

Finest 131

Chapter 131 The Old Fox

"Qiaoqiao, slow down, what happened to Qingshan?" Lin Wanrong was startled. So late in the night, and Qiaoqiao was waiting here. Could it be that something had truly happened to Qingshan? That shouldn't be the case, wasn't Little Luo watching over him? Even if Qingshan was rash, Little Luo was a clever one and there should not have been any mishaps.

"Big brother, last night, I saw Qingshan and Beidou storing a lot of knives, spears, and sticks in their room. But by evening today, they were all gone, and the two of them were nowhere to be seen. Qingshan must have gone out to fight. Even though he used to fight in the past, he always relied on his fists. But this time with knives and spears, it's certainly no small matter. Big brother, you must save Qingshan. If he's hurt, my father won't survive," Qiaoqiao said, her voice choked with urgency.

The fact that Dong Qingshan was building a gang, even Qiaoqiao was kept in the dark. This girl was pure-hearted and knew nothing about her little brother's complete transformation into a gang leader, under the guidance of his big brother. She knew Qingshan was preparing weapons to fight someone, but she was unaware of Qingshan's current strength.

Upon learning that Qingshan hadn't been kidnapped, Lin Wanrong felt a great deal of relief. He patted the young girl's shoulder, saying, "Qiaoqiao, don't worry. Qingshan will be fine. Trust your big brother."

Qiaoqiao clung to his sleeve, weeping softly, "Big brother, I didn't see Qingshan this afternoon and I panicked. I didn't know what to do, so I came to the Xiao family to find you. But they said you and the Eldest Miss were out. I, I, I'm so worried, big brother..."

Qiaoqiao had been waiting here for an hour, filled with worry and fear. Seeing her dependable big brother now, how could she not break down in tears?

Lin Wanrong held her tightly, comforting her, "Qiaoqiao, don't be scared. Big brother is here. Don't worry, Qingshan is my brother-in-law, I won't let anything happen to him."

Blushing, Qiaoqiao clung to him tightly. She had found emotional support, but her shoulders still trembled slightly. She wouldn't truly relax until she saw Qingshan return safely. Lin Wanrong knew

what she was thinking. He turned her around, asking, "Qiaoqiao, what about Luo Yuan? Isn't he supposed to be with Qingshan?"

Wiping her tears, Qiaoqiao replied, "Yesterday he was in the room with Qingshan, talking for a long time. It seemed like they were planning something. Then he left, and I haven't seen him today."

Qingshan had prepared weapons yesterday, indicating that he had planned ahead. He was not acting without a plan, especially with Little Luo as his advisor. They wouldn't be at a disadvantage. Qiaoqiao didn't understand Qingshan's current strength and thought he was the same as before, a rogue fighter. It was her concern that drove her to hurriedly seek Lin Wanrong's help.

In a few moments, Lin Wanrong had guessed the situation quite accurately. If his assumptions were correct, Little Luo and Qingshan had chosen the right time to strike Wu Zhenghu.

These two young men were truly gutsy. Even though they hadn't reported to Lin Wanrong, he was quite pleased. He had made his stance clear last time; the affairs of Hung Hing were to be managed by these two youths, with him not intervening. This hands-off approach was intended to strengthen Little Luo and Qingshan's abilities. Their readiness to take action today suggested that they were indeed confident. If they won this battle, it would certainly be a tremendous boon for Little Luo and Qingshan.

With this understanding in mind, Lin Wanrong gave a slight smile, saying, "Qiaoqiao, don't worry. Qingshan will be fine, I promise. Did you hear where they were going?"

Seeing the smile on Lin Wanrong's face, Qiaoqiao knew that he was genuinely confident. She felt a lot more reassured and obediently replied, "I overheard him talking with Beidou, they seem to be going to Guaima Alley in the southern part of the city."

Lin Wanrong was familiar with that place; its terrain was undulating, an ideal place for ambush. Hearing this, he felt even more confident.

Qiaoqiao, who had just recovered from a serious illness and had been waiting here for over an hour, was already exhausted. Now, reassured, she leaned against Lin Wanrong like a puppet without strings.

Seeing her exhaustion, Lin Wanrong felt a pang of pity. He addressed a servant at the gate, "This young lady came to see me, why didn't you invite her in?"

At this point, he was the Xiao family's favorite, and everyone in the mansion sought his favor. The servant wouldn't dare to refuse and apologized, "Young Master Lin, we persuaded this young lady many times, but she refused to go to the guest room for tea."

Qiaoqiao quickly interjected, "Big brother, don't blame them, it was my choice to wait here. The Xiao mansion is grand and prosperous, and you work inside, I don't want to cause you trouble."

Lin Wanrong snorted, "Qiaoqiao, from now on, you come to the Xiao mansion whenever you want. Don't hold back, if anyone dares to slight you, tell me, I'll sort them out. Consider the Xiao mansion as your own home."

His words were bold and audacious. Qiaoqiao, not understanding, responded blankly, "Big brother, this is the Xiao family's home, how can I consider it my own?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, indeed, he had spoken too freely. His face reddened slightly as he held Qiaoqiao tighter, "Silly girl, I just don't want you to be treated poorly. My status in the Xiao family has changed, no one can bully my Qiaoqiao."

Even after his reassurances, Qiaoqiao was still worried about Qingshan. Lin Wanrong thought, I should go and check on what those two are up to, it might alleviate Qiaoqiao's worries.

Just as he was about to escort Qiaoqiao home, he heard the Eldest Miss Xiao, who had been silent all this time, speak, "Lin San, where are you going?"

Damn, he had been talking so long that he had forgotten about the Eldest Miss Xiao. Qiaoqiao pulled on his sleeve, glanced at Xiao Yuruo and said softly, "Big brother, is this Eldest Miss Xiao? She's indeed very beautiful."

Seeing Qiaoqiao's slight jealousy, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "No matter how beautiful she is, she can't compare to my good, clever Qiaoqiao." Upon hearing this, Qiaoqiao blushed and smiled, her grievance vanishing.

Lin Wanrong sighed; the easiest woman to appease was indeed Qiaoqiao. Not marrying her as his wife would be against all reason.

Xiao Yuruo noticed that Lin San was only concerned with talking to that woman and didn't even answer her question. She couldn't help but huff, "Lin San, I am speaking to you, didn't you hear?"

Lin Wanrong looked up and smiled, "Eldest Miss, my friend is in some trouble. I need to check on him."

Xiao Yuruo's eyebrows furrowed, "Tonight, I had planned to discuss with you about the promotion of the perfumes and soaps--"

What the hell, when did you ever discuss this with me? And why choose today of all days? He laughed and said, "Eldest Miss, I am not available today. Let's have a thorough discussion another day."

Seeing him talk to Eldest Miss Xiao this way, Qiaoqiao quickly tugged at his sleeve, "Big brother, you shouldn't neglect your duties."

Lin Wanrong stopped her, "Qiaoqiao, only your concerns are important to me, everything else is nonsense." Although coarse, his words went straight to Qiaoqiao's heart. She hummed in acknowledgment and blushed, too shy to speak.

Xiao Yuruo watched the two of them chatting warmly and couldn't help but furrow her brows, "May I ask who this young lady is--"

Seeing Eldest Miss Xiao asking about her, Qiaoqiao quickly replied, "Eldest Miss Xiao, I'm from the old Dong family in town. I made clothes for your mansion a few years ago."

Eldest Miss Xiao said, "Oh, from the old Dong family. I've heard my mother mention you. I seem to remember, your name was something like Xiangxiang or Qiaoqiao. I'm not sure if I've got it wrong."

Qiaoqiao blushed, "Eldest Miss Xiao has a good memory, my name is Qiaoqiao."

Lin Wanrong felt a bit annoyed; What Xiangxiang, such a vulgar name. My darling was named Qiaoqiao, a hundred times better sounding than Xiao Yuruo. However, the fact that Eldest Miss Xiao, who had never met Qiaoqiao before, could remember her name to such an extent, demonstrated an impressive memory.

Eldest Miss Xiao had a strange smile on her face. She glanced at Qiaoqiao, seemingly pleased, and then turned to Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, since you're busy, you should get going. I'll have a good chat with Qiaoqiao today."

Chat? You don't know my Qiaoqiao, what would you have to talk about? Why had Eldest Miss Xiao suddenly become so generous? Lin Wanrong was puzzled. Xiao Yuruo turned to Qiaoqiao and asked, "I wonder if Qiaoqiao is willing to join me?"

Earlier, Qiaoqiao was distracted due to Qingshan's matter, but now she was somewhat collected. She smiled shyly and replied, "Eldest Miss Xiao is joking, as long as you don't find me dull, I'd be happy to talk with you."

Seeing Eldest Miss Xiao's mysterious smile, Lin Wanrong had a bad feeling. He took Qiaoqiao's hand and said, "Darling, let me take you home. I worry that talking to this girl might have a bad influence on you."

Qiaoqiao shyly replied, "Big brother, since you work for the Xiao family, it wouldn't be bad for me to chat with Eldest Miss Xiao. It could make it easier for me to visit you in the future."

Lin Wanrong's heart bloomed with joy upon hearing Qiaoqiao's words. So that was her plan, she truly was a cunning little one. He held Qiaoqiao's hand and laughed, "In that case, you can stay here and chat with her. However, this Eldest Miss has a peculiar character, and I can't seem to figure her out. If she badmouths me, don't believe her. The opposite of what she says is the truth. If she says I'm bad, think of me as good. If she accuses me of being fickle, take that as me being devoted."

Dong Qiaoqiao stifled a laugh, "Big brother, I understand your character far better than Eldest Miss Xiao, you can rest assured."

While the words sounded comforting, there seemed to be an underlying message. Goodness, these young women were all so cunning! Lin Wanrong shook his head in resignation, mounted his horse, and saw that Eldest Miss Xiao had already taken hold of Qiaoqiao's hand, a smile blooming on her face like a fresh May flower.

He didn't bother with what the two women were chatting about; he was indeed eager to see how Qingshan and Little Luo were faring in their fight. So, he rode southward toward the city gate. The night had fallen and he was away from the bustling streets, so the road was deserted. He galloped all the way, and before reaching the turning lane, he heard the sounds of clashing weapons.

Damn, they were really going at it. Lin Wanrong was immensely excited. He dismounted, climbed up a slope and gazed down from afar.

At the foot of the hill, torches were held high with hundreds of people in a chaotic melee. One side in motley attire was already at a clear disadvantage, with many fallen to the ground. The other side was much larger in number, all dressed in black and with red cloth bands wrapped around their left arms. Lin Wanrong immediately spotted Dong Qingshan. The lad, strong as a bull, was dressed in black and held a heavy wooden stick in his hand. With a fierce swing, he struck down a smaller opponent.

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath, it was an ambush indeed. The rigorous training of the Hung Hing gang had finally come into play. Their two hundred or so men were clearly a notch above the adversaries and held a numerical advantage, swiftly breaking the enemy's formation.

What surprised him most was that he saw Little Luo in the attacking squad. The most capable fighters, Qingshan, Li Beidou, and another man, were protecting him. Little Luo held a wooden stick in his hand, his face flushed with excitement as he attacked anyone he saw.

Initially, Lin Wanrong had thought that a bookish person like Little Luo would be afraid of the sight of blood. But once on the battlefield, he seemed to enjoy the fight more than anyone else. Never underestimate human nature, Lin Wanrong thought to himself.

The other man protecting Little Luo, standing close to Luo Yuan, struck cleanly and efficiently, with no superfluous movements. Lin Wanrong watched in secret astonishment. When had the Hung Hing gang recruited such a skilled fighter?

Lin Wanrong had arrived somewhat late. The fight had already ended, with the Hung Hing gang emerging as the clear victors. Dong Qingshan, Luo Yuan, and Li Beidou, were ecstatic, hugging each other and shouting. However, the skilled fighter who had been protecting Little Luo took advantage of the chaos to slip away quietly.

Something's fishy, thought Lin Wanrong, and he discreetly followed the man. After a few twists and turns, the man entered a dark alley, glancing over his shoulder before disappearing into it.

Lin Wanrong, having no regard for the taboo of 'not chasing into alleys or entering forests,' quietly followed him in. He looked up and saw a small sedan parked in the alley, flanked on either side by several burly men in green.

The man who had helped Luo Yuan bowed before the sedan and reported, "My lord, the task has been completed."

A voice from the sedan asked, "Did Little Yuan and the others discover you?"

The man replied, "The young master has never seen me, so naturally he wouldn't recognize me. However, in my opinion, the young master seems very interested in this matter of fighting."

The person in the sedan chuckled, "This kid, despite studying literature, seems to have a penchant for fighting."

He leaned out from the sedan, revealing a chubby old man with a protruding belly. His face glowed with a red hue, and his smile squeezed his eyes into narrow slits, resembling a Maitreya Buddha. At first glance, he gave off the impression of a stereotypical corrupt official.

Damn, has this old man had plastic surgery? Otherwise, how could someone with his appearance have a daughter as beautiful as Luo Ning? It was as if a vile bamboo had given rise to a fine shoot. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself, You old fox, I've got you now.

Chapter 132 Baffled

The portly old man glanced towards the site of the commotion, shook his head, climbed into his palanquin, and commanded, "Let's head back to the mansion." The palanquin moved slowly away.

Lin Wanrong, who had already identified this man, jumped forward, calling, "Sir, please hold on."

At his shout, the burly men surrounding the palanquin started, immediately tensing up. They encircled the palanquin protectively, eyeing Lin Wanrong with caution.

The old man pulled back the curtain, took one look, and seeing Lin Wanrong's face, paused. A trace of an awkward smile appeared on his face, and he waved his hand, saying, "Stop for a moment."

The old man slowly disembarked, clasping his fist towards Lin Wanrong, "May I ask why this young gentleman has halted my journey?"

Seeing no great surprise on his face, Lin Wanrong felt more confident. Pretending, are you, old man? He laughed heartily, "It's getting late, and I was just strolling in this alley. Quite unexpectedly, I ran into you, sir. You seem quite interested in this place, and I think we may call it fate. I hope you'll forgive me for my audacity in stopping you."

The men guarding the palanquin, listening to his nonsense, thought to themselves, Strolling my foot! It's dark, and here you are, a mere servant, blocking the palanquin. You're probably looking for trouble.

"Do you have any advice for me, young master?" The old man chuckled, his eyes squinted into slits by his smile.

"Ah, I just happened to witness the spectacle over there, and it frightened me a bit. Sir, you have a kind and friendly appearance, and I assumed you were a gentle elder. Seeing you made me feel more at ease," Lin Wanrong bluffed.

"Oh," the old man sighed, "I saw it too. Didn't expect that my little outing would be marred by such an unsightly incident. To be honest, I was a bit scared, which is why I asked my servants to leave early. I'm afraid I made a laughingstock of myself in front of you."

You, scared? You're a better actor than I am, old fox. In the past, Lin Wanrong planned to use the governor's son, Luo Yuan, to strengthen Hung Hing. Now, this old man was using Hung Hing to restrain the Cheng family, proving that no one was a pushover. However, this old man, who had even involved his own son, was staking too much.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "No laughing matter, no laughing matter, we're all in the same boat. Actually, I followed you because I thought you looked familiar."

The old man asked in surprise, "Oh, who do you think I resemble?"

Lin Wanrong smiled, "In this land of Jiangsu, whoever is the most powerful, you resemble him."

The old man laughed heartily, squeezing out a few bitter smiles on his face, "Young Master Lin, why must you talk in riddles with me? I have long heard of your intelligence and capabilities. Now that I have met you in person, you truly live up to your reputation. You are ten times more formidable than the rumors suggest."

Flattery was a basic skill in the world of officials, and this old Luo had certainly mastered its essence, readily engaging in it. Lin Wanrong clasped his fists and greeted him with a respectful smile, "I'm Lin Wanrong. It's a pleasure to meet you, Governor."

Luo Min hastily responded, "Please, no formalities, Young Master Lin. With your natural intelligence and exceptional talent, I have no doubt that you'll stand out among your peers and have an extraordinary future. I'm undeserving of your courtesy."

What nonsense about natural intelligence and exceptional talent! This old fox hadn't even seen my face before and yet he was trying to butter me up. When it came to flattery, Lin Wanrong was an expert among experts; he effortlessly filtered out Luo Min's words.

He curiously looked at Luo Min, "Governor Luo, why would you say that? I'm but a mere servant, uneducated, lacking in martial arts skills, and without wealth or power. How am I expected to stand out?"

Luo Min chuckled, "Reading poetry, practicing archery, while these may lead to some achievement, they're ultimately driven by others and aren't worth mentioning." His implication was that even without such accomplishments, Lin Wanrong could still be an exceptional person. This was indeed curious. Lin Wanrong had never interacted with him before. How could this old man have such confidence in him?

Lin Wanrong glanced at Luo Min and tentatively asked, "On the day of the restaurant opening, I was gifted with a golden plaque, and today you've sent your son to assist me. I'm truly grateful. However, since we have never met before, I wonder why you have such high regard for me?"

Luo Min, looking at Lin Wanrong, gave a mysterious smile, "Young Master Lin, your talents are outstanding. I've heard about your exploits at the brothel where you manipulated the top courtesans. I'm quite envious of your business acumen and your superior intellect. I fully support my son befriending you. Recognizing and understanding people is part of my responsibility as the chief official of Jiangsu. How could I ignore such a talent in my jurisdiction? Though we've never met, it seems our spirits have known each other for a long time."

Damn, he is indeed a cunning one, not revealing a hint of his intentions. Lin Wanrong didn't believe him for a second and laughed, "Governor Luo, you make me blush. Fortunately, I've recently made the acquaintance of many talented individuals who would certainly be moved by your noble character. I believe your golden plaques will be in high demand."

Luo Min awkwardly laughed, "Young Master Lin, don't joke like that. Your assistance to the Xiao family and your fight against the White Lotus, your actions are extraordinary, it's only right for me to show a bit of appreciation."

What does he mean by that? Is he insinuating that I've gotten involved in some sort of power struggle? Hell, I'm just taking advantage of the governor. These factional matters, it's better if they don't involve me.

Luo Min gave another mysterious smile, then continued, "Some time ago, I heard about your brave fight against the White Lotus and your rescue of Eldest Miss Xiao. Truly a cause for celebration."

This old fox, Lin Wanrong cursed inwardly. That White Lotus incident was due to your failure in maintaining order as the Governor. And yet you have the audacity to talk about my fight against the White Lotus.

It seemed as though Luo Min had perceived his thoughts and sighed, "As for the White Lotus, I may have the will, but I lack the power. The soldiers at my disposal are merely city guards, while the infantry barracks are under the control of Commander Cheng. Even with my limited authority, I cannot mobilize them. On the occasion when I tried to capture them, they disappeared as if they had been forewarned." Luo Min's eyes flickered with a shrewd glint.

His words were loaded with implications. This old fox is far from being a fool, Lin Wanrong mused. However, these matters of office politics were not my concern. Was this an excuse to exploit Hung Hing? Even if Hung Hing handled matters well, it was still a gang and couldn't be compared to the Green Battalion.

Luo Min knew that the servant before him was a shrewd person who couldn't be easily deceived. With earnestness, he said, "Young Master Lin, rest assured, I bear no ill will towards you, and I believe you can feel it. I'm here today simply because I'm concerned about Luo Yuan. This child has grown so much and yet, he has never been in a fight." Speaking of Luo Yuan, a glimmer of affection flashed across the old fox's eyes, revealing his deep love for his son.

That Luo Min bore no ill intentions, Lin Wanrong never doubted. It was evident from his encouragement of Luo Yuan's closeness to Lin. This old man had placed all his bets on Lin Wanrong, which was strange. How could he place such a high bet on a mere servant like him?

"Governor Luo, I deeply appreciate your kindness. However, I'm a stubborn man who never believes in manna from heaven. Your support for me must be motivated by someone else's

instigation. Am I correct?" Since the old Luo was not willing to speak, Lin Wanrong decided to confront him directly, challenging the old fox to acknowledge it.

With a bitter smile, Luo Min responded, "I can't say, and I dare not say. Please forgive me, Young Master Lin. But believe me, you are under the protection of a nobleman. Success is only a matter of time."

Damn, what a nobleman's protection? This old man only speaks half of his mind and it's frustrating. However, Luo Min's words sent a clear signal; indeed, someone was secretly helping Lin Wanrong.

Seeing the old fox's genuine expression, Lin Wanrong became curious, wondering who this secret benefactor could be. Of the people he knew, if wealth and power were the criteria, Xiao Qingxuan would top the list. Could it be that the girl truly had powerful connections?

"Is it Qingxuan?" Lin Wanrong tentatively asked.

With a calm expression, Luo Min shook his head and bitterly smiled, "Young Master Lin, please don't press me further."

Damn, if I don't press you, who will I press? You're as slippery as an eel, giving me a half-truth then swallowing the rest. How could you not frustrate me? Even if Qingxuan was a princess, would a single word from her be enough to have this territorial governor so devoted? Knowing the nature of this old fox, it would not be that simple.

Such a headache. I didn't even know who is backing me up or whether they could stand up against the mastermind behind Cheng De. Choosing the wrong side in critical times could cost one's life.

Seeing Lin Wanrong lost in deep thought, Luo Min said, "Young Master Lin, you need not guess any longer. Even if I had the courage, I wouldn't dare to tell you. Just continue doing what you're doing and help the Xiao family as best as you can."

Damn, how did the Xiao family get involved again? Could it not be Qingxuan? The more he asked, the more complicated it became. Was this old fox playing a game of Tai Chi with him?

Though he had gained some insight, it bred even more questions, making Lin Wanrong's head spin. He looked at Luo Min and said, "Regardless, I appreciate your guidance, Governor Luo. If you need help with anything in the future, feel free to ask - as long as it doesn't involve money." Even at this

moment, he didn't forget his crafty merchant instincts - apart from asking for money, he could assist with anything else. After all, Luo Min was acting under someone else's directive to help him. He felt that acknowledging this was sufficient.

Luo Min nodded and smiled, "Young Master Lin is indeed straightforward. However, I was wondering if you might be free tomorrow. I would like to invite you to accompany me to a certain place."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Is it the Miaoyu Pavilion? I haven't been there in quite a while. I wonder if the girls there still remember me."

Luo Min, being the governor of a province, could hardly withstand such a jest. He responded with an awkward smile, "Tomorrow morning, I will send someone to fetch you. You will understand when we get there."

Upon parting from Luo Min, Lin Wanrong continued to ponder who could be secretly supporting him from behind the scenes. Despite much thought, aside from Qingxuan, he couldn't identify anyone else. But Luo Min's demeanor told him the matter was not so straightforward.

Returning to the Xiao mansion, Lin Wanrong was concerned about Qiaoqiao. He stopped one of the young maids downstairs and asked, "Has Miss Qiaoqiao, who was speaking with the Eldest Miss earlier, left yet?"

The maid replied, "Not yet. The Eldest Miss and Miss Qiaoqiao are having a heart-to-heart talk. Miss Qiaoqiao will be spending the night in the Eldest Miss' room."

A heart-to-heart talk? Lin Wanrong was taken aback. What could these two young ladies be discussing? Through the lantern-lit paper window, he could clearly see two delicate silhouettes. It deepened Lin Wanrong's puzzlement...

Chapter 133 The Eldest Miss Underwear

Early the next morning, before Luo Min's official sedan arrived, Dong Qingshan and Luo Yuan, the two young men, were already waiting. Lin Wanrong received them warmly in the Xiao family's guest room. Lin Wanrong's status in the Xiao family had risen like the sun at midday, and he had a faint sense of being the master of the house, which was quite comfortable.

"Big brother" Dong Qingshan's face was excited as he held onto Lin Wanrong's hand tightly, "Last night, we took action."

Lin Wanrong glanced at Luo Yuan. The young man's eyes were filled with fear and excitement. His ordinarily pale face was now flushed red. Laughing, Lin Wanrong said, "Little Luo, what's this about? Did you sneak some of your sister's rouge?"

Luo Yuan, embarrassed, chuckled, "Big brother, I don't know what happened, maybe I was too excited last night. When I woke up this morning, I looked like this."

Lin Wanrong understood his feelings. Little Luo, who had been studying the classics, used to be somewhat restrained by etiquette. However, what they had done the night before had completely contradicted the teachings of the sages. It must have been a thrilling, yet fearful experience.

Both Qingshan and Luo Yuan were surprised to see Lin Wanrong merely smiling, showing none of the shock they had expected. Qingshan said, "Big brother, do you already know about this?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "You little devil, you should be more discreet in your affairs. Your sister was frightened when she saw you handling both knives and sticks."

With embarrassment, Qingshan scratched his head, "I was too excited and forgot to cover it up. By the way, big brother, I heard that my sister spent the night in the mansion with the Eldest Miss Xiao. I wonder if they've woken up yet?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "They should be up by now. Qingshan, you did a good job yesterday, I saw it all. Little Luo, I didn't realize you could be so ruthless."

Luo Yuan gave a few awkward chuckles, "Big brother, I was a bit scared at first, but then Qingshan and Beidou pushed me to the front. After seeing the blood, I wasn't as frightened, and even found it interesting. Big brother, let me tell you, last night I personally" He glanced around with a mysterious expression, then made a slicing motion across his neck.

Lin Wanrong sighed deeply. This Little Luo, he really did have a devilish streak in him. As for Qingshan, having fought so many battles, he seemed to take such things in stride.

Dong Qingshan grinned, "I've been itching to deal with those rascals for a while. The day before yesterday, I heard that they were planning to send over a hundred men to the south of the city. Luo

Yuan suggested we hit them first. Last night, we ambushed them in Guaima Alley, catching them completely off guard. Oh, the fight was truly thrilling."

Lin Wanrong said, "Little Luo, this time we've officially gone to war with the Black Dragon Society and revealed the strength of Hung Hing. What do you plan to do?"

Luo Yuan nodded and said, "Big brother, I've made some inquiries. Many of those we eliminated last night were key members of the Black Dragon Society. They've been severely hit this time, and a counterstrike won't be easy. Although our strength isn't on par with theirs yet, the gap has narrowed. Yesterday's battle significantly boosted our reputation, and our influence is set to expand. Furthermore, there's some news that is very advantageous to us."

"What news?" Lin Wanrong asked.

Luo Yuan said excitedly, "This morning, the Prefect of Jinling issued an order. Given the recent surge in banditry in Jinling, to eradicate the thieves, the defense soldiers are to increase patrols in secluded areas every evening. In key areas, curfews will be imposed."

Lin Wanrong gave a knowing hum. The order, though seemingly aimed at the thieves, was a veiled aid to Hung Hing. It would allow them to swiftly expand their power during this period of their surging reputation, eventually matching the Black Dragon Society. This order from the Prefect of Jinling, the father of the number one scholar Hou Yuebai, certainly had Luo Min's hands involved.

Seeing Luo Yuan's eager expression, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, You young lad, you revel in your battles, unaware that your father has been working tirelessly behind the scenes on your behalf.

Remembering Luo Min's rotund figure, Lin Wanrong felt a mix of amusement and warmth. Despite adopting a laissez-faire attitude towards his children, the old man's care for them never wavered.

"With this, Wu Zhenghu and Cheng Ruinian won't attack openly, but we can't guard against their covert moves, Little Luo, you all must be careful." Lin Wanrong said gravely. An opportunity came with risk, a timeless truth.

Luo Yuan nodded, "Big brother, we've considered these issues. All of the southern part of the city is under our watch. As soon as they step into it, we'll know. Furthermore, our key focus is the restaurant, and our core brothers are all nearby. Without hiding anything from you, I've secretly enlisted a few close guards of my father. They'll be protecting the restaurant continuously. These

guards are quite something, personally selected by the Emperor to protect my father when he left the capital, their martial arts skills are beyond question."

Lin Wanrong had witnessed the skills of Luo Min's personal guards firsthand the previous night. Even against the experts from the White Lotus Sect, they held their own. Unless they encountered a master like Qin Xian'er, there would be no problem. Hearing that these men were palace guards was no surprise. Meanwhile, Luo Yuan's words revealed a piece of information: Luo Min seemed to have the Emperor's deep trust. As for Luo Yuan's "secretly", Lin Wanrong couldn't help but be skeptical, surely this was a helper his father had deliberately arranged for him, and only he would still be in the dark about it. That being said, having such a father watching over him was truly a blessing.

With such a strong ally lending a hand, Lin Wanrong was happy enough to turn a blind eye. What gratified him even more was that Luo Yuan was becoming increasingly mature and thoughtful in his actions. Paired with Qingshan, they were indeed a reliable duo.

After bidding farewell to Luo Yuan, he happened upon Eldest Miss Xiao and Qiaoqiao strolling hand-in-hand in the courtyard, chatting as they went. The two young women shared a similar beauty, like twin lotus blossoms blooming side by side. However, while Eldest Miss Xiao wore a warm smile, Qiaoqiao appeared somewhat distracted, lost in her thoughts.

"Qiaoqiao!" Lin Wanrong hurriedly approached them.

"Big brother!" The sadness on Qiaoqiao's face vanished at once, replaced by surprise. "Were you waiting for me here?"

Lin Wanrong took her small hand in his, grinning unabashedly. "Of course."

Eldest Miss Xiao laughed, saying, "Qiaoqiao, you should visit more often. We should have more heart-to-heart talks."

Qiaoqiao nodded. "Eldest Miss Xiao, I will come in the future." Despite her forced smile, a hint of sadness lurked in her expression. Eldest Miss Xiao, on the other hand, appeared cheerful. Lin Wanrong noticed this, suspecting that Xiao Yuruo had been up to something regarding his Qiaoqiao.

A carriage sent by Luo Min arrived to fetch Lin Wanrong, accompanied by the same guard he'd met the day before the one who had helped Luo Yuan in the fight. Concerned for Qiaoqiao's troubles, Lin

Wanrong pulled her into the carriage, instructing the driver to take a detour through 'Food for Immortals'.

As Qiaoqiao sat in the carriage, she gazed at Lin Wanrong with endless affection, though a hint of sadness flickered in her eyes.

Lin Wanrong, however, didn't address her worries. Instead, he playfully patted her bottom and said, "Little girl, have you forgotten my words?"

Blushing with a mix of delight and embarrassment, Qiaoqiao shyly responded, "Big brother, you're so naughty. When did I ever ignore your words?"

"You still deny it," Lin Wanrong retorted. "Ever since you came out from Eldest Miss Xiao's room, you've seemed burdened. She must have spoken ill of me. Didn't I tell you to interpret her words in the opposite way? If she says I'm terrible, that means I'm actually wonderful."

Qiaoqiao giggled, "Big brother, if Eldest Miss Xiao says you're good and I interpret it the other way"

"If even she, a wicked girl, says I'm good, then I'm genuinely good." Lin Wanrong said with a thick-skinned grin.

Qiaoqiao spoke solemnly, "Big brother, Eldest Miss Xiao only had good things to say about you. Eldest Miss Xiao is a good person. She told me a lot about you, like how you invented perfumed soaps and saved her life during a crisis. She's very grateful to you."

Knowing that Qiaoqiao wouldn't lie, Lin Wanrong was intrigued. Did Eldest Miss Xiao truly say all that? Just a minor joke on the way back yesterday had provoked her to kick and whip at him, so why would she speak so highly of him to Qiaoqiao? Could he have been unfairly suspecting her?

"Qiaoqiao, I've told you all this already, haven't I? Why would she need to repeat it?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"Not only those," said Qiaoqiao, her face blushing like a ripe apple. "The young lady also gave me some other things. She said" Her cheeks burned even hotter, as if about to drip water. "She said, those too were invented by you."

Only then did Lin Wanrong notice a small bundle in Qiaoqiao's hand. It was light, possibly only a couple of ounces, and subtly hinted at a frilly edge peeking out.

Lin Wanrong was all too familiar with that item. It was his outstanding contribution to the women of Great Hua.

Could it be, the young lady had actually given Qiaoqiao a bra and underwear? Damn, why didn't I think to give her a few pairs earlier? What an oversight! He thought, pounding his chest and stomping his foot in regret. It seemed that the first person to see Qiaoqiao in her underwear would be Xiao Yuruo, much to his dismay. Such a mistake must never be made again, he vowed. From now on, he would gift Qingxuan and Yushuang a hundred sets each so they could play dress-up.

"Qiaoqiao, have you worn those things yet?" Lin Wanrong swallowed, a vision of Qiaoqiao in her underwear looking shy yet attractive forming before his eyes. He subconsciously pulled the girl closer to him.

Qiaoqiao, flushed with embarrassment, let out a soft whimper and buried her head in his chest. She replied softly, "No."

Lin Wanrong sighed with relief. At least his Qiaoqiao hadn't been taken advantage of by Xiao Yuruo. He chuckled and asked her quietly, "Why haven't you worn them?"

"Because, big brother, you didn't tell me to," Qiaoqiao replied shyly, her head still lowered.

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong felt a rush of primal desire. He thought, Could there be any aphrodisiac stronger than this little girl's words? He pulled her even closer, his hands gently kneading her slender waist, and savored the exquisite sensation.

"Big brother" Qiaoqiao's little face was burning, her breath growing hotter as Lin Wanrong's teasing hand slipped under her clothes, gently squeezing her tender breasts.

Qiaoqiao leaned heavily against Lin Wanrong, allowing him to have his way with her. Her body was heating up and soft whimpering sounds escaped from her lips. Lin Wanrong pressed her twin peaks together, his fingers gently caressing them, while his breath gently tickled her burning ear.

"Darling, tomorrow, try wearing those clothes and show me, okay?"

Qiaoqiao, her body languid and achy, hardly had the strength to resist. She softly hummed her agreement, too shy to raise her head.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, mindful of the expert bodyguard of Luo Min outside. He couldn't overstep any further, so he held Qiaoqiao in his arms, his hands playfully squeezing and kneading her. However, he was thinking, next time he should have Luo Min send a blind, deaf, and mute coachman so as not to interfere with his "business". Such a frustrating situation, being able to look but not taste.

"Big brother, how did you come up with this invention? It's so embarrassing," Qiaoqiao said, biting her lip shyly.

"It was accidental, purely accidental." Lin Wanrong chuckled. "When I invented this, I was considering the needs of women. It was intended to enhance feminine beauty, promote development, and prevent sagging"

Qiaoqiao quickly interjected with a light spit, "Big brother, please, no more"

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter. "Alright, alright, I won't say anymore. I'll speak when my Qiaoqiao puts them on."

There was simply no reasoning with this big brother of hers. Qiaoqiao flushed, then whispered, "I haven't worn them, but I've seen the Eldest Miss wearing them"

"What, what, Qiaoqiao, what did you say" Lin Wanrong could hardly believe his ears. Had he heard correctly? The Eldest Miss was wearing the underwear he'd invented? Damn, this piece of news was explosively interesting, certainly ranking as the top scoop of the year in the Xiao family. Qiaoqiao was proving to be quite the effective undercover agent.

Thinking of the Eldest Miss' tall figure and slender legs, now dressed in that bra and underwear, he couldn't help but feel tantalized. No wonder the Eldest Miss' figure was improving so much it was all thanks to his efforts.

Qiaoqiao nodded shyly. "The Eldest Miss said she has been wearing them for a while now, and indeed, the effect is remarkable. Even I am envious of her figure." Lin Wanrong was somewhat dumbfounded. So, it seemed that the Eldest Miss was indeed benefiting from the underwear he'd designed. It looked like his reputation as the "Friend of Women" was thoroughly warranted.

"Big brother, will you discard me?" Qiaoqiao suddenly asked, nestling in Lin Wanrong's arms.

"Why would I do that?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled. "You are my little darling. Of course, I will take good care of you."

"But, Eldest Miss said you already have a wife, and that her name is Qingxuan." Qiaoqiao finally couldn't hold back her tears, which started to pour down her face.

Chapter 134 Harvest

Damn it, why did Xiao Yuruo bring all this up out of the blue, threatening to ruin my relationship with Qiaoqiao? I was wondering how she managed to suddenly become close with Qiaoqiao, but it turns out she had ulterior motives. Was it all because of the little prank I pulled on her? She really holds a grudge.

Thinking of Xiao Qingxuan, Lin Wanrong felt somewhat responsible. After Qiaoqiao fell ill that day, he hadn't found the time to tell her about Qingxuan, and now, unexpectedly, Xiao Yuruo was the one who had spilled the beans.

Seeing Qiaoqiao's tears falling more and more heavily, Lin Wanrong's heart ached again. He embraced her and said, "Silly girl, it's not that I didn't want to tell you, it's just that there's too much to explain. It would take days and nights to tell you everything. The Eldest Miss wasn't wrong. Qingxuan is my wife, but didn't you come into my life even earlier?"

Qiaoqiao lifted her head, puzzled, and asked, "When did I join your life?"

Lin Wanrong pointed to his heart and said, "You entered this door first."

Qiaoqiao was both delighted and heartbroken. She couldn't help but blush at his sweet words.

But Lin Wanrong continued, "Qiaoqiao, do you remember, that day in the restaurant, I swore an oath to heaven, making a vow that if I ever betrayed you, I would..."

Qiaoqiao covered his mouth, her tears falling, and said, "Big Brother, don't say any more. Qiaoqiao understands her mistake."

"Qiaoqiao, you and Qingxuan are the most important people to me in this world. That oath I made was when I took you as my wife. What happened with Qingxuan came after that. Technically speaking, she should be calling you elder sister," Lin Wanrong said, grabbing Qiaoqiao's hand.

Qiaoqiao blushed, then said softly, "Sister Qingxuan is older than me. It is only right that I call her elder sister."

"Haha, it's all the same, it's all the same," said Lin Wanrong, obviously pleased with himself. He was pondering whether he should take advantage of the situation to tell Qiaoqiao about Yushuang, when Qiaoqiao suddenly said, "Big Brother, I heard that you and the Second Miss from the Xiao family also..."

Damn it, did Xiao Yuruo tell her that too? Had the girl lost her mind? Wasn't she always adamant about keeping the Second Miss and me apart? What was she trying to achieve by telling Qiaoqiao all this?

Lin Wanrong felt utterly perplexed by Xiao Yuruo's actions. One minute, she was saying that he should stay away from her sister, and the next, she was spilling the beans to Qiaoqiao herself. What was she playing at? Regardless, he decided to take the opportunity to tell Qiaoqiao about Yushuang. It was always better to communicate more.

So he briefly recounted his experiences with Qingxuan and Yushuang. Qiaoqiao listened with deep sighs, then said quietly, "Big Brother, Sister Qingxuan is talented and deeply loves you. The Second Miss even risked her life for you. You must not betray them."

Lin Wanrong grunted in acknowledgment. With tears streaming down her face, Qiaoqiao whispered, "Sister Qingxuan and the Second Miss are both from noble and wealthy families, born into high society, and are very capable. Qiaoqiao, with her humble life, dares not compare herself to them. Big brother, I'll be content to serve as your maid by your side for the rest of my life."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong felt both heartache and anger. What was Xiao Yuruo thinking, telling Qiaoqiao all these things for no reason? She was really causing him trouble.

Lin Wanrong hurriedly held the young girl close, saying, "Qiaoqiao, don't you know me yet? Wealth, social status, it's all nonsense. I'm nothing myself. It's you, this little girl, that I like, not

your status. Why should you care about such things? How about this: when Qingxuan and Yushuang join us, you can be in charge of them."

With a blush covering her face, Qiaoqiao quickly shook her head and replied, "No, no, big brother, I can't do that. It would be better if they are in charge of me. I promise I'll listen to my elder sisters."

Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself. He knew the little girl would respond that way. He was really falling for this girl.

"Don't worry, you're my little treasure. No one but me can control you," Lin Wanrong whispered in Qiaoqiao's ear. This simple phrase made the young girl willingly surrender, nestling happily in big brother's arms.

Leaving Qiaoqiao at the restaurant, Lin Wanrong let out a long breath. Pacifying this little girl was far from easy, even more laborious than fighting with the bandits from the White Lotus Cult.

The carriage continued northward, but even after half an hour, it seemed they were no closer to their destination. Without Qiaoqiao's company, Lin Wanrong had much less patience. He turned to the coachman and asked, "What's your honorable surname, my friend?" The coachman was the expert who had been guarding Luo Yuan last night. If Luo Min could entrust Luo Yuan to him, it meant that the man was highly skilled.

The man replied, "Young Master Lin, my name is Gao Shou."

Gao Shou? The man declared himself a 'High Hand'? Someone more shameless than me? That was indeed a rarity.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I know you're highly skilled, brother, but I was asking for your name, so I can address you properly in the future."

The man laughed, "Young Master Lin, I haven't lied. My surname is Gao, and my name is Shou, like 'head' in 'decapitated head'. My parents bestowed this name upon me, and I can't change it. I hope it hasn't made you laugh."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "This is indeed interesting. Brother Gao Shou, you indeed are a 'High Hand', but your parents are truly masters among masters."

Well, weren't they? Naming their son like that, taking advantage of others from the moment he was born. His father should be called 'High Master'.

Gao Shou laughed, "I've been living for over thirty years and have been a 'High Hand' for just as long. Even if I were to lose my life tomorrow, it would be worth it."

Their conversation elicited hearty laughter from both men. Lin Wanrong had taken a liking to this forthright Gao Shou, who also happened to be a formidable martial artist. With that, he exited the carriage and squeezed his way next to Gao Shou, taking a seat on the coach-box. "Brother Gao, it's dull being in the carriage alone, so I thought I'd come and chat with you."

Seeing Lin Wanrong's openness and boldness, Gao Shou found him to be much to his liking, despite his lowly status as a servant. He laughed heartily, "As long as Young Master Lin doesn't disdain my rough manners, I'm more than pleased to welcome your company."

Observing the carriage proceeding steadily onward, Lin Wanrong asked, "Brother Gao, where are we heading?"

Gao Shou replied, "Governor Luo has requested your presence in Xiaguan, to the north of the city."

"Xiaguan? What does Governor Luo want me to do there?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously. That place was not close by, so what was he needed there for?

"I'm not quite sure about that. Perhaps Young Master could ask Governor Luo himself later," Gao Shou laughed.

Lin Wanrong knew that Gao Shou either wouldn't tell him or simply didn't know, so he didn't inquire further. He saw how skilled Gao Shou was in handling the horse-drawn carriage, which led him to remark, "Brother Gao, not only are your martial arts skills impressive, but your horsemanship is also quite remarkable. If I'm not mistaken, you aren't a local of Jinling, are you?"

It was blatantly obvious. Even a deaf person would have recognized from Gao Shou's distinct northern accent that he was from the North.

Gao Shou nodded, "To be frank with you, Young Master, my ancestral home is Cangzhou in Hebei."

"Cangzhou? Excellent place, renowned for martial arts. No wonder, Brother Gao, you possess such extraordinary skills," Lin Wanrong flattered him subtly. Gao Shou seemed pleased to hear this. In his past life, Cangzhou was indeed known as a martial arts hub, though he didn't know whether things had changed in this world.

Gao Shou responded cheerfully, "Young Master Lin, you're familiar with Cangzhou?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Of course I've heard of such a famous place. The northern folk are known for their martial spirit and horse riding skills. Seeing Brother Gao's mastery of both martial arts and horsemanship, superior even to the elite cavalry of the Jiangsu Commander-in-chief's troops, I immediately knew you were from the North."

With a contemptuous laugh, Gao Shou said, "The Jiangsu troops? How can those weaklings be compared with us northerners? Commander Cheng De of Jiangsu is a complete fool. If it weren't for his connections at court, he would've been dismissed long ago."

In conducting his affairs, Lin Wanrong never settled for a loss. After engaging in conversation with Gao Shou and flattering him a bit, if he didn't manage to extract some valuable information, it would have been a waste.

Upon hearing Gao Shou's statement, Lin Wanrong gave a sly smile. Without pressing further, he feigned curiosity, "Brother Gao, why would you say that? When I saw the Jiangsu troops, their weapons were gleaming, they carried themselves with dignity, and their might was indeed impressive."

"Young Master Lin," Gao Shou began, "to outsiders, it's spectacle; to professionals, it's strategy. Cheng De, that fool, flaunts his power here in the south, all thanks to Prince Cheng's support. His three battalions are notoriously incompetent. Even the court officials and palace eunuchs in the capital are aware. I don't mean to belittle these southern soldiers, but while we can't compete with the scholars here in terms of poetry and verse, when it comes to battlefield prowess, these southern infantry and cavalry can only scare away petty thieves. If they were sent to the north to defend against the ferocious nomads, I fear they would collapse within moments. We brothers have a saying, 'Better to be a wandering spirit in the north than a scholarly soldier in the south.' That's the essence of it."

Prince Cheng? Was this the backer behind Cheng De? Lin Wanrong recalled hearing about Prince Cheng from Luo Yuan, who mentioned some past unsavory business related to the imperial succession. He hadn't expected Cheng De's backer to be him.

Damn, old Luo, you cunning fox, Lin Wanrong thought, the man behind Cheng De is one of the most powerful princes in the empire. Who's backing you? Just don't get me into trouble.

This Gao Shou, whose name implied "high hand", was in fact quite out of his depth before Lin Wanrong, unknowingly revealing all he knew and considering him a close friend. Lin Wanrong inwardly chuckled. Few could match him when it came to his tactics in courting women or making friends.

Though Lin Wanrong didn't fully agree with Gao Shou's regional prejudices, he had to admit there was some truth to it. The saying "Scholars in the south, warriors in the north" was conventional wisdom; the fighting strength of southern soldiers indeed fell short compared to their northern counterparts. It was no surprise that Qingxuan had been so emotional when they first met.

Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Regardless of age or region, we're all compatriots of the same land, fighting the barbarians is our collective duty. There's no need for a distinction between north and south."

Gao Shou laughed heartily, "Young Master Lin, your words are spot on. I really admire you. Living here in Jinling City, you're nothing like these southern scholars. Bold and capable, no wonder Governor Luo values you so much."

Lin Wanrong gave a nonchalant smile and casually said, "Then you can consider me a northerner. By the way, Brother Gao, during your time serving in the capital, were most of your colleagues from the north or the south?"

"Back when I was in the palace, northerners were in the majority. Most of the guards there were..." He paused, suddenly realizing, "Young Master Lin, you..."

Finally, he wasn't too nave. Young Master Lin had been subtly prying for information, leading him on a roundabout interrogation. He gave a wry smile, "Young Master Lin, as a northerner, I'm somewhat familiar with battles, but when it comes to strategy and cunning, I'm far behind you."

Lin Wanrong didn't seem to mind Gao Shou's sarcasm at all, chuckling as he slapped his shoulder, "Brother Gao, don't mind it. I've known for a while that you are a guard to the Emperor. Between Governor Luo and me, what can't we discuss? Don't you agree?"

This was pure trickery. Lin Wanrong's words were fraught with hidden traps, slyly setting up Luo Min. Gao Shou had fallen into them countless times without realizing it. If Luo Min were present and heard Lin Wanrong's words, he would surely have jumped up in indignation, cursing this cunning fox.

Believing that Luo Min had already informed Lin Wanrong of his position, Gao Shou admitted, "Young Master Lin is indeed remarkable. In the past, I was one of the Emperor's personal guards. When Governor Luo came to Jinling, the Emperor sent us to accompany him."

Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh. It seemed that Luo Yuan's words today were not false. The old Luo Min really was deeply favored by the Emperor. However, even if you're a powerful minister, you're still no match for Prince Cheng, old Luo. You must stand firm.

From then on, Lin Wanrong ceased his scheming and conversed openly with Gao Shou. Both men had seen much of the world and knew a great deal. Lin Wanrong was an eloquent speaker, easily chatting about culture, geography, and scenic landscapes. This made Gao Shou admire him even more. This Young Master Lin, not only skilled in crafty tactics, but also evidently had experience and wisdom. He was worth befriending.

Although the carriage ride was long, Lin Wanrong felt it was not in vain. He gained a deeper understanding of the backgrounds of Luo Min and Cheng De, which was quite rewarding.

He was still deep in thought when Gao Shou next to him said, "Young Master Lin, we've arrived."

Lin Wanrong quickly lifted his head, and before he had a chance to look around, he heard a clear voice, "Brother Lin, you've arrived!"

He looked toward the voice and saw a beautiful woman standing not far away. She wore a pale yellow dress, her figure slender and elegant, standing there like a fairy beyond the mortal realm. She wore a gentle smile, looking peacefully at him. The sight was strikingly familiar - it was Luo Ning, the most talented woman in Jinling.

Chapter 135 The Second Rebuke of the Talented Woman (Part 1)

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. What was this old Luo up to? I came to meet him, not his daughter. Even if he wanted to play matchmaker, he shouldn't be so blatant about it. After all, I am a gentleman.

"So, Miss Luo is also here," Lin Wanrong said with a smile. "Didn't Governor Luo summon me? But why isn't he around?"

Luo Ning nodded and said, "Father just went down to inspect the river embankment. Could you please wait for a while, Brother Lin?"

Lin Wanrong nodded and looked around. It turned out that Luo Min had arranged their meeting at the lower river embankment. It was winter now, the dry season of the Yangtze River, and the water level had dropped significantly. However, the yellow earth and thin mud on both sides still bore the ravages of the flood.

Thousands of ordinary people were rolling up their sleeves, tucking their trousers, wading through the mud, and carrying soil to the riverbank. Another several thousand people were using various tools to fill and fortify the embankment.

This scene reminded Lin Wanrong of the water conservancy projects he used to see in his past life. Growing up by the Han River, he had a clear understanding of the importance of water control. Looking at the scene before him, a sense of familiarity welled up in his heart. These ordinary folks, with their plain clothes and simple meals, were dearer to him than any so-called talented men and women.

Yet, despite the considerable number of people on the embankment, their tools were primitive and their efficiency low. It would likely take an enormous amount of time to elevate the embankment further. Lin Wanrong grew anxious at the sight.

What is this old Luo playing at, asking me to come here? Surely, he doesn't expect me to donate silver? Damn it, the old man was crafty, hitting right where it hurt.

Seeing Luo Ning still standing nearby, Lin Wanrong asked, "Miss Luo, do you know why Governor Luo asked me to come here?"

With a mysterious smile, Luo Ning replied, "Father will talk to you about it shortly."

Seeing her smile so cryptically, Lin Wanrong knew she must be in the know. But her smug demeanor suggested she wouldn't spill anything if asked.

He sighed and didn't attempt to chat with Luo Ning any further, heading straight for the embankment. The solid feel of the soil under his feet stirred something within him. I am a child of the Yangtze River, he thought, his eyes getting misty.

Noticing his emotional state, Luo Ning hurriedly asked, "Brother Lin, are you okay?"

Lin Wanrong sniffed and chuckled, "I'm fine. It's just the strong wind, a little discomforting. By the way, Miss Luo, what are you doing here?"

"I came here with my colleagues from the poetry society," Luo Ning replied, pointing to the far slope where a long row of tables was set up. A long scroll of paper was spread out on the tables. The talented men and women from the Jinling Poetry Society were wielding their brushes, apparently working on a large collective painting.

The strong men carrying the soil and sand passed by the table full of scholars, unnoticed. Among the crowd, a woman stood out, dressed in a dark red official uniform that accentuated her delicate beauty. It was Miss Wanying. This woman, sneaking out during work hours, was truly a waste of resources. However, seeing her in that red constable's outfit gave her an inexplicable wildness, Lin Wanrong mused.

He also spotted Hou Yuebai and Yu Wenpo among the crowd. The two men were frantically writing, surrounded by cheers of admiration. Wanying stood beside Hou Yuebai, clapping continuously, her eyes full of adoration.

Damn it, while ordinary folks labored and sweated for this embankment, safeguarding the interests of you privileged officials, you have the leisure to come here and paint for fun. Truly wasting your food, Lin Wanrong thought bitterly. His strong commoner sentiment couldn't bear such a sight, and he began to walk away.

However, Luo Ning seemed to know his thoughts, quickly saying, "Brother Lin, don't misunderstand. We're not here just for fun."

Lin Wanrong smiled and replied, "Miss Luo, what does your activity have to do with me?"

Luo Ning responded, "Brother Lin, do you remember the charity auction you suggested to me? It went very well and everyone was enthusiastic. Recently, we are running out of funds for the river defenses. My father is deeply troubled. So I thought about your idea. If we gather the members of

our literary society and create a collective painting of the river defense, then sell it, wouldn't that contribute to the cause?"

To be fair, Luo Ning was not delicate, she had ambitions, which was quite rare among women of this era. However, she was too idealistic, probably because she had never experienced the life of ordinary people.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's silence, Luo Ning, thinking he did not believe her, sighed, "Brother Lin, you will understand if you come with me."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Whether I believe it or not doesn't really matter."

But Luo Ning was stubborn. She took hold of his sleeve and led him towards the poetry society. He had known Luo Ning for some time but had never seen her so flustered. It seemed his attitude had genuinely upset her.

Seeing her stubborn nature, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but laugh, saying, "Miss Luo, holding onto me like this might lead to misunderstandings."

Luo Ning retorted, "We have nothing to hide, why should we fear any misunderstanding?" Since you're not afraid, I'm even less so. He let her grab his sleeve and walked towards the poetry society.

Seeing Luo Ning lead Lin Wanrong over, the crowd's expressions changed. Hou Yuebai looked displeased, while the woman named Wanying, burning with anger, questioned, "What are you doing here?"

Lin Wanrong was extremely irritated. Damn it, did they think he wanted to be part of their crowd? If not for being dragged here, when would he have the time to spare for them? Seeing the displeased tone of the young woman, he smirked and asked, "Where did this official come from? It's impressive that patrol duty even reaches this embankment. Oh, by the way, Miss Wanying, where's your white horse?"

Wanying asked, "What do you want with my white horse?"

Lin Wanrong replied, "Nothing much, just that my Little Black misses it."

Their private joke seemed to infuriate Miss Wanying, who understood its meaning. Knowing she wouldn't gain an advantage in this verbal exchange, she snorted and ignored him.

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath. Standing amidst these 'elegant' folks, he felt extremely uncomfortable. How did a mere house servant like him end up with this crowd? It was truly baffling.

Hou Yuebai, having been annoyed by Lin Wanrong yesterday and having just noticed Luo Ning's gesture from afar, was perturbed. Not wanting to lose his composure in front of the beauty, he asked Luo Ning, "Miss Luo, what do you think of my landscape painting?"

The painting depicted distant mountains, majestic and faint, like ink wash. As the view drew closer, there was a deep pool, with its sparkling green waves, surrounded by verdant pines and cypresses. Mist rose slowly amidst the layers of peaks. Hou Yuebai truly deserved his reputation as the most talented scholar in Jinling. His brushwork and ink usage were seasoned.

Luo Ning nodded in approval, "Young Master Hou's brushwork is sharp, and the ink usage is unique. This landscape painting is truly extraordinary."

Feeling slightly triumphant, Hou Yuebai glanced at Lin Wanrong and humbly said, "Miss Luo, you flatter me."

Ignoring Hou Yuebai, Luo Ning turned to Lin Wanrong and asked, "Brother Lin, what do you think?"

Luo Ning had seen Lin Wanrong's unique pencil. She knew that he was a connoisseur in drawing.

Seeing Hou Yuebai's haughty demeanor, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but shake his head, saying, "The mountains are good mountains, the rivers are good rivers." After these eight words, he said nothing more.

Wanying, a devoted admirer of Hou Yuebai, immediately asked, "Lin San, what do you mean by that?"

Hou Yuebai arrogantly responded, "Lin San, are you implying that there's something wrong with this painting?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's reluctance to answer, Luo Ning had to ask, "Brother Lin, could you please enlighten us?"

"All I see is brush and ink, not mountains and rivers," Lin Wanrong replied casually.

Luo Ning's eyes brightened as she realized what he meant, "Brother Lin, I understand now. You're saying Master Hou focused too much on the technique when painting, overlooking the simplicity and natural essence of these mountains and rivers, right?"

Hou Yuebai's face turned ashen. He knew his own work. To paint this landscape, he had exerted all his skills, used various techniques, and indeed, Lin Wanrong hit the nail on the head with his comment. However, since Luo Ning made this point, he couldn't refute her. All he could do was glare at Lin Wanrong and mutter, "Words are just words."

Damn it, Lin Wanrong had originally wanted to save Hou Yuebai some face, but the young man simply didn't know how to appreciate the gesture. Grinning slyly, he said, "Miss Luo, you're half right. The essence of mountains and rivers lies in the temperament and experience of the beholder. Without a heart set on appreciating all under heaven, how could one comprehend the grandeur and vastness of these landscapes? It's hard to capture mountains and rivers in a painting. Throughout history, how many such paintings have been passed down? That's the crux."

Poor Hou Yuebai, he had poured all his skills into creating this landscape, hoping to win Luo Ning's favor. Who would've thought he would cross paths with his nemesis, Lin Wanrong? Every sentence Lin Wanrong uttered was logical, understood by all, leaving him no chance to refute.

Meanwhile, Wanying huffed, "Your words may sound grand, but painting such a landscape is naturally difficult. Young Master Hou achieving this level is rare in itself."

Deeply moved by Lin Wanrong's words, Luo Ning had a thought. She pulled him towards another painting and asked, "Brother Lin, what do you think of this one?"

The painting depicted a scene of water conservancy work atop the river embankment. An old man in ragged clothes, shouldering a bag of mud, was about to fill a gap. His eyes, however, were fixated on the turbulent river below, reflecting deep worry.

The painting was meticulously done, with every feature vividly portrayed. The old man's expressions and actions were very realistic, especially his worry about the overflowing river, which seemed to jump off the page.

It was clear from everyone's eyes that they highly admired this painting. Its profound portrayal of the character's expressions, actions, and implied meaning could only be described as an excellent piece of work.

Luo Ning looked at Lin Wanrong anxiously, awaiting his verdict.

Lin Wanrong glanced at the painting, gave a slight smile, and delivered his straightforward opinion in two words, "A failure!"