

Finest 106

Chapter 106 Deep Affection

Xiao Yushuang seemed oblivious to his presence, her vacant gaze transfixed by the moonlit horizon. Her melancholic demeanor was pitifully endearing.

Lin Wanrong hastily addressed the maid at her side, "What has happened to Second Miss?"

The maid shook her head, "I'm not sure. A few days ago, on the same day when the Eldest Miss gathered the managers for a meeting, Second Miss seemed to have been through something. She appeared pale and worn out. Later, the Madam and the Eldest Miss sent her to her uncle's house in Suzhou. She just returned today."

Upon hearing this, Lin Wanrong exhaled softly. Since that day, he hadn't seen Second Miss, nor had he inquired about her. There was a pang of guilt in his heart. Now, seeing her vacant and forlorn expression, he could hardly reconcile her current state with the lively, clever girl she once was. She seemed to have changed into a different person.

Lin Wanrong couldn't put his feelings into words. To him, Second Miss was still a sixteen or seventeen-year-old child. He had never imagined that this girl would harbor feelings for him. Yet there she was, Xiao Yushuang, looking so pale and gaunt, no longer the lively and adorable girl she used to be.

Damn, being admired was supposed to be a good feeling, but why was he so uncomfortable? He sighed helplessly, unsure of his next move.

He wasn't concerned about the issue of status; in his eyes, status wasn't worth a damn. He felt some affection for Xiao Yushuang, but it wasn't romantic, not yet. After all, he was mentally much older than her, and his life experiences were on another level. If he were to engage with her in a romantic way, it would feel as though an old cow was grazing on young grass. The idea was just unsettling.

What a dilemma! If she were a few years older, he would have had no reservations. Lin Wanrong felt as though he had hit an impasse he could not cross.

Feeling guilty, he didn't want Xiao Yushuang to see him. Hastily, he turned towards his residence.

Winter was approaching, and a cold breeze swept over them. Xiao Yushuang seemed oblivious, her body lightly shivering from the chill.

Lin Wanrong frowned at the maid, "Quickly, go fetch a coat for Second Miss."

The maid protested, "Brother Lin, I've tried a few times already. Second Miss doesn't want anyone to follow her or give her anything. She said she doesn't want to be disturbed. She even threatened to let the General of Zhenyuan bite anyone who dared interrupt her."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong was both amused and frustrated. Even in such a state, she was still thinking of siccing her dog on others. Such a girlish temperament! But this familiar behavior warmed his heart. It was as if he was seeing the spirited girl again, hands on hips, ordering her imaginary general, "Charge!"

Second Miss was indeed different now. He shook his head and asked, "What about the Eldest Miss and Madam? Aren't they concerned about Second Miss?"

The maid replied, "When Second Miss left, the Eldest Miss and Madam were discussing matters in their room, surrounded by several female housekeepers. They don't even know that Second Miss has gone out."

Lin Wanrong nodded. He hadn't attended the "fashion show" that day, but he had talked to the Eldest Miss about it afterward. The event had been a huge success, with the cheongsam and women's lingerie receiving warm receptions from the ladies present. Even the "models" couldn't help but adore them. This unexpected popularity had surprised not only the Eldest Miss and her mother but also Lin Wanrong himself. He had heard that they had received no less than a hundred orders on the spot. Lin Wanrong marveled at the reality that nothing was impossible; women of this era also pursued beauty and comfort. He wondered whether the Eldest Miss had made those sanitary pads, as that could also be a lucrative business.

Of course, the most popular items were the perfumes. The three different types of perfume that the Eldest Miss had brought were greatly sought after by all the women present. They had never seen such a pleasant, fragrant powder before and naturally went wild. The price of the perfume hadn't been fixed at the time, so the Eldest Miss tentatively quoted a price of eighty taels of silver per bottle. Incredibly, she received two hundred pre-orders instantly and three hundred additional orders soon after. It was an auspicious start indeed.

Eighty taels of silver was extremely expensive for that era, but perfume, as a newly introduced luxury item, was not affordable for everyone.

Lin Wanrong, a shrewd businessman, was quite dissatisfied with the low price of eighty taels quoted by the Eldest Miss. In his opinion, this item was extremely profitable and should be priced at over a hundred taels.

Eldest Miss Xiao had a clearer understanding of the shamelessness of this scoundrel. Quoting eighty taels was already shocking enough, and yet this sly merchant wanted to go higher. Naturally, this elicited a rolling of the eyes from Eldest Miss Xiao.

In fact, the cost of producing the perfume was quite high, as it required vast amounts of petals every day. Even a wealthy family like the Xiao Family, with a dedicated garden outside the south of the city, couldn't sustain it. Moreover, with the arrival of late autumn and early winter, there was a scarcity of petals. Even though Fubo had collected petals from other households through various means, the production remained very tight.

Lin Wanrong had done some preliminary calculations. After mass production, the cost per bottle would be about five taels of silver. He had already discussed with Fubo to further expand the garden in the south of the city to plant new flowers according to the seasons and strive to increase production capacity next year.

As for now, the perfume produced in his workshop was extremely limited. He had estimated that even if petals could be fully supplied, they could not produce more than five hundred bottles in a month. Compared to the huge market demand, it was like trying to put out a cart fire with a cup of water.

At the same time, Lin Wanrong believed that perfume, as a newly introduced item, needed to maintain a certain degree of mystery and nobility in its initial stage to stimulate consumer appetite. It couldn't be swarmed all at once; while that might create an initial buzz, it would be difficult to sustain. Therefore, he suggested a limited supply strategy to Miss Xiao, which was, in reality, a promotional tactic.

Xiao Yuruo greatly approved of his idea. Being an expert in this field herself, this was the first time the two found a common ground.

The Xiao family's perfume, limited to five hundred bottles a month, was already sold out within the first few days of the month. Among the upper-class women of Jinling, the perfume had become a new luxury item. It was said that each bottle had been bid up to one hundred and fifty taels of silver,

and yet, there were still no available stocks. Riding on the coattails of the perfume's popularity, the promotion of cheongsam and lingerie was also going smoothly, casting a bright outlook for the Xiao family's future.

The Eldest Miss and Lady Xiao had been incredibly busy these days, planning to fully roll out the cheongsam and women's lingerie. With the perfume being in limited supply as well, they were under considerable stress. Particularly Eldest Miss Xiao, who was said to have worked nonstop for two days and nights. As Lin Wanrong admired her hard work, he also couldn't help but worry about whether she was developing dark circles under her eyes. In the meantime, the female shop assistants in the Xiao family's stores were in high demand. It appeared they were moving towards becoming specialty stores for women's goods.

Considering all this, Lin Wanrong knew that Madam Xiao and the Eldest Miss must have been too busy with all these matters to attend to the Second Miss Xiao. Thinking about her, he felt a touch of pity.

He sighed, taking the overcoat from the servant girl. "You can go ahead," he told her. "I'll go and chat with the Second Miss Xiao."

In the past few days, Madam Xiao and the Eldest Miss had summoned Lin San quite often. Knowing that he was highly regarded by the Madam and the Eldest Miss, the maidservant handed him the clothes, bowed, and left.

As he approached the young girl, Lin Wanrong felt a pang of discomfort. After a few days apart, she had noticeably lost weight. Her once chubby face was now gaunt, her thin shoulders shivering in the cold wind.

Hearing footsteps behind her, Xiao Yushuang couldn't help but sigh lightly. "Who sent you? Didn't I say not to disturb me? Aren't you afraid of General Zhenyuan?"

"I'm not afraid of the mighty general, let alone your General Zhenyuan," Lin Wanrong responded with a smile.

Xiao Yushuang trembled slightly, seemingly unable to believe her ears. She slowly turned around, only to see that the person standing before her was indeed the man she despised.

"Lin San..." Her eyes reddened. She bit her lip tightly, refusing to let herself cry. Her expression then slowly faded. "What are you doing here? To laugh at me?"

Perhaps it was just an illusion, but Lin Wanrong felt that the Second Miss Xiao in front of him seemed more mature than before. Although her face still held a trace of childishness, she had the aura of a true young lady.

"I just got back," Lin Wanrong said. "When I saw the Second Miss Xiao, I thought I would come and say hello."

Xiao Yushuang snorted. "A child like me is hardly worth the greeting of an important person like you."

Lin Wanrong knew she had heard what he had said that day and was resenting him for treating her like a child. He couldn't help but smile slightly. "Maturity is not just about words; it's about actions. Seeing you so stubborn, punishing yourself, doesn't necessarily mean maturity."

The Second Miss huffed, unable to find the words to refute him. His words seemed laced with concern, which made her feel both sweet and sour inside, and vaguely sad. He always sees me as a child, she thought. Even his concern is probably because he finds me pitiful as a child. She found herself stuck in a negative loop, unable to pull herself out.

Seeing her changing expressions, Lin Wanrong, despite his many skills, couldn't fathom what was going through the girl's mind. He stepped forward and suggested, "It's a chilly night with heavy dew, Second Miss. You should put on more clothes."

He approached her and offered her a garment. Xiao Yushuang huffed again and turned away, ignoring him.

This girl, Lin Wanrong thought, Seems to have grown up but at the same time, she still behaves like a child. Her petulant display amused him, and he decided to let her be. He draped the garment over her without her consent.

Caught off guard, Xiao Yushuang felt warmth envelop her. A long robe was draped over her shoulders. She sniffled, turning her head away from him, and said, "You, you bad man. Why do you care about me so much? Is it because you find it fun to tease me?"

Lin Wanrong broke out in a cold sweat. This girl was only sixteen or seventeen, the age of a blossoming flower, yet her words were increasingly reminiscent of a scorned woman in her boudoir. And when have I ever teased you? It's more like you're the one teasing me.

He didn't respond to her accusation, saying only, "It's late, Second Miss. You must be tired from your travels today. You should return and rest."

Xiao Yushuang gently wiped away a tear and sighed, "Lin San, it's been a long time since we've talked. Can we chat, just like we used to?"

Just like we used to? He feared it wasn't possible anymore, for now this girl had dubious intentions towards him, and he was wary of falling into her trap. Lin Wanrong shamelessly thought.

But seeing her soften, he found it impossible to reject her. He sighed and said, "If that's the case, let's chat. Second Miss, I heard you visited Suzhou?"

"Yes. I did visit." Xiao Yushuang responded distantly, emphasizing the word 'visit'.

Lin Wanrong felt a sting in her words. Having a guilty conscience, he was naturally more sensitive. Seeing Xiao Yushuang's intense gaze fixed on him, he felt increasingly uncomfortable.

He forced a smile and said, "Suzhou must be a fun place, with its beautiful gardens, local folk music, and the breathtaking views of the Suzhou River. When I get the chance, I'd love to visit."

Despite his words, Xiao Yushuang stayed silent. He looked up at her to see her expression as still as water, silently watching him.

When did this girl learn to play coy? Lin Wanrong was disconcerted by her intense gaze and was about to turn away when Xiao Yushuang said, "Are those all the things you wanted to talk to me about?"

Lin Wanrong paused, unsure of how to respond. It was odd, considering he was significantly older than this girl, but why was he always thrown off by her questions? Previously, it was always Lin Wanrong who led their conversations, and it was a bonus if the girl managed to contribute something. But today, the roles had reversed. His eloquence seemed to have no effect in front of this young lady. Was it because he truly had something to hide?

Xiao Yushuang sighed lightly and said in a soft voice, "Lin San, do you already have a woman you fancy?"

"Yes," Lin Wanrong replied, not intending to hide this fact from her.

Upon hearing that he indeed had a special woman in his heart, Xiao Yushuang felt an indescribable sorrow. She bit her lower lip tightly, and asked, "Is she gentle? Is she beautiful?"

Seeing her strange expression, Lin Wanrong didn't understand what she was up to, so he nodded and said, "She's beautiful and also gentle."

"Lin San, do you think I am beautiful?" Xiao Yushuang mustered all her courage, moved slowly towards him, and gently whispered the words. Her pretty face was tinged with a faint blush in the moonlight.

Startled, Lin Wanrong looked at Xiao Yushuang. She was inherently a stunning beauty. In time, her beauty would definitely surpass that of the Eldest Miss and Madam Xiao. Under the moonlight, with her sorrowful countenance and tear-streaked face, she didn't look childish but rather like a heartbroken beauty, inciting pity in others.

"Eldest Miss Xiao, you are also very beautiful," Lin Wanrong said, forcing his gaze away from her and speaking truthfully.

"Then why don't you like me?" Xiao Yushuang's heart leaped with joy, and she could no longer contain her feelings. Abruptly, she threw herself into his arms, choking on her words, "Do you think I'm too young? But I'll grow up. My mother said she was married at my age. Why don't you like me, why?"

Xiao Yushuang held him tightly around his waist, burying her head in his chest and began to sob.

Lin Wanrong felt a soft body trembling lightly against his. Second Miss Xiao, whose bosom had fully developed, was pressed tightly against his chest. Her delicate body moved gently as she wept, causing a warm friction against his chest.

Feeling the boundless heat from this enticing woman's body, Lin Wanrong repeatedly reminded himself that Eldest Miss Xiao was still a child and he mustn't harbor impure thoughts. However, the heat beneath him was betraying him, pressing gently against Xiao Yushuang's smooth belly.

"Beast, beast," Lin Wanrong cursed himself inwardly, but Xiao Yushuang held him even tighter and started rubbing her tempting body against his.

Realizing his nature, Lin Wanrong felt an itch like a cat scratch within him as he felt Xiao Yushuang's tender, soft, and trembling body. He held her tightly in his arms, gently rubbing his lower body between them while his hands slowly moved over her fully developed hips.

Xiao Yushuang let out a soft whimper, feeling weak and hot as she nestled into his arms.

Hearing her soft cry, Lin Wanrong sobered up slightly. What am I doing? He thought. This cannot continue this should happen in the room if it were to happen at all. It would be far too ahead of time to do this outside for the first time.

"Second Miss Xiao" With tremendous willpower, Lin Wanrong pushed her away, only to see her eyes bloodshot, tears welling up and ready to fall.

"Lin San, why don't you like me? Is it because I'm not gentle enough? But I've changed a lot already," murmured Xiao Yushuang, lying on his chest and softly crying, her tears soaking his clothes.

Lin Wanrong was a mature man, feeling uncomfortable with a young girl clinging to him so tightly, he gave a bitter smile, thinking to himself, Even if I don't like you, my little brother certainly does.

"Second Miss Xiao, can we discuss this another day?" Lin Wanrong tried his best to soften his tone, hoping not to frighten this delicate girl.

Xiao Yushuang lifted her head, gently humming in agreement. Her face flushed with embarrassment as if she too felt shy about her bold actions earlier.

Lin Wanrong secretly let out a sigh of relief, suppressing his rising desire. He dared not predict what might happen if this continueddamn it, he was no stranger to the hardships of the battlefield.

After a few words and some commotion, Xiao Yushuang seemed to recover significantly. Having been unable to speak to Lin San for days, she had been deeply worried and distressed, yet she could not approach him. Her inner turmoil was imaginable.

"Second Miss Xiao, it's getting late. You should return and rest," Lin Wanrong suggested, noticing her shivering in the night breeze, and hastily draped her fallen cloak back over her shoulders.

Miss Xiao obediently agreed, but did not leave. Instead, she gazed at him and said, "Lin San, could you possibly tell me some stories today? I would really like..." She blushed again, yet she did not continue.

Lin Wanrong felt a pang of annoyance. This young girl had seemed so mature with her heartfelt expressions just a moment ago, and now she wanted him to tell her stories. Wasn't this an obvious ploy to stir his guilt?

"Second Miss Xiao, it's late and you must be tired. We can talk another time when I am free," Lin Wanrong attempted to persuade her.

Second Miss Xiao nodded lightly, but her eyes fell on the paper in his hand. "Is this from Qin Xian'er again? She really seems to favor you, delivering messages at this hour," she stated, her tone tinged with bitterness.

Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered that Qin Xian'er had sought him out multiple times that day. Could there be some urgent matter?

In haste, he unfolded the note and began reading by the moonlight. Scribbled on it in eyebrow pencil were a few hastily written words: "Leave the Xiao family immediately!"

Leave the Xiao family? Lin Wanrong was puzzled. He opened the remaining notes, each bearing the same four characters. As he was considering this, he heard a servant shout out, "Fire, fire!"

Lin Wanrong asked in alarm, "Where's the fire?"

Both looked up to see the Xiao family's main building ablaze with roaring flames.

Xiao Yushuang cried out in alarm, "It's the council hall!"

Lin Wanrong hurried to reassure her, "Second Miss Xiao, don't panic. We have many hands, we can control the fire"

Before he could finish, a soft rustling sound echoed, and a dazzling firework ascended into the sky. Seen from afar, it resembled a pure white lotus in full bloom.

Lin Wanrong clearly remembered seeing this white lotus blossom when he was talking with Qin Xian'er that day. Damn it, whose child is this, setting off fireworks in the middle of the night?

Before he could finish his thought, a loud shout echoed from nearby: "A single white lotus brings myriad auspicious clouds. In front of Guanyin Hall are a hundred grains, beneath the lotus seat are a thousand doors. The white lotus messenger invites Miss Xiao to her rightful place."

Suddenly, over twenty shadowy figures sprang up from the perimeter wall, all dressed in black from head to toe, faces obscured by black cloths. They wielded gleaming swords and steel knives, leaping off the wall and rushing straight into the courtyard. These intruders were fierce and fast, closing the distance in the blink of an eye.

Xiao Yushuang's body trembled lightly as she said, "Lin San, what do we do? The thieves are here."

Damn it, where did these thieves come from? Reciting a tongue-twister before a robbery, it would be a shame if they didn't pursue careers in R&B.

Lin Wanrong had only seen this kind of high-stakes robbery in movies, never imagining he'd experience one himself. He hadn't believed in martial arts before, but after meeting Xiao Qinxuan, his views had changed. It was just a pity that he was already too old to start learning martial arts.

Naturally, he was somewhat afraid when confronted with these robbers, but seeing Xiao Yushuang's pitiful expression, he quickly turned to comfort her, saying, "Second Miss, don't be afraid, let's run"

Before he could finish, he sensed a swift wind coming from behind. Xiao Yushuang's eyes flashed with a blend of terror and unparalleled determination. In this critical moment, the young girl found strength from somewhere, and darted forward, positioning herself in front of Lin Wanrong.

As Lin Wanrong looked back, his heart and mind were thrown into disarray. He saw a blur of white light a sword moving fast and ruthlessly, accompanied by a faint whistling sound, heading straight for Xiao Yushuang's chest.

Chapter 107 The Unexpected

"Oh God," Lin Wanrong cried out in despair, feeling as if his heart had shattered, his eyes on the verge of tearing. In that moment, his mind was flooded with countless thoughts, all transformed into the determined yet tender gaze of Xiao Yushuang.

"Ah" Lin Wanrong let out a thunderous roar, striving to place his body in front of Xiao Yushuang in an attempt to protect her. Tear clusters dripped from the Second Miss's eyes, but her face was adorned with a hint of a smile.

With a soft clang, Lin Wanrong assumed he and the Second Miss were on the verge of losing their lives to the approaching sword. He grabbed Xiao Yushuang's hand, thinking, 'Her affection... I can only repay in the next life.'

After waiting for a moment, however, he felt no pain. Opening his eyes, he found a dazzling sword hanging in the air between him and Xiao Yushuang, stopped by another blade.

The one launching a surprise attack on them was a thin, agile figure dressed in black, his face masked. He turned to his companion who had halted his sword, shouting, "Junior Sister, what are you doing? How can we leave this mansion without staining our swords in blood?"

The Junior Sister, a delicate woman with her face covered in a black veil, replied, "Senior Brother, why bother with these servants? We have urgent matters to handle. Let's get to the point before our enemies arrive, or it will be difficult for us to escape."

Her voice was muffled and unnatural, making it hard for Lin Wanrong to understand at first.

Lin Wanrong was soaked in cold sweat. He had almost lost his life to that sword, and other than the moment he fell from Mount Tai, this was the most desperate he had ever felt.

He turned to look at Xiao Yushuang. Her face still had traces of tears, but she was smiling, her eyes bright and unafraid. She looked at Lin Wanrong with deep emotion, her grip on his hand unyielding.

Lin Wanrong was speechless with emotion. This girl, she was going to be the death of him. A tear nearly escaped his eyes. Judging by her selfless act of protection, Xiao Yushuang was no child, but a woman of sincere affection.

Lin Wanrong did his best to suppress his emotion, feeling as though he owed her more than he could ever repay. Thinking of his previous attitude towards her, he felt guilt creeping into his heart. He held her small hand tightly, considering himself foolish for not appreciating what was willingly offered until someone had risked their life for it.

The Senior Brother seemed somewhat wary of his Junior Sister, so he sheathed his sword and said, "As you wish. Let's quickly capture Miss Xiao and that servant and return as soon as possible."

The Junior Sister nodded. As she walked past Xiao Yushuang, she noticed her hand tightly gripped by Lin Wanrong. A flash of anger crossed her eyes. She snorted and said, "You shameless woman, meeting your lover in the dead of night. You bring disgrace upon our gender. Today, I'll gouge out your eyes, and we'll see how you seduce men then."

Her fingers curled like a hook, moving fast as lightning and stirring a strong wind, aimed directly at Xiao Yushuang's eyes.

"Lin San" Xiao Yushuang screamed in fright, darting behind Lin Wanrong for cover.

Upon hearing Xiao Yushuang call out Lin Wanrong's name, both the Senior Brother and Junior Sister froze in surprise, a cold smirk surfacing in the Senior Brother's eyes.

By now, the place Xiao Yushuang held in Lin Wanrong's heart was beyond words. For such a deeply affectionate woman, he was willing to sacrifice his life to ensure her safety.

Lin Wanrong stepped in front of Xiao Yushuang, keeping her closely guarded behind him. The Junior Sister moved swiftly, appearing before Lin Wanrong in an instant.

Lin Wanrong felt a strong gust of wind as the woman's slender, powerful fingers swept across his face, yet they did not harm him in the slightest. His heart pounded in his chest. 'Damn it, another near-death experience,' he thought. Even with a thousand strategies in his mind, he was powerless against these powerful figures. Although fear welled within him, knowing that the little girl

Yushuang was behind him, his fear disappeared, replaced by a cold smile as he observed the female thief.

The Junior Sister snorted, saying, "What are you waiting for? Why are you still here?"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. However, he reacted quickly, grabbing Xiao Yushuang's hand to leave. Yet, the Senior Brother who stood slightly afar shouted, "Wait, are you Lin San?"

A chill ran down Lin Wanrong's spine. In her panic, Xiao Yushuang had already called out his name, so denying it was no longer an option. But why would these powerful figures know the name of a lowly servant like him? Could it be that someone had deliberately

The more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed. However, with the sword against his neck, he had to respond. But before he could speak, Xiao Yushuang intervened, "He's not Lin San, I am."

Xiao Yushuang's words were incredibly naive. If she had said this earlier, he would have thought her childish. But now, he found her simplicity and sincerity endearing.

He gave Xiao Yushuang a gentle look, smiled at her, and kept her closely guarded behind him, saying to the man, "You're right, I am Lin San."

"Hahaha" The man threw his head back and laughed. "So you are indeed Lin San. We've found you without much effort. We won't make things difficult for you. Just come with us quietly." The Junior Sister glanced at Lin Wanrong, remaining silent.

Xiao Yushuang realized that her previous outcry had put Lin Wanrong in danger. She began to sob softly, gripping his hand tightly, "Lin San, it's all my fault. I've brought this upon you. If they take you, I will go with you. We will never be apart."

The Senior Brother looked at Xiao Yushuang, a spark in his eyes as he remarked, "What a beauty in the making. Since you wish to accompany your lover, I'll grant your wish."

But the Junior Sister interjected, "Senior Brother, we should get to the task at hand instead of accumulating burdens."

The Senior Brother laughed, "Junior Sister, don't be jealous. In my heart, you will always be number one."

Lin Wanrong's palms were slick with cold sweat. Having already faced death several times, losing his life today would not be unbearable. However, dragging Yushuang into this mess was his greatest regret. Recalling the Junior Sister's words, they, too, had enemies. From the sound of it, it seemed they were also rushing this way. If he could delay for a while, there might still be a chance.

With this in mind, he gritted his teeth, saying, "If you want me to go with you, that's fine. But you must release this young lady first."

The man burst into laughter, "Do you think you're in a position to negotiate with me? Don't forget, your lives are in my hands."

Lin Wanrong smirked, "Whether I'm qualified to negotiate with you isn't for you to say. That would be more appropriate coming from your master."

The man startled, "You"

Lin Wanrong's heart raced. His words were a mere conjecture. If someone was targeting him by name, they certainly had something they wanted from him and must have been cautious about his life. This was why Lin Wanrong had made such a bold statement, hitting the man's weak point.

The man, though, was quite brutal. He snarled, "You're clever, indeed. I may not take your life, but I have many ways to make you wish for death."

"That would still require your master's approval. You don't even know what your master wants me to do. I advise you not to offend me lightly," Lin Wanrong coldly retorted. 'Damn it, I'm already on the chopping block; might as well go all out.'

The man, apparently terrified of his master, glared at Lin Wanrong. However, several more shadowy figures swooped in from the side, one of them a woman carrying a hostage, shouting, "Senior Brother, Miss Xiao has been brought."

The woman's long hair hid her face, but the contour that peeked through was familiar.

"Sister" Xiao Yushuang exclaimed.

It was indeed Eldest Miss Xiao held captive by the woman. Xiao Yuruo looked at Xiao Yushuang, her eyes flashing with affection. Though a woman, she carried a certain aura of dignity. She glanced at the gang's leader with contempt, saying, "Do you want silver? As long as you do not harm my family, even if it costs all I have, I will repay you."

The gang leader, Senior Brother, was about to respond when a light sound came from outside, and another white lotus soared into the sky. The Junior Sister, who had intended to take Xiao Yushuang's eyes, cried out, "Our enemies are here, let's go."

The gang leader, Senior Brother, was flustered, ordering the others, "You take Miss Xiao and this servant and go first. Young girl, tell Madam Xiao to prepare ten thousand taels of gold within ten days to ransom her daughter's life. Otherwise, don't blame us for being ruthless."

As he spoke, the clash of weapons rang out, followed by a feminine yell. A radiant white figure, like a shooting star, crashed over the wall.

The figure moved swiftly, closing in within the blink of an eye. Her face was covered with a light veil, but Lin Wanrong recognized her in an instant it was Xiao Qingxuan.

Xiao Qingxuan hovered mid-air, her long sword trembling, conjuring seven blossoms of sword light accompanied by a sharp whistle, assaulting the Senior Brother and his companions.

"I'll hold them off for a while with Junior Sister, the rest of you run!" Senior Brother countered with a single backhanded strike, barely blocking one sword blossom. His Junior Sister, however, was astoundingly agile. She waved her own long sword, meeting the sword blossom, and managed to parry three of Xiao Qingxuan's attacks without losing ground.

Upon landing, Xiao Qingxuan furiously exclaimed, "You remnants of the White Lotus, evil to the core, I won't let you go today!"

The Senior Brother shouted back, "You've killed many of my brothers; there's no way for the White Lotus to coexist peacefully with you! Junior Sister, you fight her. I'll leave first with our brothers."

Xiao Qingxuan turned to the woman, "You again? Humph, the last time we didn't decide on a victor. Today, I'll unmask you to see who you really are."

Junior Sister giggled, "I am also curious about how you look, sister."

Hearing the conversation between the two women, Lin Wanrong lamented, Damn it, why didn't I arrive in this world when I was ten years old? As a child, I could have learned some martial arts. Coming here in my twenties is bloody useless. Even these youngsters are hundreds of times stronger than me.

Just as he was pondering, he felt a numbness overwhelm his body, and he could no longer move. One of the thieves seized him and sprang into the air, shooting towards the distance side by side with the man who had captured the young miss.

"Lin...!" Xiao Yushuang let out a horrified cry.

Startled, Xiao Qingxuan gritted her teeth and sprang into the air like a swallow soaring in the clouds, her sword trailing a cold wind, targeting the man who held Lin Wanrong captive.

"Junior Sister, go and face her," Senior Brother shouted, and before his voice fell, he sped like lightning towards Xiao Qingxuan's back.

Junior Sister hesitated for a moment, then jumped up hastily, swinging her sword. It was a feint, lacking any real power. Xiao Qingxuan didn't stop her attack, continuing to aim at the man's back.

Her sword struck swiftly. The thief holding Lin Wanrong was cornered and unable to dodge. The blade went straight through him, causing him to drop dead without uttering a single groan.

Having slain the man in one breath, Xiao Qingxuan was significantly drained. Seeing his chance, Senior Brother scooped up Lin Wanrong's body and continued towards the distance.

Damn it, thought Lin Wanrong, I'm just a plaything flying around in the sky, relying on these young ladies for rescue. For the first time, a sense of sorrow welled up in him. Even with a wealth of scientific knowledge, what good was it? In this world where might makes right, power was the only truth.

Xiao Qingxuan's lethal thrust, while mighty, had exhausted her strength by half. With no energy to launch another strike, she could only watch as Lin Wanrong was carried away.

She stomped her foot in frustration, pain coursing through her heart. You've always had excuses for not learning martial arts. Now let's see if you can keep your life. But she knew that even if Lin Wanrong learned some basic moves, it wouldn't help much. Against the demonic members of the White Lotus, he'd be like a lamb waiting to be slaughtered.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she mulled over the situation, silently berating herself for departing too soon that day. If she had waited a little longer for him, this predicament would not have arisen. Yet, at the moment, her physical strength had been depleted to such an extent that she had no ability to go after him. Her mind felt empty, as if devoid of all strength.

Just as she was at a loss, she sensed a strong gust of wind coming from behind her. Swiftly, she raised her sword and just managed to counter the incoming force. Turning around, she found it was the junior sister, who had thrust her own sword towards her.

"You sneak attack from behind, how despicable!" Xiao Qingxuan accused angrily.

The junior sister giggled and replied, "In your eyes, we of the White Lotus Sect have always been demons. If I weren't underhanded, I wouldn't be a disciple of the White Lotus."

Xiao Qingxuan retorted, "With your skills, you are among the top in the White Lotus Sect. I don't believe you're some nameless nobody."

The junior sister chuckled, "You're right. In fact, considering our connections, I should be calling you senior sister. Please convey my regards to Master Ning and wish her everlasting beauty and eternal supremacy."

Xiao Qingxuan exclaimed in shock, "So you truly are a disciple of that witch! I don't acknowledge you as my sister."

The junior sister laughed nonchalantly, "I saw how you spent your energy earlier trying to save Lin San. What is he, your lover?"

"You--" Xiao Qingxuan's face reddened in anger. "You witch of the White Lotus, stop your nonsense."

The junior sister, eyes gleaming, scoffed, "Deny it all you want. You escaped from me once before and even injured me. Today, I will settle the score with you."

Without another word, she attacked. Her palms moved elegantly, glowing white as a lotus. She transformed her palm into a claw, aiming directly for Xiao Qingxuan's face, intending to mar her beauty.

Seeing the ruthlessness of her attack, Xiao Qingxuan grew furious. She gritted her teeth, circulating her qi throughout her body, and her palm glowed a soft blue as she clawed back at her.

"All disciples of Master Ning are renowned beauties. Today, I will ruin your face and see how you seduce men after that," the junior sister taunted, laughing as her movements grew faster, dodging Xiao Qingxuan's attack. Her fingers split apart, aiming for Xiao Qingxuan's eyes.

Their exchanges, rooted in a complex history, were rapid and dazzling. Their qi, one blue and the other white, intertwined like a beautiful display of fireworks. If Lin Wanrong were there, he would have gasped at the sight.

The junior sister's fingers moved in unpredictable patterns, ruthlessly aiming for Xiao Qingxuan's face as if driven by deep-seated hatred. On the other hand, Xiao Qingxuan's movements seemed plain, but they were cleverly simple, matching and countering each of her opponent's moves. Their tactics were polar opposites, and for a while, it was hard to tell who was gaining the upper hand.

Despite their youth, both were top-notch fighters in the martial world due to their respective sects. They were usually equally matched, but Xiao Qingxuan had exhausted more than half her energy in saving Lin Wanrong earlier. As they continued to tussle, her movements gradually slowed down.

The junior sister was a crafty and ruthless character. Seeing Xiao Qingxuan showing signs of fatigue, her movements became even more aggressive. On several occasions, she nearly scratched Xiao Qingxuan's cheek.

Xiao Qingxuan sighed inwardly, stomped her foot, and leaped out of the fight circle, avoiding further combat. "Qin Xian'er," she said, "If we continue like this, I will get hurt, but you will not end up any better."

The junior sister's body trembled slightly, exclaiming in surprise, "How did you recognize me?"

Slowly, she pulled off her veil, revealing the seductive face of Qin Xian'er. If Lin Wanrong had witnessed this scene, he would have been unable to believe that the gentle and charming woman before him was the ruthless White Lotus witch in secret.

Xiao Qingxuan had been observing her for many days. Qin Xian'er was in the open while she kept herself hidden. She had been injured during their last confrontation when Qin Xian'er and her fellow brothers ambushed her, confirming that this woman was indeed Qin Xian'er.

Upon discovering Qin Xian'er's whereabouts today, she sneered, "Did you think your tricks could deceive everyone, even me? And yet that man, so obstinate, still believes in you."

Qin Xian'er responded with a seductive laugh, "Senior sister, I sense a touch of sourness in your words."

Ignoring her taunts, Xiao Qingxuan continued, "Your desire to ruin my face is because of Lin Wanrong, you're afraid he'll grow fond of me. It seems to me that you're the one who is infatuated with him."

Qin Xian'er's face reddened before she retorted, "If I like him, I like him. What of it? At least I dare to admit it. But from the looks of you earlier, you were beside yourself. Such a pity, you have thrown your lot in with the wrong people and now, you'll never have a chance."

Xiao Qingxuan countered, "I won't engage in baseless talk with you. You're young, appearing gentle and lovely in his presence but so jealous behind his back. I'm afraid Lin Wanrong may not fancy you."

Qin Xian'er huffed, "Thank you for the reminder, senior sister. Can I interpret this as you being jealous? Oh, I'm sorry. I almost forgot, you can never marry. What a pity, what a great pity."

Chapter 108 The Desire to Cultivate Divine Skills

By the time they had engaged in their duel, they had already left the Xiao family's residence, reaching a wide-open area where they didn't need to worry about being overheard.

Xiao Qingxuan's eyes were downcast, her eyelashes slightly trembling. After a long while, she said, "Telling you all this is of little use. I don't need anyone else meddling in my affairs."

Qin Xian'er giggled charmingly, "Senior sister, matters of mutual attraction between a man and a woman are beyond rescue. If it can't be remedied, why not just go with the flow and follow the will of the heavens? That's the proper way, unlike you, torturing yourself. However, since you know I fancy him, you can't compete with me, or else, I'll surely kill you."

Xiao Qingxuan replied coldly, "Lin Wanrong and I are like-minded friends, not as ignoble as you imagine. If you have feelings for him, it doesn't necessarily mean your wish will be fulfilled. He already has someone in his heart."

Qin Xian'er laughed flirtatiously, "You needn't remind me, senior sister, I'm well aware. I have my own plan. But the way you care about him, is it truly just friendly concern? His behavior is entirely different from yours, so how did this friendship come about?"

Xiao Qingxuan's face remained serene. After a pause, she finally said, "I won't fight with you today. If you are truly in love with him, then take good care of him. He's always getting into trouble without the ability to protect himself, and he doesn't have anyone by his side, I worry about him--" She bit her lip, cutting herself off.

Listening to her, Qin Xian'er stopped bantering and sighed deeply, "That man, truly as stubborn as an ox. I hinted to him discreetly some time ago, advising him to leave the Xiao family, but he kept evading. I tried notifying him again today, but he's nowhere to be found. I wondered why he couldn't bear to leave the Xiao family, it turns out he can't part with Second Miss Xiao, the little vixen."

In her heart, Xiao Qingxuan thought, It's you who's the vixen, yet you dare to speak ill of Miss Xiao. However, reflecting on Lin Wanrong's unique character, she also sighed, "I wonder who could persuade him. Some time ago, I suggested he learn some martial arts, but he declined mercilessly. I really can't tell what he's thinking."

Qin Xian'er giggled, "So, senior sister has been harbouring such thoughts too, which is not so different from me. I've gifted him many classic books, but he doesn't even give them a glance. Yet, with his particular temperament, it's hard to know whether to be annoyed or pleased with him."

Upon hearing Qin Xian'er's candid words, Xiao Qingxuan thought, This Qin Xian'er truly is a bewitching white lotus, so straightforward with her words. She contemplated for a moment, then chuckled, "Actually, we may have underestimated him. He is indeed intelligent. What we gave him, although coveted by many, may not be suitable for him. He's already quite old, unless some extraordinary opportunity arises, starting from scratch at this point would hardly yield noticeable

results. Even if he were to learn, it would only be a few basic moves, barely sufficient to fend off the high-flying thieves from your White Lotus sect."

Qin Xian'er glanced at Xiao Qingxuan but didn't dispute her words. Instead, she just listened to her continue. "You and I have been practicing martial arts since we were young. We've consumed countless spiritual medicines and undergone years of guidance from our elders. After more than twenty years of arduous training, we've achieved our current skills. He, as an ordinary man of his age, would find no use in our doctrines and regular training methods. He'd just end up owing us a favor. A shrewd man like him wouldn't make such a loss-making deal."

At this point, Xiao Qingxuan chuckled lightly, obviously reminded of the cunning merchant's savvy demeanor, always different from the others. A smile also emerged on Qin Xian'er's face. Surprisingly, these two adversaries were thinking along the same lines.

Suddenly, Qin Xian'er glanced at Xiao Qingxuan and said, "Senior sister, with your deep understanding of him, I'm afraid you've fallen for him already."

Xiao Qingxuan was taken aback, finding it hard to believe the words that had come from her own mouth. Fortunately, her lifelong training had centered on calming the mind, and she quickly recited a few mantras, regaining her composure.

After a lengthy silence, Qin Xian'er let out a slow sigh. "Senior sister, despite our fights, we can't seem to sever our ties with that man. Is this the destiny of us women?"

Xiao Qingxuan gave her a glance, thinking, 'You may be a demoness of the White Lotus sect, and that man may be a villain, but I wonder who will triumph when the demoness and the villain clash.' After a moment of thought, she realized that regardless of who won, it would no longer concern her. She felt a pang of bitterness, quickly gathered herself, and her expression became serene again. The two women, who had been locked in fierce combat just moments ago, now stood in unified silence, making one marvel at the wonders of the world.

After a moment, Qin Xian'er suddenly beamed, "Senior sister, after some thinking, it seems to me that you pose the greatest threat to me. Without me, he will surely fall for you. I won't be at peace until I've killed you."

As she spoke, she leapt forward, her delicate fingers flicking. Tiny white flashes of light sped towards Xiao Qingxuan like bolts of lightning. One moment they were chatting and laughing, the next moment deadly intent filled the air. The rapid shifts in the demoness's demeanor might even make Lin Wanrong admit his inferiority.

Xiao Qingxuan shook her head helplessly. A demoness will always be a demoness; no matter how much she changes, she can't change her nature. As she mused, her hands were not idle. She flicked her slender fingers and caught all the projectiles, which turned out to be several silver needles.

Qin Xian'er laughed lightly and retreated, her voice coming from the distance, "Sister, I'm off to take care of that man now. Be careful, I'm definitely going to kill you."

Xiao Qingxuan gazed at her retreating figure and sighed deeply. The demoness seemed genuinely fond of Lin Wanrong. However, she appeared to be struggling within the White Lotus sect. Could she really protect him?

"Miss..." A soft voice interrupted Xiao Qingxuan's thoughts. Turning her head, she saw her own maid, Xiu He.

"What happened?" Xiao Qingxuan asked.

"It seems that the group has left the city. I followed them for a while and left some markers before returning," Xiu He reported.

"As long as we can locate them, things will be easier." Having finished her words, Xiao Qingxuan turned to leave.

"Miss, should we call for some troops from Jiangsu?" Xiu He quickly inquired.

Xiao Qingxuan pondered for a moment and said, "The city of Jinling has been troubled by the White Lotus bandits recently, and it may well be that they have connections within the local government. I don't quite trust Cheng De, the Commander-in-chief of Jiangsu, not to mention that I don't have a military token to command him. Luo Min, the governor of Jiangsu, only has some patrol soldiers under him, which wouldn't be of much use. Our priority for this journey is to rescue people. We can deal with other matters later."

Xiu He nodded and followed her mistress. Their slender figures disappeared into the twilight.

Meanwhile, Lin Wanrong was completely oblivious to these developments. He was annoyed, thinking, 'I am merely a servant, you have plundered the Xiao family, that's one thing, but why drag me into this?'

Walking alongside Eldest Miss Xiao, held captive by the same group, she glanced at him, her eyes filled with confusion. She seemed to question, 'I am the owner of the Xiao family, it makes sense for them to kidnap me, but why did they take you, a servant, as well?'

Lin Wanrong forced a bitter smile, thinking, 'You think I came looking for them for a friendly visit? Damn it, I've clearly been set up this time.'

Both of them were immobilized by their captors, unable to move or speak. Although Eldest Miss Xiao put on a strong front in front of the bandits, she was, after all, a woman. Fear naturally gripped her heart, and she turned her gaze to the servant, who was smiling at her. Even though she was a strong woman in the business world, this was a situation she had never encountered before. In this critical moment, having this annoying rogue beside her gave her some comfort.

The bandits placed them in a carriage and unlocked their acupuncture points. The bandit chief stared at Eldest Miss Xiao for a long while, swallowing before grinning at her. "Miss Xiao, I apologize for this inconvenience. But I believe you'll thank me for it in the future, haha."

He signaled to a woman by his side, who reached out to frisk Miss Xiao. Terrified and furious, Xiao Yuruo exclaimed, "What are you doing? If you dare to touch me, I will end my life right here!"

While the bandit chief seemed sleazy, he was surprisingly considerate of Miss Xiao, leaving the pat down to the woman beside him. Seeing the woman's intention, Xiao Yuruo sneered, "If your filthy hands dare touch me, I will die before you."

The woman hesitated, glancing at the bandit chief, who chuckled, "Miss Xiao, don't misunderstand. This is merely a precaution. As long as you promise not to harm yourself, we won't make things difficult for you."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong furrowed his brows. The bandit chief seemed to treat Miss Xiao with unusual caution. If their motive was merely robbery, there was no need to show such consideration towards Miss Xiao. There was only one other explanation - they had ulterior motives for Miss Xiao.

Miss Xiao knew that her life was in the hands of these bandits, but being a strong-willed woman, she said scornfully, "As long as you do not harm us, no amount of money will be too much to offer."

The bandit chief laughed, "If that's the case, I will not make things difficult for you, Miss. I hope you will not make things difficult for me either."

With a wave of his hand, he blocked their acupressure points, immobilizing them. They were already on the outskirts of the city on a remote path. He was not afraid of them shouting for help, so he generously left their voice points unblocked. Thanks to Miss Xiao, the bandits did not search her body nor pay any attention to Lin Wanrong, they turned and left.

About a dozen bandits mounted their horses, surrounded the carriage, and galloped swiftly towards the outskirts of the city.

Eldest Miss Xiao's anxiety subsided for the moment. She glanced at Lin, who seemed lost in thought, and wondered what he was thinking. 'At a time like this, he still manages to daydream,' she thought.

"Hey" Eldest Miss Xiao called out softly. They were trapped in the narrow carriage, unable to move their hands and feet, only their mouths could move.

Lin Wanrong snapped back to reality, realizing that the only thing they could move now were their mouths. Judging from the bumpiness of the carriage, they were definitely in a desolate, wild area. Cries for help would be futile, and with the bandits surrounding them, any attempt to call for help would turn them into minced meat before any help could arrive.

Being a clever man, Lin Wanrong would never do such a foolish thing. He winked at Eldest Miss Xiao and said with a smile, "Miss Xiao, I didn't choose to get on this carriage myself, I really had no choice."

Xiao Yuruo's face reddened. The last time they shared a carriage, he had forced himself onto it. She glared at him but couldn't understand why, in such a dire situation, he still had the nerve to make light of her.

"It seems these bandits are being quite considerate towards you, Miss Xiao. Perhaps they intend to take you as their camp wife," Lin Wanrong joked. "But rest assured, Miss, even if it costs my life, I'll snatch you back."

"What nonsense are you talking about," Xiao Yuruo snapped, yet his teasing somehow lessened her fear.

But Lin Wanrong was not lying. When Eldest Miss Xiao was negotiating terms with the bandits earlier, she had included him as well, which reassured him. It appeared he held some significance in her eyes. Additionally, she was the sister of his beloved Yushuang, so it was his duty to protect her.

Since the bandit chief had demands for both of them, Lin Wanrong felt more at ease. If the bandit needed something from them, there was room for negotiation. In playing devious games, Lin Wanrong was second to none.

Thinking of Yushuang, Lin Wanrong's heart was filled with tenderness. If he could escape alive, he resolved to hold Yushuang in his arms and kiss her to his heart's content.

Eldest Miss Xiao noticed his gentle expression, a stark contrast from his usual intimidating demeanor. Her heart fluttered a bit. 'What is he thinking about to make him look like that?' she wondered.

Neither of them spoke again. Although Eldest Miss Xiao had been captured, she felt less afraid with this wily servant by her side, and even began to feel somewhat at ease.

The carriage swayed back and forth, hurrying onwards under the cover of night. Eldest Miss Xiao, who had been frightened tonight, eventually drifted off to sleep.

Seeing her furrowed brows even in sleep, as if troubled by many worries, Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly. He observed her somewhat pale cheeks and couldn't help but empathize. The young lady was under enormous pressure, not only fighting battles in the business world and managing the Xiao family but also dealing with bandits; it was indeed not easy. After pondering for a moment, he too began to feel drowsy.

'Damn it, I've been taken for a ride this time,' he thought, 'if I manage to escape, I'll spare no expense to buy something like thousand-year-old ginseng or ten-thousand-year-old knotweed [tuber fleceflower/polygonum multiflorum] to enhance my strength.' He sighed inwardly.

In his mind, those aberrantly strong characters in martial arts novels all used these kinds of things to enhance their strength, invigorate their energy, cleanse their marrow, undergo rebirth, and become indefatigable - their effects were similar to those of Viagra and desensitizing sprays.

'Divine skills, divine skills, I must practice divine skills,' Lin Wanrong thought. This was his greatest wish before drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 109 The Heart of Man

Lin Wanrong did not know how long had passed when he slowly woke up. The first thing he saw was the Eldest Miss, staring at him with intense eyes. He couldn't guess what she was thinking.

Yawning, Lin Wanrong asked, "Miss, do you know what time it is? Oh, what hour is it?"

His possessions were limited to a few broken silver pieces and a spring palace painting booklet he always carried with him. Having so little, he had slept quite comfortably. The bandit leader, to reassure the Eldest Miss, had not searched Lin Wanrong at all, just paralyzing them both with pressure points.

They were both confined inside a carriage, unable to move. The carriage did not let in light, making it difficult to tell the time. Seeing Lin Wanrong awake, the Eldest Miss said, "I don't know the exact time, but at least four hours have passed."

"How do you know?" asked Lin Wanrong, surprised.

A blush spread across the Eldest Miss's face as she confessed, "I usually don't rest for more than four hours. Once that time has passed, I wake up naturally."

So, it was a biological clock, thought Lin Wanrong, nodding his understanding. If that was true, did it mean they had been on the move for four hours since leaving the city? Where was this bandit leader taking them? How far had they traveled? Judging by the carriage's movement, which was increasingly upward, it seemed like they were climbing a hill.

While lost in thought, the carriage curtain was lifted, and the bandit leader and another woman entered. They picked up Lin Wanrong and the Eldest Miss, taking them out of the carriage.

It was one thing for the Eldest Miss to be handled roughly, but when the bandit leader held Lin Wanrong, he showed no mercy, gripping him so hard that it hurt. Damn you, one day I will castrate you, Lin Wanrong swore inwardly.

Once out of the carriage, Lin Wanrong noticed that they were on a mountainside. The mountain was so tall that he could not see the peak. The chill of the early winter morning, mixed with the slowly rising fog, enveloped the mountainside. Lin Wanrong could not help but shiver. He glanced at the Eldest Miss who was also shivering uncontrollably. Seeing him look at her with a gentle expression, her eyes welled up, but she held back the tears from falling.

These bandit scum led the two of them up the mountain. When they reached the peak, the scenery changed dramatically. There were several rows of houses hidden among the green trees on the mountain top. Without careful observation, one might not notice them at all. Seeing how familiar these bandits were with the place, Lin Wanrong realized that this must be their temporary hideout.

The bandit leader said to Xiao Yuruo, "Miss, I'm afraid you'll have to stay here for a few days. Once your family gathers the ten thousand taels of gold, I will let you go."

Damn, he makes it sound so pleasant, thought Lin Wanrong. If it were really that simple, why did you bother to capture us and bring us here? Of course, he wouldn't dare to voice this thought aloud. His life was in their hands, after all.

The houses on the mountain were scarce. The bandit leader arranged for Lin Wanrong and the Eldest Miss to stay in two connected rooms. The Eldest Miss was placed in a large room with two connected spaces. Although simple, it was furnished with all necessary items. Lin Wanrong's room, however, was completely bare.

Lin Wanrong snorted inwardly. Damn these White Lotus bandits, always looking down on others. One day, I will wipe you out.

There was an iron gate connecting the two cells, but it was locked and could not be opened. Thus, they could see each other through the bars but could not be together. Lin Wanrong felt somewhat strange about this arrangement. Xiao Yuruo's face turned red. Such a setup seemed like they were sharing a room, but considering their current predicament as captives, what more could they ask for?

The cells were made of large stones, and apart from the main entrance, there wasn't a single window. Escape was impossible. There was a small hole in the main door through which their captors could occasionally peek inside. Even with limitless abilities, Lin Wanrong could find no way to hide.

Feeling utterly defeated, Lin Wanrong sat down heavily, his mood gloomy. He thought back to the note Qin Xian'er had sent yesterday, reminding him to leave Xiao Manor earlier. At that time, he had been busy making perfume and had not paid attention to her warning. The timing yesterday had been unfortunate; he had been running back and forth between the perfume workshop, Xiao Manor, and the tavern and had not received the critical message.

Damn, this is the consequence of poor communication. Is there such a thing as a mobile phone? I'd buy a dozen of them, he daydreamed.

From the current situation, it was clear that Qin Xian'er was somehow involved with the White Lotus sect, but her repeated warnings showed that she cared for him.

Reflecting deeply, Lin Wanrong realized that his predicament was partly due to inadequate communication and partly due to his lack of self-defense abilities.

Speaking of self-defense, he thought of Xiao Qingxuan's impressive skills. If possible, it would be best to hire a couple of bodyguards with similar abilities. He had no idea how much it would cost to hire such people. He knew Xiao Qingxuan was of noble birth and only staying temporarily in Jinling. It was impossible to hire her as his bodyguard, but perhaps she could recommend a few people with similar skills.

Lin Wanrong was lost in his pleasant thoughts, unaware that Xiao Qingxuan was one of the top figures in the martial arts world. Not only those who could match her, but even those with eighty percent of her skills were as rare as phoenix feathers or unicorn horns.

Lin Wanrong was now in danger, and since he couldn't compete in martial skills, he had to rely on his intellect. Reflecting on his capture, it was clear that the White Lotus bandits had come prepared. They had not only captured the Eldest Miss but also seemed to be interested in him. What could he possibly have that would attract their interest?

Could it be because I'm handsome, with the potential to be a gigolo? The thought alone disgusted him.

He then focused on his enemies. He had a minor quarrel with Cheng Ruinian, but they had not really clashed. Besides, their conflict was related to Qin Xian'er and had nothing to do with the Xiao family.

Another person was Tao Dongcheng. They had clashed before, and the only conflict related to the Xiao family involved this man surnamed Tao. But Tao Dongcheng's father was a silk weaver in Suzhou, and he himself was merely a cloth merchant. How could he be connected to the White Lotus Sect? As for him, Lin San, he was nothing more than a lowly servant who had exchanged a few harsh words with him. Would he really need the help of the White Lotus Sect? Furthermore, if he really despised him, wouldn't it have been more satisfying to kill him on the spot? Why bother bringing him there?

Seeing that he was lost in thought for a while, the Eldest Miss figured he must be pondering something. She found herself in the dull cell with only this detestable servant to keep her company, which alleviated her sense of loneliness to some extent.

"Lin San, what are you thinking about?" The Eldest Miss rarely initiated a conversation with him, and this time it felt rather strange.

Lin Wanrong smiled, "Eldest Miss, you rarely have such leisurely moments, right?"

Xiao Yuruo was taken aback. After a long pause, she said, "Indeed, it feels like I haven't sat quietly like this in a long time." As the head of the Xiao family, she had been bustling around handling family affairs since she was fifteen or sixteen. The tranquility of sitting idly had long since been lost to her. This ordeal provided her with some spare time, but it was rather filled with fear and trepidation. She could only respond with a wry smile.

"Eldest Miss, life is not only about work. There are many beautiful things to do, like family and affection. These are more important than work. Don't push yourself too hard. Learn to relax and enjoy life. Life is short. If there's no joy, then it's a wasted life," Lin Wanrong calmly advised.

"Hmph, you...where do you get all these deep thoughts?" The Eldest Miss snorted, but inwardly she felt comforted by his words. They resonated with her. However, looking at his calm expression, she wondered if he was afraid at all. This inscrutable servant always seemed unfathomable.

"Life is full of various hardships. Like this time, don't overthink it. Just treat it as a short journey. Once it's over, it will be fine," Lin Wanrong reassured her.

The Eldest Miss found his reasoning peculiar and retorted, "Aren't you afraid?"

"Of course, I am," Lin Wanrong admitted generously. "Everyone is afraid of death. That's normal. But fear doesn't change facts."

Xiao Yuruo snorted, acknowledging his point. Suddenly, she remembered something. "Lin San, were you with Yushuang yesterday?"

Seeing her expression, Lin Wanrong knew what she wanted to say. But after yesterday's incident, there was no way he could abandon that young girl. He didn't answer her question and instead asked, "Eldest Miss, you're Yushuang's elder sister, but do you truly understand her?"

Xiao Yuruo responded, "We grew up together. Of course, I know her well. She is still a child. I hope you won't harm her any further."

Lin Wanrong frowned, "Eldest Miss, I don't like what you just said. I've never harmed the second miss. Not in the past, and definitely not in the future. Before yesterday, I thought she was just a child, like you. But I was horribly wrong. I underestimated her. Every day, she worries about her mother and sister, prays for the Xiao family, and she is willing to sacrifice her life for someone she likes."

Just as Xiao Yuruo was about to speak, Lin Wanrong waved his hand to stop her, "To be honest, Eldest Miss, if it weren't for the kindness of the second miss, I wouldn't have interfered in the affairs of the Xiao family."

Hearing him speak to her in such a tone, Xiao Yuruo felt very annoyed. However, seeing his calm demeanor, so unlike his usual rogue ways, filled her with an unexplainable fear. Taken aback, she thought, 'Why has this man changed so much? I actually preferred our usual banter.'

"Let's...let's not talk about this, Lin San. We are trapped in jail now, talking about this ruins the mood," Xiao Yuruo weakly said.

"Not only are we trapped in jail, but we are also alone together in a room. Eldest Miss, this could be the result of karma from three past lives," Lin Wanrong, seemingly reverting to his original character, began to tease again.

A tremor ran through the Eldest Miss. His words rang true. Despite the unyielding iron door between them, it added to the intimate atmosphere. Seeing him tease her, Xiao Yuruo became very angry and scolded, "Lin San, stop disrespecting me. If you continue to speak like this, I will, I will"

"Will you move out?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. Watching the proud Eldest Miss angry in the cell was very entertaining.

The Eldest Miss blushed and snorted, ignoring him.

"Has the Tao family reached out to you recently, Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong's voice calmed again. To Xiao Yuruo, his voice now seemed to carry a sense of wisdom.

Xiao Yuruo did not know why he asked this but responded, "No, they haven't contacted me, nor mentioned the alliance."

After Tao Dongcheng's confession, he surprisingly hadn't sought the Xiao family, and even the alliance was not mentioned? Something seemed odd. The quieter the Tao family, the more extraordinary the situation behind it.

"Do they know about the new lingerie and cheongsam introduced by the Xiao family?" Lin Wanrong asked as he paced slowly in his cell.

Xiao Yushuang leaned against the iron window and watched his movements. 'Can you really come up with a plan just like that?' But seeing his furrowed brow, she felt no resistance and simply answered, "News like this spreads fast. They should know by now."

Lin Wanrong stopped pacing, a sharp glint in his eyes, and asked with emphasis on each word, "Do they know about the perfume?"

Upon seeing a dangerous glint flash across Lin Wanrong's brow, Xiao Yuruo felt a twinge of fear. At that moment, Lin San seemed far removed from her, an unfamiliarity she did not appreciate. She huffed, "How would I know?"

As his gaze settled coldly on her, she could not help but feel cowed. In a soft voice, she conceded, "How could such matters be hidden? When we promote the perfume, they would naturally find out." A sudden realization hit her, and she gasped, "Are you suspecting Tao Dongcheng?"

With Lin Wanrong remaining silent, Xiao Yuruo furrowed her brows, "Although I don't know the Young Master Tao well, he is amiable and hails from a noble and official family. How could he possibly be involved with the evil cult of the White Lotus? You mustn't presumptuously gauge people's hearts."

A cold smirk emerged at the corner of Lin Wanrong's mouth, "Hearts? In this world, the most elusive thing is the human heart."

He sighed deeply, shaking his head, 'Damn, if this matter is as complicated as I suspect, then it's not going to be simple.'

The two were held in the room for a day and a night. Until the next day, at dusk, the door to Lin Wanrong's cell opened. A follower of the White Lotus outside called, "Lin San, come out."

'Here it comes, is it time?' Lin Wanrong gave a cold smile and stood up to leave.

As if sensing something, Xiao Yuruo hurriedly yelled, "Lin San, don't go" Lin Wanrong turned back, smiling at her, then with a stride, he stepped out of the door.

Chapter 110 Duel of Wits and Ruthlessness

The place they took him to was a few steps away from his cell. Lin Wanrong followed behind the bandit, incessantly peering around, sizing up the nearby circumstances.

By then, dusk had fallen, and it seemed no other bandits were in sight. Could it be that they've gone down the mountain to work? Lin Wanrong wondered. These followers of the White Lotus cult survived by robbery, often targeting wealthy households in Jinling. They likely had a decent income.

Observing the emaciated bandit leading the way, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but start plotting. Damn, I don't see any other bandits around. If it's just this guy, I could charge him and take him down. I might have a chance to escape.

He had some confidence in his fighting abilities. The White Lotus bandits he had encountered yesterday were tall and formidable, but he doubted that this gatekeeper shared their skills. The other day, he had handled Li Ergou, knocking him out with a single blow. Perhaps he might get lucky again.

The thought was as enticing as candy, tempting him continuously. Lin Wanrong had a clear understanding of his current predicament. The kidnapping was far from being as simple as he had

imagined, and if he wasn't careful, his life could end here. Instead of waiting for death, he decided it was better to take a chance.

There was a gambler's streak in his nature. Seeing that the area was deserted, he clenched his teeth and quickened his pace, walking right behind the bandit. But before he could act, he heard the bandit grumble, "Damn it, who threw this stone here again?"

Ahead, a large rock about one-third the height of a man stood in their path. With his complaint uttered, the bandit kicked the rock, shattering it into pieces with a dull sound.

"Damn," Lin Wanrong blurted, startled. He immediately halted his intended actions. I thought I was pretty good at playing possum. I didn't expect an ordinary White Lotus bandit to be so much stronger. No wonder they sent only one person to escort me. With that kind of strength, ten of me wouldn't stand a chance.

Cold sweat drenched Lin Wanrong. He dismissed his previous thoughts, caught up to the man, and flattered, "Your martial arts skills are extraordinary, sir, unmatched in the past or future. I am fortunate to have met such a master today. Truly, it is a blessing in my life. May I ask for your esteemed name? I truly admire you."

The man glanced at him and said arrogantly, "Why would you need my name? We're not friends."

Lin Wanrong smiled and said, "I wish to ask if there is some magical pill or potion that could give me martial skills like yours, quickly and efficiently. I am willing to pay a high price for it."

The man laughed heartily, "You are amusing. There is no shortcut to mastering martial arts. I started practicing from the age of five, and only after more than thirty years have I achieved this level. The idea of mastering it in one day is utterly ridiculous."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Your martial arts prowess, sir, is beyond anything I've ever witnessed. You are far more formidable than any of the so-called warriors or masters I've met. My deep admiration led me to ask such a question, causing you to find amusement, I'm afraid."

In the distance, three figures stood, observing every movement the duo made.

The one in the center was a young nobleman, dressed opulently. His demeanor was dignified, his temperament refined, and his comportment remarkable. One glance was enough to tell that he was

not an ordinary man. He looked at Lin Wanrong's retreating figure and chuckled, "So, this is the Lin San you mentioned. He's amusing and quite bold."

The young man standing to the left of the nobleman replied, "Indeed, my lord. This man is Lin San, a servant of the Xiao family. According to my investigation, the Xiao family's sudden shift in business ventures and the adoption of new trades were all strategized by him." This man had thick brows and large eyes, and in Lin Wanrong's words, looked somewhat like Zhu Shima.

The nobleman nodded and laughed, "This Lin San is indeed interesting. The cheongsam and women's undergarments he created, although somewhat daring, are quite appealing. The women in my household are quite fond of them."

The young man on the left agreed, "You're absolutely correct, my lord. This Lin San is indeed clever. I admit I underestimated him before. When we first met, even Miss Xiao didn't think highly of him."

The nobleman nodded, "Speaking of which, it seems Lin San spoiled your plans. If it hadn't been for his interference, your scheme would have been successful and Miss Xiao would already be in your arms."

The young man hurriedly replied, "I failed to carry out my task effectively. I await your punishment, my lord."

"No matter, no matter," the nobleman's eyes sparkled, "It just took a bit more effort this time, and we didn't lose anything. Instead, we gained a bit more. By the way, are you sure that the perfume formula is with this Lin San?"

"Yes." The young man on the left answered with certainty, "I have been investigating for several days. Like our household, the Xiao family was also originally a cloth business, but recently they suddenly introduced cheongsams, women's undergarments, and perfumes. Leaving the rest aside, both the perfume factory and perfume formula were planned by Lin San. I can assure you, the formula is in his possession."

The nobleman nodded and sighed, "This perfume, it's really something. A single bottle costs hundreds of taels of silver. If it falls into our hands, it would be a significant boost. We must acquire both this perfume and the Xiao family, we can't afford to miss either." He turned to the young man on the side and said, "We must seize the Xiao family. Lu Zhongping, you two must work together to achieve this. There will be a generous reward."

Lu Zhongping, a tall and thin man, was the eldest disciple of the White Lotus cult. He quickly replied, "Please rest assured, my lord. We will take care of it."

The nobleman laughed heartily and turned to the young man on the left, "If you handle this matter well, I will put in a good word for your father for the vacancy of the Mayor of Jinling next year. You can leave the Suzhou Weaving to others."

"Thank you, my lord," the young man on the left hurriedly replied. All three burst into laughter once again.

At that moment, Lin Wanrong was busily striking up a conversation with the bandit. "Brother, is your sect called the White Lotus?"

Impatiently, the bandit responded, "Indeed."

"That's a pleasant name. Was it named by your sect leader?" asked Lin Wanrong.

"The term 'White Lotus' signifies purity and was established by the first leader of our sect," the bandit proclaimed with pride.

Purity my foot, this old youngster practiced martial arts since childhood. He probably doesn't even know how to write those two words. Lin Wanrong drawled, "Your sect indeed has a long history and profound lineage. I am truly in awe."

"That is natural," responded the bandit.

"Oh, by the way, where do you buy those fireworks that your sect releases before every operation? They are quite beautiful. I'd like to purchase some for my leisure."

"We in the sect produce those ourselves. You can't buy them just anywhere."

"Oh?" Lin Wanrong prolonged his tone, "What is the name of your sect leader?"

"Our sect leader's name is Su" The bandit suddenly looked alarmed, glared at him and said, "What are you asking this for? Don't think you can coax information out of me."

Such a shame, Lin Wanrong thought, this fool has finally become alert. He hastily replied, "Brother, you misunderstood me. I found your fireworks intriguing and wanted to do business with you. As you know, our Xiao family specializes in business. If your sect brothers can supply the goods, I can manage the sales. We can split the profits sixty-forty and I can give you a ten percent commission. What do you think?"

The bandit was taken aback, mulling over the business proposal, but quickly realized that it was a sect secret and couldn't be handed over to outsiders. He glared at Lin Wanrong, "You've thought this through, trying to play us for fools."

If anyone doesn't believe then hes a fool, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Then, brother, is your White Lotus sect still recruiting members?"

"Under the Bodhi tree, the truth is revealed; before the Guanyin temple, we speak of all sentient beings. All the suffering brothers and sisters in the world are disciples under the protection of the White Lotus. As long as you are willing, we of the White Lotus can look after you," the bandit proclaimed loudly.

Damn, he recites this so fluently. The political commissar of this White Lotus sect is pretty strong, having carried out such deep ideological work. Every cult has a set of methods to bewitch people's minds, and this White Lotus sect is no simple matter.

"How much are the monthly membership fees?"

"Two taels of silver a month."

"That's cheap." Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Then I'll pay twenty taels for a year. By the way, where is your headquarters?"

"Our headquarters is in JiningHey, what exactly are you planning by asking all this?" the bandit abruptly woke up to the situation.

"Oh, I greatly admire your sect and am thinking of visiting when I have the time," Lin Wanrong bluffed. But the man's words sent a chill down his spine. Jining was in Shandong territory,

thousands of miles away from Jinling. The fact that the White Lotus sect could run rampant in this fertile land of Jiangnan meant that there was no way they were unsupported.

The man grunted, "I don't mind telling you. Our White Lotus sect is the largest in the world, redeeming countless believers. Within the vast realm of our land, branches of our sect can be found across numerous provinces."

Lin Wanrong smirked, damn it, whether you're white lotus or black lotus, you've tortured me so today, I won't rest until I've destroyed you.

He was led by the bandit to a vacant room. The bandit opened the door, "Lin San, we're here. Go in."

Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled at him, "Thank you, brother. We'll chat again when there's time."

The man was stunned. Who is this youngster to be so nonchalant after being captured by me, where does his audacity come from?

Little did he know, this was Lin Wanrong's way of alleviating stress with his thick skin.

Upon entering, Lin Wanrong saw a lean young man standing inside. Judging from his silhouette and profile, he was the very senior brother who had kidnapped him the day before. The senior brother had now removed his mask, revealing a rather pleasant face.

Thinking about how he almost lost his life to this man's sword the day before, Lin Wanrong was extremely irritated. Seeing the smirk on the man's lips further annoyed him. He said nonchalantly, "Oh, it's you. Couldn't they send someone of higher rank to speak with me?"

With that, he flopped down onto a chair, too lazy to pay the man any further attention.

The senior brother had been sent to recruit him, so he had to suppress his anger, "Brother Lin, my name is Lu Zhongping. I was disrespectful to you yesterday due to circumstances beyond my control. I hope you can forgive me."

Bullshit. You tried to kill me yesterday, now you're apologizing. Would you be so calm and polite if you didn't see some value in me? Lin Wanrong snorted disdainfully, "There's no need to pretend. I'm your prisoner. Just say what you have to say."

Seeing the contempt in Lin Wanrong's eyes, Lu Zhongping couldn't help but feel a surge of anger. Raising his voice slightly, he said, "Since you're so straightforward, Brother Lin, I won't beat around the bush. I invited you here today to discuss something."

Lin Wanrong glanced at him, "Discuss with me? Are you even worthy?"

Fuming, Lu Zhongping shot up from his seat, a dark line forming between his brows. In a stern voice, he said, "Lin San, don't mistake courtesy for weakness. Speaking to you this way is a sign of respect, but don't think for a moment I can't make you suffer. I have plenty of ways to make you wish for death."

Outside the window, a well-dressed young man who had been eavesdropping sighed, "This Lin San is indeed difficult to deal with. Lu Zhongping is no match for him."

The person beside him said, "You're right, sir. I've experienced Lin San's sharp tongue myself."

Suddenly, Lin Wanrong slammed his hand on the table and stood up, "You think I'm scared? Show me what you've got. If I so much as whimper, then I'm your grandson."

Lu Zhongping was so exasperated that he didn't catch the implications in Lin Wanrong's words. He too slammed his hand on the table, "Fine! If you do shout, then I'm your grandfather!"

Lin Wanrong felt a thrill inside, like he had just eaten a piss-bull's gall. Young man, you're too green to compete with me. Despite his internal satisfaction, cold sweat had drenched his back. He was gambling, betting on the fact that Lu Zhongping had a master behind him, and that they surely needed something from him. He had deliberately provoked Lu Zhongping to the point that they had ended up in a confrontation before the topic of discussion was even broached - all to meet his behind-the-scenes master. With this rash and tactless Lu Zhongping, negotiation would be a waste of time.

Once the words left Lu Zhongping's mouth, he realized he had fallen for Lin San's trap. Enraged to the point where his hair seemed to stand on end, he decided that even if it meant facing reprimand from the young master, he had to vent his anger today.

Seeing Lu Zhongping's rage-filled approach, Lin Wanrong knew the man was seriously angry. Damn it, if this guy actually hit him, he wouldn't be able to take it. He would, of course, cry out. It would be his grandson who wouldn't.

Though Lin Wanrong's face remained calm, beads of sweat had started to form on his forehead, and he began to count silently in his heart.

"One..."

"Two..."

Before he could utter the word "three," a clear voice came from outside the window, "Zhongping, you should come back now."

Oh, thank god! It was as if Lin Wanrong had heard the sound of heaven's music. He relaxed instantly and leaned lazily back in his chair.