, "How dare you! This is Prince Cheng's mansion; who gave you the right to enter?"

The young junior officer drew his sword with a swish and roared, "The mansion is ablaze and the doors are closed. Could someone be plotting against the Prince? Who dares commit such a crime under the Emperor's nose? Men, break down these doors and save the Prince!"

On his command, soldiers lifted logs and smashed against the doors. With a series of crashes, the grand entrance collapsed. Like a flood breaking its banks, thousands of soldiers surged in, trampling over the fire hoses lying on the ground.

Lin Wanrong watched in secret amusement. 'That young man Xu Zhen certainly prepared well, with fire hoses and logs and all. Quite the tactician.' With a wave of his hand, his bodyguards followed, swarming into the mansion like hungry wolves.

Qin Xian'er furrowed her brow, "That general looks familiar. I think I've seen him in Shandong before—Oh, Husband, he's one of your subordinates—"

"That's not my concern. He's the city defense general," Lin Wanrong said, feigning seriousness.

Qin Xian'er nodded with a smile, "Whatever you say, Husband. Now that the mansion is breached, what do we do next?"

"Burning down a mansion is easy. What comes next is the real challenge," Lin Wanrong replied, chuckling mischievously. "Xian'er, shall we go inside? The mansion is so large; I could show you some interesting things."

## Chapter 480 Breaking into the Royal Mansion

The origin of the fire was the royal mansion's firewood storage. Gao Qiu had even added some gunpowder to fuel the flames. Once ignited, the fire blazed fiercely, lighting up half of the sky with its intense glow. Chaos reigned within the royal mansion, as countless maids and servants frantically rushed towards the source of the fire with buckets and basins of water in hand.

Xu Zhen led thousands of soldiers, smashing open the mansion's grand gates. Brandishing their weapons and radiating an aura of violence, they burst inside. The maids and servants of the mansion, who had never witnessed such a spectacle, were immediately stricken with fear. Dropping their buckets and basins, they scattered in all directions.

"Attention, men! The situation is critical. First, rescue the prince and his consorts, and then put out the fire!" Xu Zhen shouted. His troops responded in unison, discarding the wooden buckets they were carrying on the ground. Like a torrential river, they surged towards the inner quarters of the mansion.

"What do you think you're doing?" A portly steward, dressed in fine silk, hastily blocked the entrance to the inner quarters. His ample flesh quivered as he shrieked, "How dare you! Are you staging a rebellion? Do you know what this place is? This is the residence of the prince, his sons, and his consorts, a home granted by the late Emperor. Commoners like you have no business wreaking havoc here. Leave immediately, and I may plead for mercy on your behalf before the prince. Otherwise, the prince will report you to the Emperor and you will be executed!"

The corpulent steward was in the midst of his heated speech when Xu Zhen's blade flashed, and he bellowed, "Audacious! I am here to assist the prince and to prevent any harm that might befall him. You dare obstruct us? Are you in league with the arsonists? Soldiers, follow my command: advance into the residence and protect the prince and his consorts. Anyone who disobeys will be punished by military law!"

"Protect the prince, protect the prince!" Over a thousand soldiers echoed the chant as they stormed into the inner residence. Someone extended a foot, connecting squarely with the portly steward's behind.

The rotund steward yelped and stumbled forward, taking a nosedive. Quickly turning his head, he saw the cold steel of swords and shining armor. The atmosphere was deadly serious. No longer daring to utter a word, he hurriedly covered his mouth, where a tooth had been knocked out, and retreated.

Inside the royal mansion, amidst the twin calamities of fire and military invasion, the scene had descended into utter chaos. The servants and maids had no heart left to fight the fire. A few bold ones grabbed valuables and tried to escape, only to be forced back at the gate. Surrounding the mansion were banners fluttering and war horses neighing; countless soldiers had effectively sealed off the area like an iron bucket, to the point where not even a basin of water could be thrown out.

Fanned by the wind, the fire continued to rage, gradually spreading to the inner courtyard. Beams and pillars began to collapse amidst the cracking sounds, triggering a cacophony of screams and cries for help.

"Boldness—!" Just as Xu Zhen and his men broke into the inner courtyard, a stern shout rang out, revealing hundreds of burly men ahead. Dressed uniformly in blue short shirts, they appeared as household guards. Their hands grasped shiny swords and their eyes emitted a fierce light. They locked eyes with Xu Zhen and his men, their expressions markedly ferocious.

"Who are you all, daring to intrude into the inner quarters of the royal residence at night? Do you intend to rebel?" Standing at the forefront of several hundred strong men was a scholar in his

forties. Clean-shaven with a white face, he wore flowing traditional robes and looked haughtily at Xu Zhen and his companions.

"I am General Xu Zhen, commander of the city's defensive force. We've heard reports of arson in the royal residence that jeopardizes the lives of the prince and his consorts. We have come to apprehend the culprits. Who are you to obstruct my official duties? You even brandish weapons against us, the city's defense force. Are you the ones endangering the royal residence? Seize these rebels!" With a derisive laugh, Xu Zhen waved his hand, and the well-prepared formation of the government troops shifted. Hundreds of archers lined up, awaiting his command to shoot at the men before them.

"General Xu Zhen of the city defense?" The scholar sneered. "You are audacious to impersonate the city's defensive commander. The real commander, Lord Yu Hang, is a disciple of the Prince. I know him well. When did a wet-behind-the-ears boy like you replace him?"

Xu Zhen spoke gravely, "His Majesty issued a decree this afternoon directing Lord Yu Hang to move to Shandong for another appointment. I have been temporarily appointed to his position. Do you wish to see this imperial decree? And who are you?"

"Who am I?" The scholar burst into laughter, snapping open his folding fan with a flick. With insufferable arrogance, he said, "I am but a humble scholar, known as Gu Bingyan, graced by the affection of His Majesty and the prince. I occasionally visit the inner palace, and even the Emperor calls me younger brother Bingyan."

Gu Bingyan? Xu Zhen, having grown up under the guidance of Hu Bugui, was clever but not well-read. He did not recognize the name. One of his staff officers whispered into his ear, and Xu Zhen exclaimed, "You're the son of Master Gu Shunzhang?"

Gu Bingyan replied haughtily, "Even His Majesty dares not casually speak my father's name. Who are you brats to be so presumptuous?"

"What's the story with this Gu fellow?" Seeing Xu Zhen's face filled with concern and apparent hesitation, Lin Wanrong consulted with Miss Qin who was sitting beside him. They were both outside in a sedan, tucked into a corner of the wall, eavesdropping on the conversation inside.

Qin Xian'er giggled, "My Lord, are you not a true citizen of our Great Hua? How could you not know about the Gu family?"

He chuckled softly, lowering his voice, "I met this Gu Bingyan once while I was out enjoying the springtime. He was accompanying Zhao Kangning then, but I didn't know who he was—"

"Enjoying the spring?" Qin Xian'er's lips pouted slightly, and she huffed, "With whom did you go without telling me?"

Realizing he had misspoken, Lin Wanrong quickly corrected, "It was not for leisure; I was on a secret mission ordained by your father. Truly, it was a top-secret task crucial to the honor of our Great Hua—something I absolutely couldn't talk about!"

"What kind of secret mission? What top-secret task?" Annoyed, Qin Xian'er snorted, "Was it just another assignment to seduce women—"

Lin Wanrong looked at her in shock. "How did you find out?!"

"If you don't want people to know, you shouldn't have done it in the first place," Miss Qin said, lightly punching him on the arm. "When Qiaoqiao was washing your clothes, she found the imperial decree. We've both seen it. Sent to seduce women under imperial orders—how could father issue such an edict!"

Unbelievable! Lin Wanrong sighed, thinking he still had some secrets left. Now, it had become public knowledge.

Xian'er grabbed his hand and said irritably, "Just what did you do with that Goryeo palace girl? You can't—"

"Can't what?" Lin Wanrong noticed that Xian'er's face was flushed and she was hesitant.

Miss Qin's face turned rosy, and she snorted, her mouth looking exceedingly cute. "—you can't bestow your 'rain and dew' upon her!"

Good heavens, this girl really dared to say anything. Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, patted her pert behind, and teased, "I have plenty of 'rain and dew,' if I don't bestow it on her, then who should I give it to?"



"Give it to—stop it!" Miss Qin's cheeks were flushed, her laughter infectious, and she didn't dare ask about the seduction matter any further.

Lin Wanrong was reminded of the real issue. "Tell me quickly, what sort of person is this Gu? He looks so pompous; he's even more arrogant than me!"

Miss Qin smiled and said, "Even if he's not as arrogant as you, he's not far behind. His father is among the most famous scholars in our Empire—"

'A scholar?' Lin Wanrong chuckled. 'I'm known as the bane of scholars; I've knocked down quite a few of them.'

Seeming to read his mind, Miss Qin added, "If it were any ordinary scholar, that would be one thing. But Gu Shunzhang is no ordinary man. He is the Teacher of the Emperor, respected by all in our empire!"

The Emperor's teacher? Lin Wanrong stuck out his tongue. That was a big deal indeed. Xian'er continued, "Gu Shunzhang is a master of the zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting, and he has a great reputation for his noble character. He was a close friend of my imperial grandfather, who deeply respected him and entrusted him with the education of the imperial sons. Both my father and Prince Cheng were his students. He is known to be a strict educator; even my father was once beaten by him when he was young. Every time he visits, my father personally goes to meet him, first offering the salute between sovereign and subject, then that of student and teacher. It's a well-known story among the people."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "And what about this Gu Bingyan? He can't be the Emperor's teacher!"

Miss Qin said, "Although Gu Bingyan is not the Emperor's teacher, his status is by no means ordinary. He is the only son of Gu Shunzhang and has grown up studying with my father and Prince Cheng. Although he has no official title, he is practically half a prince. Even my father calls him 'younger brother Bingyan!'"

So that was how things stood. Lin Wanrong's head throbbed as he listened. Everything had been so well arranged, but out of nowhere came this Gu Bingyan. Though the man held no official position, he was unmistakably a power player, shielded by his influential father. Even the Emperor could not touch him easily, let alone Xu Zhen.

On the other side, Xu Zhen seemed to have realized Gu Bingyan's true identity as well—an untouchable bone that could neither be struck nor touched. This left him in a difficult position.

Seeing the young general's face cloud over with concern, Gu Bingyan arrogantly sneered, "A mere city defense commander dares to act recklessly in the royal mansion? Wouldn't that be a laughingstock if word got out? Today, I'll discipline you on behalf of His Majesty and the Prince. Strip him of his armor and take him to the Ministry of War for—"

Before he could finish, a jolly voice came from outside, "Is anyone home? Anyone there?"

Gu Bingyan was momentarily stunned. Who could be so audacious as to shout like that within the walls of Prince Cheng's Residence? The pudgy steward, finding that Gu Bingyan had taken control of the situation, scrambled up from the ground and chanted, "Who dares to make such a racket—do you value your life so—"

A sharp slap interrupted him, leaving the steward's cheek swollen and several of his teeth scattered about. A fierce guard stood before him, "You blind fool! How dare you disrespect the Princess and Mr. Lin!"

A striking young woman, dressed in yellow, slowly entered, pushing a wheelchair. Seated in the wheelchair was a man covered in bandages, grinning from ear to ear.

"Young Lin San here to pay my respects to the Prince!" Lin Wanrong greeted, raising his fist in a traditional salute and smiling.

Gu Bingyan's face paled. He stared at Lin Wanrong, "You... you are Lin San? You're not dead—"

"You're the one who's dead!" Qin Xian'er, the princess, snapped coldly. Even if Gu Bingyan was the son of an imperial tutor, he was no match for this royal princess of pure lineage. He promptly closed his mouth.

"Ah, who is this gentleman? He seems familiar. Oh, I remember now, Mr. Gu, we met outside the city," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Thank you for your concern. I initially thought I was done for. But when I got to the underworld, the King of Hell told me I still had years to live—eighty years of good fortune, in fact. So he sent me back. How embarrassing, truly embarrassing."

Gu Bingyan couldn't help but scoff at Lin Wanrong's pretense. He forced a smile, "Mr. Lin, you're truly lucky. I wish you a long, prosperous life."

"Much obliged, much obliged," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "After returning from the dead, I've had much to reflect upon. Particularly, I remember the Prince's kindness to me. That's why I've come, hoping to repay his grace. Oh, where is the Prince? Is he at home?"

Gu Bingyan laughed, "The Prince is at the Grand Prime Minister Temple, praying and offering incense for the late Emperor. Surely you're aware?"

Lin Wanrong elongated his response, "Is that so? I've just come back to life, so naturally, I wouldn't know. You say the Prince is at the Grand Prime Minister Temple, Mr. Gu, are you certain?"

Faced with Lin Wanrong's scrutinizing, half-smiling gaze, as if he had grasped some hidden leverage, Gu Bingyan hesitated and didn't dare to reply.

Lin San nodded absentmindedly, muttering to himself, "No wonder Mr. Gu wants to use the royal residence for a bonfire. Turns out the Prince isn't home!"

"What did you say?" Though Lin San's voice was low, it was perfectly audible. Gu Bingyan felt his blood boil when he realized that Mr. Lin was accusing him.

"Am I wrong?" Lin Wanrong gave a sly smile, "The royal residence is engulfed in a roaring blaze. Mr. Gu, not only are you unconcerned, but you're also preventing others from putting it out. Isn't that akin to wanting a bonfire?"