

Finest 116

Chapter 116 The Return

The road down the mountain was extremely rugged. The Eldest Miss, seemingly in a huff, tiptoed in a wobbly fashion and nearly fell several times, yet she stubbornly kept silent. Upon seeing her refusing to glance at him, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, "This young lady is playing the haughty game again. She's indeed quite obstinate."

Upon descending from the mountain, they saw that the troops had all scattered; the scene was so silent, not even a bird's shadow could be spotted.

Lin Wanrong, completely unfamiliar with the terrain, could only distinguish north from south. Seeing him standing in the middle of the road, gazing around like a dazed goose, the Eldest Miss Xiao chuckled. She swiftly covered her mouth, thinking, "That's for annoying me."

Observing her calm demeanor, Lin Wanrong knew she must recognize this place. He forced a wry smile and said, "My dear Eldest Miss, please speak."

Eldest Miss Xiao hummed lightly, a triumphant smile on her face, and sweetly said, "This is Dangtu County."

Dangtu County was located in Anhui Province, hundreds of miles away from Jinling. The bandits had gone to great lengths indeed. The Eldest Miss Xiao had visited Dangtu County a few times for business, so she recognized the way.

The pair rested in the town for a while, ate breakfast, changed clothes, and took a bath. Then they hired a horse carriage, heading straight for Jinling. Luckily, Lin Wanrong had some small silver coins with him to afford the carriage. Miss Xiao Yuruo, a rich young lady, did not usually carry money. She carried a good amount of makeup, though. Women, Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly.

The horse carriage clotted along, heading northward. Eldest Miss Xiao remained silent in the carriage. Lin Wanrong yawned; he hadn't slept all night, having spent it whispering sweet nothings with Xiao Qingxuan. Exhausted, he leaned against the carriage, about to doze off, when Eldest Miss Xiao asked, "Lin San, where is Miss Xiao from?"

Lin Wanrong replied, "I believe she's from the capital." Xiao Qingxuan hadn't mentioned her background, and respecting her, Lin Wanrong hadn't asked.

Xiao Yuruo huffed, glancing at him sideways, "She's extremely beautiful. I wonder how a celestial being like her could fall for you. You must have deceived her with some despicable means."

Feeling a pang of guilt, Lin Wanrong thought to himself that without the help of the aphrodisiac, his relationship with Xiao Qingxuan might have been uncertain. He felt Eldest Miss Xiao was underestimating him. Indignant, he retorted, "Our feelings are mutual. It's not as filthy as you make it out to be!"

Xiao Yuruo huffed again but didn't respond. Lin Wanrong dug out a parcel he had brought with him, held the musket in his hands, and started toying with it.

In this era, a firearm like this was a rare artifact, especially a double-barreled one, which demanded superior craftsmanship. It was said that Mr. York had specifically brought this from the West as a gift for Xiao Qingxuan. In the whole of the Great Hua, there was only one such piece. Judging from the quality and feel of the gun, it must be a highly valued object in the West, let alone in Great Hua. Lin Wanrong was perhaps the only person in the Great Hua dynasty who possessed a firearm.

Thinking of Xiao Qingxuan, Lin Wanrong felt warmth in his heart. His feelings for this girl were unique, akin to a bosom friend. She understood him well; the aphrodisiac and firearm were indeed treasures suited to him. Thinking of this, he felt some gratitude towards Tao Dongcheng. If it weren't for Tao Dongcheng's schemes, given Xiao Qingxuan's personality, the two might have never had such an opportunity in their lifetimes.

He had learned forty to fifty percent of Xiao Qingxuan's martial arts skills, and even received a firearm from her, yet he didn't feel the slightest bit like a gigolo.

A gigolo? Damn, to conquer a girl like Xiao Qingxuan, if not for my masculine charm, how could it be possible? From psychological to physical conquest, my strength was what counted. Those who accused me of being a gigolo, could you conquer a woman yourself? Damn, it was pure jealousy.

"Lin San, how did Tao Dongcheng bring the troops to rescue us?" The Eldest Miss Xiao suddenly said thoughtfully.

Rescue us? Heh, that's a nice way to put it. He retorted, "Eldest Miss, do you really think he came to rescue us? Although his father is the silk weaver of Suzhou, could that position really mobilize the military forces of Jiangsu Commander-in-Chief to rescue us?"

Xiao Yuruo nodded, "There is something strange about it. When Tao Dongcheng charged up the mountain last night, I didn't see many of the White Lotus bandits. If they had fled, why would they leave me behind?"

Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly. If it weren't for the fact that Xiao Yuruo hadn't fallen for Tao Dongcheng's scheme, she wouldn't have this clear mind to analyze the situation so calmly. If he hadn't appeared in time last night, and she had been taken by that Tao Dongcheng, she would certainly not be analyzing the situation this calmly.

"Eldest Miss, think about it. Why were those White Lotus bandits so courteous to you? Was it just because they were hoping Madam would ransom you with gold?"

This was precisely what Xiao Yuruo was puzzled about. Lin Wanrong further elaborated, "You fainted mysteriously yesterday. When you woke up, the bandits were gone, and young Master Tao arrived just in time"

When it came to crucial matters, Xiao Yuruo was rather astute. She gasped, "Are you suggesting... that Tao Dongcheng was in league with them?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I didn't say anything. You did."

Xiao Yuruo glared at him, highly dissatisfied with his evasion of responsibility. She pondered for a while, then sighed, "If this is true, why would Tao Dongcheng want to associate with the White Lotus Sect? He has status, a good position, and plenty of money."

Lin Wanrong roughly knew the reasons but didn't want to disclose them to her. He shrugged, "As for the specific reasons, I really don't know."

The Eldest Miss Xiao fell silent, and Lin Wanrong remembered something. "Eldest Miss," he began, "Does our Xiao family have any establishments in the capital? How's the business there?"

Xiao Yuruo replied seriously, "Of course. The capital is under the Emperor's feet, full of countless dignitaries. How could I possibly neglect it? Aside from Jiangsu, the capital is where our Xiao

family conducts the most business. After settling the matters here this year, I plan to go there to expand our business next spring."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong was overjoyed. He had been wanting to go to the capital for Xiao Qingxuan, and now, hearing that the Eldest Miss Xiao would be heading there in the spring, he was all for it, hands, feet, and all. Dominating Jinling and the capital, indeed the job of the Xiao family's servant was quite interesting. He was starting to enjoy this feeling, playing the fool to trick the tiger felt exhilarating.

"Why are you so happy?" Xiao Yuruo suddenly asked coldly, "Is it because Miss Xiao is in the capital, and you want to see her?"

There was no point in hiding this. Lin Wanrong chuckled and replied, "The two matters aren't mutually exclusive."

Xiao Yuruo gave him a look, opened her mouth as if to say something, but fell silent. A tense quietude filled the carriage.

Just as Lin Wanrong was thinking about leaning back in the carriage for a nap, he noticed that the Eldest Miss Xiao's face was flushed, her demeanor coy. She kept glancing out of the carriage window, as if she had some urgent matter to attend to.

Following her gaze, he saw that the carriage was next to a dense forest. Considering her coy demeanor, he wondered, was she in need of a bathroom break? She had been immobilized since last night, and after seven or eight hours, such a need was indeed normal. But this Eldest Miss Xiao was so reserved, how could she possibly voice such a need?

"Driver, stop the carriage," Lin Wanrong yelled, "I need to pee."

"Vulgar!" The Eldest Miss Xiao muttered with a red face. Yet she heard him say to her, "Eldest Miss, the forest over there has a nice view, with dense leaves and a good cover. Why don't you go and take a look? We can take a short break before we continue."

He even winked at her, causing her face to flush crimson. 'So, he has noticed,' she thought. She felt somewhat grateful, but she was too shy to admit it. Without a word, she stepped down from the carriage. She saw Lin San standing beside the carriage, seemingly about to unfasten his belt to relieve himself right there. She cried out hastily, "Lin San, what are you doing?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Didn't I just say what I was going to do? What do you think I am going to do?"

The Eldest Miss Xiao gasped, cried out, "Shameless!" and turned to run towards the forest in embarrassment.

Lin Wanrong shook his head with a smile. 'This girl, can't she take a joke?' he thought.

The carriage driver asked in confusion, "Aren't you going to pee?"

Lin Wanrong laughed out loud, "This is saline-alkali land, even if I pee, it won't make it fertile. It won't grow crops, it's a waste. I'll save it for watering the garden back home." The driver also burst out laughing.

The Eldest Miss Xiao approached the edge of the forest, her heart filled with a hint of fear. The forest was so dense; who knew what creatures - snakes, insects, mice, or ants - might lurk within. Hearing laughter from behind, she turned to see that Lin San hadn't done any vulgar act at all. Instead, he was leaning against the carriage, resting with his eyes closed. 'So, he deceived me on purpose. He thought of such a trick just to scare me. How despicable,' she thought.

She dared not venture into the forest alone, so she called out softly, "Lin San, Lin San, come here"

Lin Wanrong wondered what she wanted him for. 'Could it be that she wants us to go together?' He smirked inwardly as he approached, asking, "Eldest Miss, what is it?"

Xiao Yuruo replied weakly, "The forest is too dense, and I'm a little afraid. Stay here and guard the spot while I go in to enjoy the scenery" As she uttered those last few words, her face turned as red as the evening glow.

"Understood," Lin Wanrong said, pretending not to catch her meaning. "Just call me if you need anything."

Xiao Yuruo gave a soft hum in response and walked into the forest, until she was out of Lin San's sight. Only then did her heart rate slow. 'This man,' she thought, 'aside from being a bit wicked, he's good in every other aspect.'

After waiting for a while, Lin Wanrong saw the Eldest Miss Xiao emerge with a red face. Knowing she was shy, he pretended not to notice and remarked, "The scenery here is truly splendid. If we get another chance, we should visit again."

The Eldest Miss Xiao whispered, "Lin San, let's go."

They both got back into the carriage. The Eldest Miss Xiao was quiet and didn't speak. Lin Wanrong didn't bother her either, thinking it was finally time for that nap.

Seeing Lin Wanrong leaning against the carriage, looking exhausted, Xiao Yuruo thought, 'I owe him for his help this time. Who knows what could have happened otherwise?' A sense of gratitude rose within her, and the way she looked at him softened. Lin Wanrong yawned and said, "Eldest Miss, don't look at me like that, I'll become shy."

"You, go to hell" The Eldest Miss Xiao snapped, instantly furious. She threw a pillow at him, her fleeting fondness for him instantly extinguished.

When it came to teasing girls, Lin Wanrong needed no preparation. Even though his teasing was casual, its effect was extraordinary. Like this time, throughout the journey to Jinling, a distance of hundreds of miles, the Eldest Miss Xiao did not speak another word to Lin Wanrong. She bore a resentful expression as if she held a grudge against him. Anyway, Lin Wanrong was already accustomed to this. If he saw the Eldest Miss Xiao smiling at him, he might suspect that she had ulterior motives.

As the carriage entered Jinling, Xiao Yuruo's eyes grew moist. Never before had she felt such a strong sensation upon leaving home. Thinking about how she nearly hadn't made it back, she could no longer hold back her tears, which started to fall in large drops.

Seeing her crying silently, Lin Wanrong thought, 'This girl has indeed suffered quite a bit.'

Upon arriving at the entrance of the Xiao residence, the Eldest Miss Xiao was even more emotional. She held her face in her hands, her slender shoulders trembling as she wept. She was so overcome with emotion that she couldn't even get off the carriage. Lin Wanrong hopped off from the carriage, stood at the gate, and shouted at the top of his lungs, "The Eldest Miss has returned"

The mansion was thrown into chaos. Without wasting a moment, a large crowd emerged, led by Madam Xiao.

"Yuruo, where is Yuruo?" Madam Xiao cried out in panic, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Mother" Xiao Yuruo stepped out of the carriage and immediately threw herself into her mother's arms. Mother and daughter clung to each other, weeping bitterly.

'It's so bloody touching,' Lin Wanrong thought, wiping the corner of his eye.

"Lin San, you're back." The mansion veteran steward, Fubo, greeted Lin Wanrong with a bear hug.

"Fubo, I've missed you so much. Let's hug"

"Ah, Changbo, I've missed you too. Let's hug"

"Eh, Chief Steward Wang, I've missed you too. Let's hug"

"Madam, I've missed you too. Let's hug Take care!" Lin Wanrong was about to give Madam Xiao a hug when her sharp glare made him reconsider.

With an awkward smile, he noticed Young Master Guo waving at him and walked over, asking, "Young Master, what's up?"

"Lin San, Miss Qin has left," Guo Wuchang said dejectedly.

'She's gone? That's great,' Lin Wanrong thought to himself, feeling secretly relieved. If the young lady were still here, with her temperament, who knew what might have happened. Though Qin Xian'er held deep affection for him, her tendency to resort to violence concerned Lin Wanrong. Perhaps her departure was a good thing after all.

Lin Wanrong knew why Qin Xian'er had left. Seeing Guo Wuchang's downcast appearance, he initially thought the young master was genuinely infatuated with Qin Xian'er. But then, Guo Wuchang added, "Now that she's gone, I need to find another excuse to see my Dongmei."

'Damn!' Lin Wanrong exclaimed inwardly, raising his middle finger in his mind. 'I despise you.'

Seeing Xiao Yuruo safely returned, the Xiao mansion was buzzing with excitement. However, as Lin Wanrong scanned the crowd, he felt like a figure was missing. 'Where's Yushuang, my dear Yushuang?'

In haste, he pulled Young Master Guo aside, asking, "Young Master, where's the Second Miss?"

Young Master Guo sighed, "Yushuang, my cousin, is at Rosy Cloud Temple!"

"Rosy Cloud Temple? She's becoming a nun?" Lin Wanrong jumped in surprise.

Chapter 117 Rendezvous with Second Miss

Lin Wanrong's voice was louder this time, and everyone heard him. In a sudden panic, Xiao Yuruo quickly grabbed Madam Xiao's hand and asked, "Mother, where is my sister?"

Madam Xiao sighed and said, "Yushuang is just too naive. Ever since you all got into trouble, she blamed herself. She hides in her room all day and refuses to see anyone. I was so preoccupied with trying to rescue you that I didn't pay much attention to her. Who would have thought that the next day, she sneaked off to Rosy Cloud Temple alone? She said she wanted to purify herself and pray for you all day. She still refuses to meet anyonethis silly child..." As Madam Xiao spoke, tears trickled down her cheeks, as if recalling the gloomy days of late.

The mention of the temple made Lin Wanrong realize something. Ah, I've been such a fool. Monks go to temples to become monks, Second Miss should be going to a nunnery. Bah, what nonsense am I spouting? Such a lovely girl, how could she possibly want to give up the world? She's only praying for us, not planning to become a nun. Even so, he was taken aback. This girl, she really knows how to break my heart, he thought to himself.

He knew that Xiao Yushuang must have blamed herself deeply for revealing Lin Wanrong's identity with her outcry that night, placing all the blame on herself. Lin Wanrong sighed softly. This little girl, she's too naive. But I like it!

Amidst the cheers of joy from the people of the Xiao Manor, a desperate voice echoed from a distance, "Thank Heaven, virtuous sister, you are safe."

Lin Wanrong turned to look, and saw Tao Dongcheng rushing from a distance. He was slightly limping, seemingly due to the aftermath of a fall from a horse.

Madam Xiao said to her eldest daughter, "Yuruo, we owe a great deal to Master Tao for resolving this crisis. He persuaded Lord Cheng to agree to send troops to rescue you, or else,"

"In that case, thank you, Young Master Tao," Xiao Yuruo said to Tao Dongcheng, who had just arrived at her side.

Panting, Tao Dongcheng quickly replied, "Eldest Miss, there's no need for thanks. I would do anything for you. Yesterday, when I led the soldiers up the mountain and saw you being taken away, I arrived too late. I was filled with regret. When I heard that you had returned unharmed, I rushed over. Seeing you safe and sound now, my mind is finally at ease."

Lin Wanrong listened from the side and cursed under his breath, Damn it, I thought I had a thick skin, but I never imagined yours could be just as thick. Everything that comes out of your mouth is all rosy.

He had already had a falling out with this Tao Dongcheng. Now, with his divine skills and musket for protection, he didn't fear this man named Tao. He chuckled and said, "Others may not have noticed, but I certainly did. Yesterday, Young Master Tao, on a white horse with a silver spear, you were quite the picture of gallantry."

The Eldest Miss shot him a glare but couldn't help but chuckle inwardly. She had personally witnessed Lin San knocking Tao Dongcheng off his horse yesterday. She thought to herself, Tao Dongcheng may be bad, but you're countless times worse.

Tao Dongcheng had silently cursed Lin San countless times, but he couldn't admit it publicly. He could only force out a few awkward laughs without answering.

The Eldest Miss said, "Mother, since we are safe and sound, I should go and fetch Yushuang back."

Madam Xiao replied, "It's late today, and you know Yushuang's temperament. She made a vow before the Bodhisattva, and no one can stop her. This ordeal seems to have made her grow up a lot. We should let her fulfill her vow of purification for a month. The Xiao family has gone through

many trials recently; let her prayers be our way of showing gratitude. Go see her early tomorrow morning to reassure her."

Lin Wanrong breathed a sigh of relief, thinking, Thank God, she's only praying. If anyone dared to make little Yushuang become a nun, I might have to tear down those monasteries and nunneries.

Mother and daughter went inside for a long talk. Once Madam Xiao knew her daughter hadn't suffered any harm, she was relieved.

The Eldest Miss highly praised Lin San, mentioning his composed and unyielding nature, his quick-thinking and bravery. Hearing all this, even Lin Wanrong felt a bit flattered. So, I have so many undiscovered qualities. The Eldest Miss indeed has an eye for talent.

After a moment of contemplation, Madam Xiao said, "Lin San, you have protected our family with loyalty and bravery this time, and you have provided valuable suggestions for the development of the Xiao family. I will make an exception and promote you to a senior servant in the Xiao family, raising your monthly wage from two taels to twenty. In the decades-long foundation of the Xiao family, we've never had someone as young as you achieve such a position. Don't let me down."

This was a clever calculation on Madam Xiao's part. Lin San was talented and loyal; she couldn't afford to lose him. While she was hoping to win him over for the Xiao family, Lin San had no thoughts of leaving.

His mindset had greatly changed. When old Wei forced him to take this position, he was reluctant, but over time he had become quite comfortable with being a servant.

Planting flowers, tending grass, managing industry, visiting brothels, flirting with the two Misses... With the Xiao family shielding him and money at his disposal, what could be more enjoyable? What better job could there be? He was waiting to go to the capital with the Eldest Miss next year to find Qing Xuan. With the Xiao family as a cover, everything would go much smoother.

Lin Wanrong bowed with a smile, "Thank you for your generosity, Madam. I will bend over backwards and dedicate myself to the love of our great Xiao family, contributing to its development in any way I can."

Although he didn't care much about the increase from two to twenty taels, he wasn't one to reject any form of wealth, big or small. This was the rule in business. For a cunning businessman like Lin

Wanrong, there could never be too much money. Since Madam had given him a raise, it was only right for him to say a few words of gratitude. After all, everyone should help to lift the sedan.

They enjoyed a grand banquet in the main hall, a gesture meant to dispel the Eldest Miss's fears. Lin Wanrong, the newly promoted senior servant, had quickly become a prominent figure in the Xiao household. Naturally, this stirred up quite a flurry of attention. Even the veteran steward, Fubo, was taken aback, musing that Lin San's current fame far outshone his own in his heyday.

Upon returning to his courtyard, slightly inebriated, Lin Wanrong habitually scanned the room for a familiar figure. However, the realization hit him—Xiao Qingxuan was already gone. He felt a slight pang of disappointment. The evening chats with Qingxuan had become a part of his routine, and her abrupt departure left him feeling out of sorts.

He removed the jade pendant that Qingxuan had left around his neck. Observing the beautiful luster and extraordinary craftsmanship, he thought to himself, Even though she's my wife now, she never told me where she lives or who her father is. Next time we meet, she surely deserves a punishment. As he considered this, his thoughts drifted to Qin Xian'er, who was Qingxuan's adversary, when they were at the Miaoyu Pavilion. Despite Qin Xian'er's harsh methods, their interactions were generally pleasant. Lin Wanrong considered that if she could change her ways, she could be quite agreeable.

He hadn't been sleeping well these past few days, and as soon as he laid down, he was overwhelmed by a wave of fatigue. In no time at all, he was sound asleep.

Upon waking up early the next morning, Lin Wanrong first visited the perfume workshop. After all, it was the primary cause of his recent misfortunes. He couldn't neglect his most important responsibility. Fubo and Changbo were already there. The two old men had grown quite fond of the workshop and were thrilled to contribute to the Xiao family's business in their old age.

During Lin Wanrong's absence, the perfume workshop's production had somewhat stalled. Partly because Lin Wanrong was not there, and partly because winter was approaching, creating a shortage of flower braids. The problem couldn't be resolved immediately, and they had to continue with a limited production of five hundred bottles a month.

Lin Wanrong's primary concern that day, however, was the young Yushuang. He wasn't even sure where Rosy Cloud Temple was. He never showed much interest in Buddhism or Daoism and thus had little enthusiasm for monasteries. If anything, he had a slight fondness for nunneries.

After asking Fubo about the location of Rosy Cloud Temple, he found out that it was quite a distance away. He hailed a carriage to take him there. Now that he held a position in the Xiao household, he had to keep up appearances whenever he ventured out. And as for the fare, he figured it could be charged to the Xiao family's account. Public expenditure, after all, was a concept he was quite familiar with.

Rosy Cloud Temple was located to the east of Jinling, known for its ancient origins and thriving worshippers it had a highly reputable name.

As Lin Wanrong meandered through the temple, he contemplated offering an incense stick due to his good mood. However, learning that a single stick cost one silver taels and that fortune-telling cost two silver taels, he quickly balked at the thought. He scoffed internally at the outrageous prices, Do they think I'm made of money? Even a landlord doesn't have such surplus!

He caught hold of a novice monk, asking, "Young monk, could you tell me if there's a female devotee here"

"Om Mani Padme Hum" the young monk hastily intoned a Buddhist chant. "This is a place of purity for Buddhists. We do not entertain such unclean matters. If you're interested, you might want to try the Qinhuai River area"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback for a moment before he understood. This young monk had mistaken him for someone seeking the services of a prostitute. Annoyed, he thought, What kind of gaze is that? Who comes to a monastery for such a thing? Going to a nunnery might make more sense.

Without a change in his expression, he slipped a half tael of broken silver into the young monk's hand, saying, "Young monk, could you tell me if there's a female devotee here"

The young monk's expression instantly shifted to one of joy, "There is, there is. Not just one, we even have ten. You go straight from here, there's a well-serviced inn named Junzailai. They'll ensure your satisfaction."

Covered in cold sweat, Lin Wanrong quickly clarified, "Young monk, I'm asking about the Second Miss from the Xiao family. She is here to offer prayers and keep a vegetarian diet, but I don't know which room she's in."

Immediately, the young monk's face turned serious. He chanted a Buddhist invocation and pointed to a room on the outside, "The Second Miss Xiao? She is praying in that meditation room." The

speed of his transition from jovial to solemn didn't reveal any inconsistencies, which even Lin Wanrong had to admit was impressive.

Hurrying to the designated room, Lin Wanrong peeked inside through the window. There, a petite figure was in his sight. Her long, black hair hung loose, cascading over her shoulders. She wore a plain, light-gray robe over her thin frame, kneeling before the Buddhist shrine with her hands in prayer. She was softly chanting, "Oh, Buddha and Guanyin Bodhisattva, please ensure Lin San and my sister return safely. I, Xiao Yushuang, am willing to exchange my life for their safety. Please, fulfill my wish." After she finished speaking, she respectfully bowed.

After a few days apart, the young girl seemed to have become even frailer and more pitiful. Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly, his heart melting for her. Ever since she had tempered her unruly nature, she had stirred up an intense tenderness within him.

Seeing Xiao Yushuang's devout demeanor, an idea sprang to Lin's mind. He drew out a homemade pencil from his pocket, along with a piece of paper. Scribbling a few characters, he attached a small stone to the note and tossed it inside the room.

Xiao Yushuang was in the midst of her prayers when she heard a soft sound. A small note had landed next to her. She glanced at it, her expression undisturbed, as if she hadn't noticed the note at all. She turned her head away and resumed her sutra.

Lin Wanrong was both frustrated and moved. She really was devout, seemingly uncaring about anything else except her prayers. Picking up another small stone, he threw it inside again. His aim was precise, and the stone landed right next to the previous note.

Xiao Yushuang felt a tinge of annoyance. She came here to pray and fast, relying purely on her sincerity. Who was it that kept disturbing her peace, ruffling her calm? If she offended the Bodhisattva, what would become of her?

She sought forgiveness from the Bodhisattva before slowly rising, casting a puzzled look around. There was no sign of any movement. Spotting the note on the ground, the writing faintly visible, she bent down to pick it up, and softly read it out, "The colors of the trees stretch beyond the gate, the sound of the river flows into the distant sea. The imperial city will be reached tomorrow, but still, I dream of being a fisherman or woodcutter."

"Lin San..." Xiao Yushuang suddenly jumped up, a confused look on her face. Her eyes reflected disbelief, and tears of joy started to fall. She circled around the room, crying out anxiously, "Lin San, did you come back? Where are you? You naughty man, come out"

After a few cries, there was no response. She wondered if her devout prayer had caused her to hallucinate. Tears started to fall again. She picked up the note to continue reading, only to find a few more characters, "Outside the Rosy Cloud Temple, by the Weeping Willow Pond, I have a meeting with the Second Miss. We shall not leave unless we meet!"

The unique and vigorous handwriting could only belong to Lin San. It wasn't fake!

With tears and laughter, the Second Miss said, "You naughty man, what do you mean by 'not leaving unless we meet'? Even when we meet, we can't part."

She hurriedly closed her eyes and put her hands together in front of the Buddha, gratefully saying, "Thank you, Buddha, for showing your grace. I shall leave now."

She rose with joy, a trail of tears streaming down her face. With a quick tug on her robe, she darted towards the temple's entrance as if flying.

Chapter 118 The Capture on the Date

Upon exiting the temple gate, she saw a shallow pond in the distance, glittering with a silver radiance under the winter sun. It was winter, and the willows around the pond had already withered, a few solitary leaves floating on the water, an epitome of desolation.

Xiao Yushuang glanced around, but she saw no sign of Lin San. Confusion surged within her. He had clearly been captured by villains, so how could he suddenly appear before her? With this thought in mind, she examined the note in her hand again. Lin San's unique handwriting was unmistakable, any attempt at imitation would fail. This was undoubtedly his writing. But where was he? That scoundrel!

As she waited anxiously, a figure emerged from behind the withered willows, a yellow wild chrysanthemum in his hand. He gazed at her with a smile. If he wasn't the scoundrel, who else could he be?

Second Miss looked at him, tears welling up in her eyes. Softly, she uttered, "You scoundrel" but was unable to continue.

Upon seeing her dressed in plain robes, Lin Wanrong found her still stunningly beautiful despite her haggard appearance. Her tear-filled eyes reminded him of pear blossoms after a rain shower. He was taken aback, thinking how she seemed to have matured over the few days he hadn't seen her, which charmed him immensely.

With a few hearty laughs, he walked up to her, presenting the wild chrysanthemum. "For you, beautiful lady," he said. "May you forever remain as radiant as this flower."

"I don't want it," Second Miss blushed, though she quickly seized the flower, her smile even brighter than the bloom. A girl truly smitten with springtime love, he thought. I'd best be careful not to charm all the beauties in Jinling City, lest I run out of silver to support them all.

Gently placing the chrysanthemum behind her ear, Xiao Yushuang asked bashfully, "Lin San, does it look good?"

With her shy and coquettish face, she radiated an indescribable charm. Lin Wanrong was left stunned. "It's not just good, it's spectacular," he answered.

"You're always such a sweet talker," she replied, blushing yet again. Now, there was nothing left of the child she used to be. She was a young maiden in the throes of spring.

Lin Wanrong took a seat next to her. "Second Miss, what brought you to the Rosy Cloud Temple? This is a Buddhist monastery. It's dangerous for a delicate lady like you."

Xiao Yushuang began to sob softly. "Lin San, are you still mad at me?"

"Mad at you? Mad for what?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"It was because of me that you got captured that day" Second Miss choked on her words.

Taken aback, Lin Wanrong felt a mix of amusement and warmth. How did this girl always manage to find a way to blame herself? Yet, her words made him unexpectedly emotional. Where could he ever find such a sweet girl?

"Foolish girl," Lin Wanrong said softly, "it has nothing to do with you. They came for me intentionally. If it weren't for you that day, I would've died under their swords."

These words comforted the young maid's heart. Had it not been for Xiao Yushuang that day, Qin Xian'er wouldn't have intervened in the murderous intent of Lu Zhongping. However, Second Miss was unaware of this, she spoke softly, "I don't know what happened. Seeing those villains wanting to kill you, I felt unbearable pain in my heart. If you died, my life would be devoid of joy. Later, when I saw you standing in front of me, ready to sacrifice your life, I realized that even if I died, it would be worth it."

"Ah, my god, I'm so moved," Lin Wanrong, in an emotional state, grabbed Second Miss Xiao's hand and said, "You mustn't do this again in the future. We both must stay alive and live happily. Isn't that better?"

The young girl nodded, her words shy but determined, "If you don't die, then I won't either." What she implied was clear: if he died, she wouldn't want to live in this world either.

Conversing with this young girl, Lin Wanrong felt his heart was being hollowed out. This was not a simple romantic exchange, it was rather something the young girl said unintentionally, yet it moved Lin Wanrong profoundly. This young girl, she indeed was extraordinary.

Seeing his distracted look, Second Miss hurriedly asked, "Lin San, what's the matter?"

"Me? Oh, it's nothing, just seeing you makes me very happy," Lin Wanrong replied.

"I feel the same way, Lin San. Do you know? I dream about you every night. These past days, I've been terrified. What would I do without you? I am scared..." The young girl cried.

Lin Wanrong felt he couldn't continue the conversation. This girl's tender sentiments were too intense. Even a battle-hardened man like Lin San was not immune to such sweet words, especially when they came from such an innocent beauty, it was truly life-threatening.

"By the way, Second Miss, the Eldest Miss is back too. She might come to see you later," Lin Wanrong wiped his sweat and changed the subject.

"Really?" Xiao Yushuang, who still had some childish temperament, immediately jumped up upon hearing this and asked, "Did elder sister come back with you? Were those villains harming her?"

Lin Wanrong replied, "How could those villains harm her? Look at who she was with!"

Xiao Yushuang nodded, holding his hand and said, "Lin San, I knew it, you are the most capable person in the world."

Being admired felt extremely good. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, then picked out some things that had happened in the last few days and told her.

Of course, he couldn't tell her about the conspiracies of Tao Dongcheng and the people behind him, nor could he mention Qin Xian'er's matter. Xiao Qingxuan was just described as a friend.

Despite this, the story was very thrilling. Lin Wanrong was an expert in storytelling and emotive engagement, his words kept Miss Xiao on tenterhooks, feeling more exciting than the most thrilling adventure tales.

After listening for a while, Second Miss sighed suddenly, "Lin San, do you think I'm useless?"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, "Second Miss, why would you think that?"

Xiao Yushuang spoke in a melancholic tone, "Every member of our family contributes to its prosperity. Mother is the pillar of our household, having raised the entire Xiao family. Elder sister manages the family, handling all the business affairs with competence. As for you, Lin San, there's no need to even mention your contributions. Just by looking at sister's demeanor, one can tell she highly admires you."

Admiration? Lin Wanrong grimaced. If she had a knife, her desired action would most likely be to kill him.

Second Miss Xiao continued, "Among us, I am the most useless. In the past, when I had nothing to do, I would use the names of the mighty general to scare the servants. Now that I've grown up, I can't do anything. I can't help my mother or elder sister. Don't you think I'm useless?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed, "Where is this coming from? Everyone has their own strengths. Let's take the Eldest Miss Xiao, for example, her strength is in management. However, you have your own strength as well, such as your ability to discern people. Think about it, I am an exceptional talent, and it was your discerning eye that identified me, right? That's a significant contribution to the Xiao family."

Upon hearing his self-praise, the young maid couldn't help but chuckle, "You really have a thick face." She sighed, "Actually, the first time I saw you profiting from selling elder sister's portrait, I thought you were a terrible person with too many tricks up your sleeve. Later, when I saw your name in the registration list, I was so delighted. But that day you arrived late, and I had to tell Deputy Steward Pang not to make things difficult for you. Who would have thought that you couldn't..." She covered her mouth, recalling that day's event, "Even write more than a few sentences of the Three-Character Classic!"

Lin Wanrong's face turned red. It wasn't a glorious moment indeed, but he defended himself, "There are plenty of people in this world who can write the Three-Character Classic, but who has skills like me?"

Xiao Yushuang playfully scolded, "Stop boasting. Back then, I wanted to bring you into the Xiao family so I could deal with you properly using the mighty general. Who knew you would be so fierce, I almost hated you."

Having said that, Xiao Yushuang sighed softly, "Looking back now, I'm glad you came. Otherwise, who knows what would have happened to our family. I've been thinking these days, I can't burden my mother and elder sister, I have to become useful. Lin San, I want to seek knowledge, what do you think?"

"Seek knowledge?" Lin Wanrong was surprised, "Where would you, a young lady, go to seek knowledge?"

Second Miss Xiao softly said, "I haven't figured that out yet, but I feel miserable not knowing anything and being stuck at home."

Lin Wanrong could understand this point. Women pursuing liberation is a universal phenomenon across all ages. It was commendable that Xiao Yushuang had such an ambitious mindset.

Nodding, Lin Wanrong said, "Second Miss, I will support you."

"Really?" Xiao Yushuang eagerly grabbed his shoulder. Seeing his nod, she smiled sweetly and said, "Lin San, thank you."

"What are you thanking me for?" Lin Wanrong replied in a daze, "Who are we to each other?"

Second Miss Xiao's face reddened slightly. She hummed softly and gently leaned toward him.

Noticing her blush and coquettish demeanor, Lin Wanrong's heart was already itching with anticipation. He lightly wrapped his arm around her slender waist and held her lithe and boneless body close.

Xiao Yushuang was still a young girl. Her body was just beginning to mature, and when embraced, she gave off a tender and sweet feeling. Lin Wanrong gently stroked her slender waist, whispering in her ear, "Second Miss..."

His voice seemed to have an odd enchanting power, making Xiao Yushuang's heart both bashful and ticklish. A soft hum escaped from her nose, and her face felt like it was burning.

Looking at Xiao Yushuang's vivid, alluring lips, Lin Wanrong could no longer bear it. He pulled her closer and leaned in to kiss her. Xiao Yushuang made a soft whimpering sound, burying her head into his chest, her mouth slightly agape, awaiting her shy and sweet first kiss.

"What are you two doing--" The furious roar came just as their lips were about to meet, shattering their dreamy state.

Lin Wanrong turned around to see what was happening, a sudden chill rushing to the bottom of his heart. Damn it, he thought, Buddha, Bodhisattva, are you messing with me?

Chapter 119 Qiaoqiao Fell Ill

The moment the Second Miss caught sight of the figure behind her, she jumped up, startled. She glanced at Lin Wanrong, her face flushed with embarrassment and she stood there, too flustered to move.

The Eldest Miss approached, positioning her younger sister behind herself, and sternly interrogated Lin, "Lin San, what on earth are you doing?"

Damn, he was too careless, and here he was, encountering this tigress again. Lin Wanrong cursed inwardly.

Caught in the act of flirting with another's sister, he showed no remorse and shamelessly replied, "I wasn't doing anything. The Second Miss and I were simply conducting a research project to see who could hold their breath longer."

The Eldest Miss gave him an angry glare, "You've never been honest. How can I trust you?" She turned to her sister, "Yushuang, don't be scared. Tell me if this scoundrel has bullied you. I'll make him pay."

Xiao Yushuang's face turned crimson. She lifted her head to sneak a peek at Lin Wanrong, then lowered it again and replied, "Sister, he did not bully me. We were just having a conversation."

Xiao Yuruo gave her younger sister a helpless look and gently tapped her forehead, "You're too soft-hearted, Yushuang. I just hope you won't end up being taken advantage of without realizing it."

Yushuang hummed in agreement while nestled in her sister's arms, but she cheekily stuck her tongue out at Lin Wanrong when her sister wasn't looking. Lin Wanrong returned the gesture with a smile, his heart still fluttering.

Seeing that she wasn't going to get any more out of her sister, the Eldest Miss decided not to push further. She took Yushuang's hand, "Little sister, Lin San and I have safely returned. Let's go home."

Xiao Yushuang shook her head, "Sister, I made a vow in front of the Bodhisattva to be a vegetarian and pray for a month. You can't make me break my promise."

The Eldest Miss affectionately tapped her sister's nose, "You naughty girl." The Second Miss giggled, hugging her sister tightly. The pair was a whirl of sisterly affection.

Lin Wanrong watched them, feeling disgruntled. Why was the Eldest Miss always so friendly towards others but kept a stern face with him? It was as if he owed her a large sum of silver. Speaking of debts, wasn't the first profit he made in this world by taking advantage of her?

The Eldest Miss was in high spirits after seeing her sister. The two sisters held hands, chatting in the Zen room. She instructed Lin Wanrong to accompany Yushuang in her fasting at the Rosy Cloud Temple and told him to prepare some vegetarian dishes.

Lin Wanrong had no interest in vegetarian food. Watching the sisters nibbling and savoring their food, he thought such bland taste was only for young ladies like them.

He waited until the afternoon, intending to share some heartfelt words with Yushuang once the Eldest Miss left. However, the Eldest Miss was on guard against him, like one would guard against a thief, keeping him away from Yushuang. This left Lin Wanrong feeling like a crab steamed alive, left in a dilemma, with nowhere to go.

Ah, this girl was trying to guard against him, then he'd defy her, determined to covertly win over his little Yushuang. Let this girl be vigilant to no avail.

He aimlessly wandered about the Rosy Cloud Temple. When encountering female devotees coming to offer incense, he would pose as a devotee and follow behind them, stealing glances at their figures and faces. This wasn't driven by ill intentions but was purely for self-amusement out of boredom. His stealthy demeanor, if matched with a Buddhist robe and a shaven head marked with six dots of incense ash, would make him the spitting image of a loitering monk. He even amused himself by giving a charming name to his action, the "Wolf Following the Tail."

Regrettably, the Eldest Miss was astute and didn't leave any gaps for Lin Wanrong to approach the Second Miss. Seeing today's plans thwarted, Lin Wanrong decided not to waste any more time and sneaked away.

"Little sister, you must stay away from Lin San in the future. He is a bad man," the Eldest Miss cautioned, watching Lin Wanrong's retreating figure.

"Why, sister? Lin San is a good person. He's capable, treats me well, and, besides, didn't he take care of you when you both were captured by the thieves?" the Second Miss inquired curiously.

Xiao Yuruo recalled the scene she had witnessed between him and Xiao Qingxuan in the cave, and her face turned crimson. "In any case, he is bad. He specifically bullies us women."

"Specifically bullies women? Why?" The Second Miss curiously asked, "When I am with him, I don't see him bullying me."

While she said this, a blush crept up her cheeks. To claim that this scoundrel hadn't bullied her would be a lie. She couldn't ignore that time he had spanked her. But then again, she had provoked him first, and he had retaliated later. It was all quite complicated.

The Eldest Miss thought, He might not have bullied you, but he bullied me. Seeing her sister was quite fond of Lin San, she sighed. Did Lin San have such a charm that even after bullying Yushuang, Yushuang still spoke well of him? And what about the brilliant woman Xiao Qingxuan who was also one of his intimates? She pondered about Lin San. Apart from being crafty, she couldn't find any particularly good qualities about him. Yet, he seemed like a disaster for women.

Frustrated at the failed attempt with the Second Miss, Lin Wanrong was rather irritated. He wasn't exactly eager to consummate a relationship with her just yet. After all, she was only sixteen. It wasn't wise for her to delve too early into romantic affairs. It would be best to let nature take its course. Using a trendy phrase, he considered it as "fattening the sheep before the slaughter."

However, since both of them had mutual affection, it should not be excessive for them to be intimate, touch, and thereby promote certain bodily developments of the Second Miss. Numerous practices had proved that a good figure could be nurtured by touch, and Lin Wanrong was exceedingly confident in his proficiency in this art.

That girl Xiao Yuruo was absolutely insufferable, guarding the Second Miss so closely as if she were protecting her from a thief, preventing him from laying his hands on her. Heh, if she wanted to keep a watchful eye on her, then he would make sure to sneak a kiss when least expected. This stealthy chase could perhaps prove more exciting.

After indulging in his fantasy for a while, he headed towards Food for Immortals. That day, the chaos at the Xiao residence had attracted the attention of the entire city. He wondered how the restaurant was faring, and Qiaoqiao must be deeply worried.

Thinking of Qiaoqiao, he felt warmth in his heart. With Qingxuan nowhere to be found, and the Second Miss under the watchful eye of the tigris, it was only sweet little Qiaoqiao who remained by his side. How could he not cherish her?

When he arrived at the restaurant, it was dusk. The restaurant was bustling with guests, sparkling lights, and lively chatter. Business seemed to be thriving, which brought him quiet satisfaction. Ah, all this money was his.

Upon climbing to the second floor from the first, he found neither Qiaoqiao nor the Dong father and son. As the scale of Food for Immortals had grown, they had hired some running hands to work downstairs. When he ascended to the third floor, he finally saw Old Dong.

He was meticulously keeping accounts. Watching him write word by word, Lin Wanrong felt impatient for him. Just as he was considering whether he should teach Old Dong the Arabic numerals, Old Dong lifted his head and saw Lin Wanrong. The brush he was holding dropped to the ground in surprise. "Little Lin, you've returned."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Uncle Dong, I've returned. Where is Qiaoqiao? Why haven't I seen her?"

Old Dong's eyes turned red, "Qiaoqiao...she, she..."

A bad premonition rose in Lin Wanrong's heart. "Uncle, what happened to Qiaoqiao? Did someone bully her? Damn it, who was it? I'll shoot them."

Old Dong shook his head, "No, that's not it. Qiaoqiao...she's ill"

"Ill? Where is she now? Is it serious? Has she seen a doctor?" Lin Wanrong fired off a series of questions. The thought of Yushuang already caused him heartache. He couldn't bear to grieve again over Qiaoqiao.

Old Dong pointed upstairs, and Lin Wanrong understood. No one ever visited the fifth floor, which had become Qiaoqiao's temporary boudoir due to her busy days at the restaurant.

Lin Wanrong hurriedly ascended, and upon entering the fifth floor, he heard a female voice softly saying, "Qingshan, is that you? Be quiet, your sister just fell asleep."

The woman's voice was vaguely familiar but it wasn't Qiaoqiao's. Lin Wanrong anxiously pushed through the curtain and nearly collided with the woman coming out.

"Miss Luo?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, recognizing her as Luo Ning, the foremost talented lady in Jinling.

"Brother Lin? You've returned? That's great, now Qiaoqiao will be saved." Luo Ning initially looked surprised, then relieved.

Ignoring why Luo Ning would be here, Lin Wanrong urgently asked, "Where's Qiaoqiao? Where is she?"

Luo Ning quickly placed her slender finger on her lips, whispering, "Shhshe just fell asleep."

Lin Wanrong entered the room only to see Qiaoqiao lying on the bed, her face deathly pale. A wet towel was draped over her forehead, and she had fallen asleep. He hadn't seen her for several days, and her once round, lovely face had already grown thin.

A twinge of pain coursed through Lin Wanrong's heart. He swiftly walked over, sat down beside her bed, took her small hand, and whispered gently, "Qiaoqiao, big brother came late."

In her sleep, it seemed Qiaoqiao heard his words. She let out a soft hum, murmuring, "Big brother." Her brow furrowed, and tears fell.

Lin Wanrong knew she must be dreaming about him. A wave of guilt surged within him. After returning last night, he should have visited Qiaoqiao immediately. She had endured so much hardship for him, and he knew he could never repay her deep affection.

He held Qiaoqiao's small hand tightly, sitting by her side in silence, watching her. An unprecedented sense of tranquility filled his heart, leaving no room for any inappropriate thoughts.

After a long silence, Lin Wanrong finally turned to Luo Ning and said, "Thank you, Miss Luo."

Luo Ning shook her head, "Big brother, why are you thanking me? Qiaoqiao is my good friend. It's only right that I visit her when she's sick. Moreover, I came here to seek her advice on a matter. By the way, big brother, how did you escape from the bandits? Everyone has been so worried these past few days, especially Qiaoqiao."

The Xiao family was a notable figure in Jinling City. The news of their house being attacked by bandits had spread throughout the city. Naturally, Qiaoqiao, who was concerned about Lin Wanrong, had received the news.

Gently caressing Qiaoqiao's beautiful cheek, Lin Wanrong sighed, "It's a long story. Miss Luo, could you tell me how Qiaoqiao fell ill?"

Luo Ning nodded, "When the Xiao family was in trouble, Qiaoqiao fainted on the spot after hearing the news. It scared the living daylights out of Qingshan and Uncle Dong. When Qiaoqiao woke up, she said she didn't want you to see the business decline when you came back, so she pushed herself to manage the shop. It wasn't until yesterday morning when there was still no news of you that she couldn't hold on any longer. She fell ill and started speaking nonsense."

"This silly girl," Lin Wanrong fondly rubbed her little hand against his cheek. Qiaoqiao was the first woman he had fallen for in this world, and also the first who cared so much for him. This evoked a special feeling in Lin Wanrong. His pledge was clear in his heart: he would rather fail the whole world, but he could never let down Qiaoqiao.

Qiaoqiao had slept for a while before she woke up leisurely. Seeing Lin Wanrong in front of her, she could hardly believe her eyes, two trails of tears streaming down her cheeks, "Big, big brother, is it you? Am I dreaming?"

Lin Wanrong rested his forehead against hers and gently kissed her burning lips, "Silly girl, does this look like a dream to you?"

"Big brother" Qiaoqiao could not hold back any longer, and she burst into tears.

Lin Wanrong was distressed and quickly patted her shoulders, "Qiaoqiao, big brother is fine, look, hasn't big brother come back?"

But the more he spoke, the harder Qiaoqiao cried. Knowing she had been greatly terrified these past days, he held her tightly, gently patting her shoulder, comforting her.

Eventually, Qiaoqiao managed to stop her tears and gazed at him blankly, "Big brother, how did you return? Did those bandits give you a hard time?"

With a thick skin, Lin Wanrong said, "Qiaoqiao, you know, big brother is talented and full of stratagems. Those little thieves were nothing. With big brother stepping in, everything was easily settled."

Laughing through her tears, Qiaoqiao said, "Big brother, you always find a way to coax me."

Pinching her little nose, Lin Wanrong said, "I only know how to coax my Qiaoqiao."

After saying this, he couldn't help but feel disdainful of himself. This was how he spoke to Yushuang and Qingxuan, and this move had always been effective.

Sure enough, Qiaoqiao stopped crying. She scolded, "Big brother" and couldn't bring herself to say more out of embarrassment.

Seeing Qiaoqiao blushing, shy, and beautiful as a begonia in spring, Lin Wanrong was delighted. He was about to tease her more when Luo Ning walked over with a bowl of medicinal soup, "Qiaoqiao, hurry and drink this while it's hot."

Dong Qiaoqiao was taken aback, "Sister Ning, I can't deserve your care. Where is Qingshan?"

Luo Ning replied, "When I arrived, Qingshan and Little Yuan already knew big brother was back. They must have gone to the Xiao's house." Lin Wanrong nodded, thinking to himself, I wasted a day messing around at the Rosy Cloud Temple, so I probably missed the two of them.

Feeling a sense of guilt, he took the bowl of soup from Luo Ning's hand and said, "Thank you, Miss Luo."

Chapter 120 Playing the Talented Woman

Luo Ning chuckled softly, "Big brother, there's no need for such formalities. Qiaoqiao is like a sister to me. Besides, I had other business today, which brought me here."

Lin Wanrong nodded approvingly. This made sense; he was not so conceited as to think that Miss Luo had come specifically for him. Though he often prided himself as the most handsome man in Jinling, he was well aware that his charm had no effect on Luo Ning. Luo Ning was outgoing and sincere in her dealings with others. A woman like her would have many friends, but to win her heart was an exceedingly difficult task.

Regardless of Luo Ning's intentions, she had taken care of Qiaoqiao, and he should be grateful for that. He nodded and said, "Miss Luo, let's do this. Later on, you tell us what you need, and I, on behalf of Qiaoqiao, pledge our support. If we can help, we will."

A mix of shyness and delight suffused Qiaoqiao as she looked at Lin Wanrong but offered no words of objection.

Lin Wanrong held a bowl of medicine to Qiaoqiao's lips, "Qiaoqiao, be a good girl and drink this while it's hot. Big brother will buy you some candy."

Behind them, Luo Ning stifled a laugh, thinking that his method of cajoling was rather peculiar.

Qiaoqiao felt sweet inside but, upon smelling the medicinal brew, couldn't hide her distaste, crinkling her brows, "It's bitter..."

Unperturbed, Lin Wanrong suggested, "How about I taste it first, then feed it to you?"

Luo Ning was made uncomfortable by his words, thinking to herself, This man truly is shameless. He can say such presumptuous things without batting an eye. Qiaoqiao, on the other hand, was so moved by his words that she obediently tipped her head back and swallowed the bitter brew.

Seeing Qiaoqiao's spirits lift and a smile return to her face, Lin Wanrong breathed a sigh of relief. He reflected that it didn't matter if he was caught, but involving his beloved Yushuang and Qiaoqiao was a grave mistake; he could not afford to repeat such folly. Now that he had both his divine skills and his gun, getting captured again would be quite a feat.

Qiaoqiao, still tired, fell into a peaceful sleep under Lin Wanrong's watchful gaze.

Lin Wanrong gestured to Luo Ning, who followed him out of the room. The two of them stepped outside. Lin Wanrong smiled, "Miss Luo, please tell us what you need help with."

As he spoke, he opened the window, allowing the cool breeze from the Xuanwu Lake to waft in, bringing him some relief. The five-story building was lavishly decorated. The lake, visible in the distance, shimmered under the fluctuating light, a spectacular sight that made him feel light and carefree.

Luo Ning shared a similar sentiment, admiring the lakeside scenery from the window and chuckling, "Big brother, you've chosen well with this place."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "It's not that I have eyes for quality, but my understanding of human psychology."

"Oh? What do you mean by that, big brother?" Luo Ning asked curiously.

"From a psychological perspective, everyone wants to be above others, looking down upon the world. This feeling can bring about a greater sense of accomplishment. It's like us standing here, everyone has to look up to us, so it feels great." Lin Wanrong went on to display his knowledge in psychology.

After some thought, Luo Ning nodded, "Big brother, your words are indeed insightful. I suppose since ancient times, all monarchs and generals must have felt the same."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "That's unrelated to what we're discussing today. Please tell us what you need our help with."

With a smile, Luo Ning thought to herself, This topic of psychology was your idea, and now you're saying it's unrelated. Your leaps in thought are truly unmatched by ordinary people.

"The reason I came to seek Qiaoqiao's help is that there's something troubling me." As she mentioned this, Luo Ning involuntarily lowered her head. It seemed difficult for her to voice out her request, a rarity for such a forthcoming person like her.

Seeing her hesitancy, Lin Wanrong wondered what was going on. Could it be she was longing for love, hoping for Qiaoqiao to introduce her to a boyfriend?

He chuckled, "Miss Luo, speak freely. Luo Yuan is my brother, you are his sister. We're family. There's no need for such formalities."

Luo Ning was silent for a while before saying, "I have two reasons for seeking Qiaoqiao, but in essence, they pertain to one issue. I wish to ask her help in raising donations."

Fundraising? Lin Wanrong understood immediately. What donations? To put it bluntly, it's sponsorship. He hadn't expected her to have such a modern mindset. Luo Ning, truly Jinling's foremost talented woman, could come up with such an idea. If she were in business, she'd certainly be as crafty a merchant as himself.

"Oh? Donations? What are donations?" Lin Wanrong feigned ignorance.

Since Luo Ning had already started speaking, she decided to explain it fully, "Donations involve collecting some silver from wealthy city dwellers for charitable purposes. A few friends and I have set up a charity hall, specifically to aid orphans and widows."

Isn't that the Red Cross? Luo Ning's ideas were indeed advanced. But being the daughter of the Governor of Jiangsu and blessed with such beauty, surely, wouldn't people readily offer their wealth to her? Why would she need to raise donations?

Luo Ning seemed to anticipate his doubt, and she explained seriously, "Big brother, though my father is the Governor of Jiangsu, he is a man of integrity. He would never allow us to accept gifts indiscriminately. Though I am but a woman, I understand this principle. I would never accept unjust money."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, he hadn't expected this young lady to have such an upright character. This talented woman was indeed interesting.

"A few years ago, we were able to raise some donations, but recently, we've approached all the wealthy patrons we could find. Having supported us for so many years, they've lost interest, making fundraising increasingly difficult," Luo Ning sighed and continued.

Lin Wanrong thought to himself, That's natural. The first year you approached them, they might have been inclined to help due to your status as the Governor's daughter. But people's patience wears thin; one cannot keep asking without offering something in return. Philanthropists do exist, but not in the way you imagined.

Being a crafty merchant himself, Lin Wanrong was no benevolent patron. He thought for a moment, then asked, "How many children are you taking care of? How old are they, approximately?"

Luo Ning nodded, "We have more than a dozen children. The oldest are around eleven or twelve, and the youngest are three or four."

Lin Wanrong paused before saying, "Miss Luo, regarding this matter of donations, I can contribute"

"Really? Thank you so much. Brother Lin, I, on behalf of the children, thank you" Before he could finish his sentence, Luo Ning, assuming he had agreed, jumped up in joy.

With a wry smile, Lin Wanrong corrected her, "Miss Luo, you've misunderstood. I'm not offering to donate money"

Luo Ning exclaimed in disappointment. Lin Wanrong thought to himself, this young lady thinks money is easy to earn. This money is the fruit of Qiaoqiao's hard labor. It's not right to let you gain without lifting a finger.

"However, I can offer you a suggestion," Lin Wanrong continued.

Luo Ning's spirits weren't high. She had traveled many places for these donations, only to be met with similar results, and the disappointment was hard to hide.

Lin Wanrong sighed, thinking, This young lady only thinks of doing good, but hasn't considered that her good deeds are done at others' expense. How could this last?

"Let me give you a suggestion. Miss Luo, aren't you Jinling's top talent? Your friends are also gifted individuals, so I presume you're all skilled in calligraphy and painting. Why not collect your works, periodically gather patrons who appreciate calligraphy and painting, and hold charity auctions?" Lin Wanrong suggested.

"Charity auctions? What's an auction?" Luo Ning asked in surprise.

Lin Wanrong explained the concept of an auction to her. Luo Ning pondered for a while and thought, this method is indeed good. Not only does it increase the visibility of the talented men and women, but it also provides a source of income. It makes a lot of sense.

She nodded, "Big brother, I've never seen an auction before, so I don't know what the outcome will be. But I can try. But, would people really be willing to spend a lot of money to buy our calligraphy and paintings?"

Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "Of course, you are all gifted individuals. The future masters of literature and painting will emerge from among you. Those with discerning eyes will certainly be willing to pay. Moreover, you can offer them some benefits. For example, incorporating their names into the calligraphy and paintings, and recording their good deeds, both in books and on stelae. This

way, they gain prestige and acquire artwork they appreciate. It's a win-win situation. Why wouldn't they be pleased?"

Luo Ning clenched her teeth and said, "Alright, I'll give it a try when I go back."

Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, "You can go ahead, I guarantee you'll be satisfied. If your calligraphy and paintings sell well, remember to reserve a few for me."

Luo Ning chuckled but said nothing.

Lin Wanrong continued, "Since you're so compassionate, I'll contribute as well. But we have to be careful with the money matters. If we only give these children silver, it might sustain them now, but what about the future? You can't support them forever. It's better to teach a man to fish than to give him a fish. Send the children over the age of ten who you have taken in to this restaurant. We'll be responsible for training them in cooking, waiting tables, providing meals and accommodation. As for their monthly salary, since they're still apprentices, it should be a little less for now, say five taels of silver per month. What do you think?"

Luo Ning gratefully said, "Big brother, you're very thoughtful. I was only thinking about how to support them but never considered teaching them skills to become self-reliant. I'm so grateful, big brother."

Thanking me? Lin Wanrong found it amusing. In my world, I'd be arrested for employing child labor, but here I'm appreciated for it. I'm a businessman, I won't do business that loses money. We're short of staff at the restaurant anyway. These kids won't cost much a month. With training, they'll become the backbone of the restaurant. This is called talent reserve, a long-term vision.

"By the way, didn't you say you have two things to discuss? The first one is pretty much settled. Let's talk about the second one," Lin Wanrong said with a smile.

As soon as he finished speaking, Luo Ning seemed embarrassed and lowered her head. Lin Wanrong understood immediately. Ah, here comes the money matter again.

"Big brother, we have a poetry competition in Jinling every year, and this year is the tenth one," Luo Ning said softly.

A poetry competition? Interesting. But it doesn't have anything to do with me. It's you talented individuals who participate and make a show of yourselves, ending up in a collective matchmaking event. How does that involve me?

"Do you need money?" Lin Wanrong guessed, noticing Luo Ning's discomfort.

Luo Ning's head dropped lower as she said shyly, "We're short by a thousand taels of silver."

Lin Wanrong jumped in surprise. Good heavens, that much? To hold a damned poetry competition requires so much silver? Damn, these young masters and mistresses must be burning money for fun. It seems that Luo Ning, seeing my restaurant making money every day, has come specifically to ask for alms. However, a thousand taels of silver isn't something easily collected, it would take the restaurant two or three days of work.

He shook his head in resignation. Little Luo, you're an honest person, but you, Sister Talented Woman, you're acting a bit unfairly. Isn't there a saying about not eating the grass next to one's nest? Yet, you choose the soft persimmon to squeeze, thinking Qiaoqiao can't refuse? Damn it, Qiaoqiao is my wife, she should listen to me.

As Lin Wanrong was ruminating in resentment, he heard Luo Ning say, "Actually, I feel embarrassed to ask Qiaoqiao for help, but we're running out of time. We've already approached the wealthy households in Jinling City during the previous competitions, it's difficult to raise more money."

A thousand taels of silver was no small amount. In Jinling city, only a handful of wealthy households could sponsor this poetry competition with that much money in one go. They must have been rejected elsewhere, and Luo Ning, unwilling to rely on her father's power, was left with no other choice but to approach Qiaoqiao.

"Isn't your poetry competition membership-based? Why don't you ask them for money, like a registration fee?" Lin Wanrong asked.

Luo Ning shook her head, "The purpose of the poetry competition is to discover more talent. If we start collecting money, things could get messy."

Lin Wanrong nodded. He had seen many talent shows and model competitions in his previous life; which didn't have shady deals and exchanges of power and sex behind them? It was rare for Luo Ning to be aware of these issues.

"Who do you invite to these poetry competitions?" Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment before asking.

Seeing his tone soften, Luo Ning hurriedly responded, "The reputation of the poetry competition is quite extensive. Participants are talented individuals from all over Jiangsu Province. Moreover, the Jiangsu Provincial Education Commissioner will personally attend, making it a grand and bustling event."

The personal attendance of the Education Commissioner was naturally attractive to those talents. Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "Miss Luo, I will provide a thousand taels of silver, but I have a few conditions"

"Please tell me your conditions, big brother." Luo Ning's previously despairing heart immediately came back to life.

"My conditions are simple." Lin Wanrong smiled, "Firstly, the name of my restaurant, 'Food for Immortals', should be placed before the poetry competition, making it 'Food for Immortals' Exclusive Sponsor of the Jinling Poetry Competition."

"This" Luo Ning hesitated for a moment, immediately grasping the key point. In her mind, he really was a cunning businessman, never missing any opportunity. However, there was never such a precedent, and she was a bit flustered.

Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Miss Luo, this doesn't cause any loss to you and it benefits my 'Food for Immortals'. It's a win-win situation, why not take advantage of it?"

Luo Ning hesitated for a moment, then gritted her teeth and said, "Fine, I agree to your terms."

Lin Wanrong gave a light smile, "This is what we call a win-win, Miss Luo, there's no need for such distress. Besides, I want my 'Food for Immortals' logo to be printed on all your items: stationery, official and flower boats, lanterns, silk, toilet paper, napkins, everything."

If you're going to squeeze my wealth, I will advertise, making my 'Food for Immortals' omnipresent. I will regain the lost silver, tenfold, hundredfold. Lin Wanrong thought fiercely.

Luo Ning was both angry and annoyed. No one had ever made such demands before, not even the sponsors of previous rounds had the audacity to match a tenth of Lin Wanrong's brazenness.

She sighed. What was supposed to be a very elegant poetry competition was now smelling of mere copper. She wondered how this man could come up with such harsh conditions.

Lin Wanrong didn't care about the 'copper smell'. This is called mutual benefit, business is king. You 'talented' folks enjoy your high-minded poetry, I prefer things more earthy.

"Miss Luo, don't worry. To show my sincerity, 'Food for Immortals' will provide some elegant gifts for the poetry competition," Lin Wanrong chuckled.

"What kind of gifts?" Luo Ning asked curiously.

"Every participant will receive a free oil-paper umbrella from 'Food for Immortals'," Lin Wanrong grinned mischievously.

"I bet it will also bear the logo of your 'Food for Immortals'," Luo Ning snapped.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Mutual benefit, simply mutual benefit."

He imagined a rainy day in Jinling, when the streets were filled with oil-paper umbrellas, each imprinted with 'Food for Immortals'. It would be hard for 'Food for Immortals' not to become famous.

Luo Ning was completely defeated by the man before her. She had once thought he was learned, and his manner unique. However, this uniqueness soon proved a headache for her.

She sighed inwardly, wondering where he got these bizarre ideas. With these conditions, the poetry competition would essentially become an exclusive advertising platform for him.

Luo Ning felt like a lamb in a wolf's den, and she was on the verge of tears.