

Finest 136

Chapter 136 The Second Rebuke of the Talented Woman (2)

Before Luo Ning could speak, Miss Wanying was the first to jump up and exclaim, "What nonsense are you talking about? This painting is well-done, acknowledged by everyone, even the Governor himself praised it."

Lin Wanrong was puzzled. Could this painting be the work of Miss Wanying? It didn't seem right. The girl was like a fiery pepper, could she possibly have such delicate brushstrokes?

No matter who painted it, the words were out, and Lin Wanrong was not afraid of her. He chuckled and replied, "I said it's flawed, and I have my reasons."

Luo Ning, her face flushing, asked, "Brother Lin, could you please point out the flaws in the painting?"

Seeing her face turn red, her expression twisting, and noting the delicacy of the brushstrokes on the painting, Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Could it be that this painting was done by Luo Ning, the number one talented woman?

On the side, Wanying huffed, "Sister Luo, don't mind him. He's always talking nonsense, belittling your painting without reason."

So, it really was Luo Ning's work. Thinking of how Luo Ning was hailed as the number one talented woman of Jinling, how aloof and proud she was, it must have been a severe blow to have Lin Wanrong succinctly describe her proud work as 'flawed' in front of everyone. It was remarkable she didn't break down in tears on the spot.

Lin Wanrong was caught between laughter and tears. If she had told him earlier... He would have shown restraint even towards that worthless young master, let alone her. However, Luo Ning was proud and stubborn. She didn't want her relationship with him to affect his independent opinion.

Seeing Luo Ning biting her lip, her face flushed with embarrassment, Lin Wanrong sighed. Having critiqued the number one talented man, and then the number one talented woman, he felt rather impressive himself.

"Brother Lin, please speak freely. I would very much like to hear your criticism," Luo Ning said bravely.

"Miss Luo, this painting is superior in terms of lines, brushstrokes, and angles," Lin Wanrong started on a positive note, then turned, "However, it seems a bit presumptuous."

Seeing everyone listening attentively, even Hou Yuebai and the always grumbling Wanying perked up their ears, Lin Wanrong continued, "From this painting, one can see the elder's ragged clothing, suggesting he is a commoner, still striving to meet basic needs. Am I right?"

Luo Ning nodded slightly, "Yes, I wanted to depict the worries of an ordinary citizen about the flood."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Miss Luo, your intentions were good, but you don't understand the human heart, nor the common people. You've never suffered, so you have no clue what's on the minds of ordinary people. Our people in Great Hua are loyal and easily placated; if you provide them with enough food and warm clothes, they will treat you as their own parents. But at the same time, they are also the most pragmatic. If their basic needs are not met, they won't care about anything else. Imagine, if their survival is threatened, and yet you expect them to worry about the floods. Miss, do you think they're all saints concerned about the nation and its people? You're mistaken, terribly mistaken. For those at the bottom, survival is their first need; issues of the nation and race are miles away from their reality."

The talented men and women in the room fell silent, all at a loss for words. They were privileged sons and daughters who had never experienced the hardship of the lower classes. They assumed that everyone in the world was just like them, well-fed, with nothing to do but worry about national affairs. Lin Wanrong's words left them astounded but forced to admit that he had a point.

Everyone fell silent, even Miss Wanying, who had always disagreed with Lin Wanrong, gave him a glance of admiration.

Lin Wanrong felt heavy-hearted, as if he was carrying large stones. These ignorant, privileged young men, not only in Great Hua but also in his past life, were numerous. Out of touch with reality, disconnected from the masses, it was a tragedy indeed.

Luo Ning had drawn this painting based on her own perspective and assumptions. It was lauded by these talented individuals and initially, she was quite proud. Now thinking about it, she was far from

the mark. If the skin does not exist, where can the hair attach? The whole concept of this painting was wrong; using the word 'flawed' was an understatement. It was entirely a waste.

Luo Ning, her eyes rimmed with red, desperately held back tears. Since she came of age, she had been hailed as the number one talented woman in Jinling due to her exceptional intelligence and academic excellence. While she remained modest and cautious, she couldn't avoid the little vanity in her heart. This critique was the biggest blow she had received as an adult. Despite her resilience, having been criticized by Lin Wanrong in front of everyone, she naturally felt wronged.

"If you want to paint life, first paint the heart." Seeing Luo Ning on the verge of tears, Lin Wanrong sighed wistfully, then said, "Don't cry, don't cry. I have a remedy."

Luo Ning wiped the corner of her eye and snorted, "Who's crying? What remedy do you have?"

Lin Wanrong pulled out a homemade pencil from his pocket and smiled, "I'll have to rely on this little gem."

Aside from Luo Ning, no one had seen this pencil before. Wanying seemed to have forgotten her earlier spat with Lin and asked, "Lin San, what is this?"

Lin Wanrong replied with a faint smile, "This is the result of a black horse and a white horse loving each other for a hundred years, turning into ashes. It's made from their ashes and called a pencil."

Wanying was taken aback, she hummed softly, quickly realizing that Lin San was jesting with her. She thought to herself, 'This man is really wicked, still in a playful mood at a time like this.' She lightly snorted and turned her head away, but she continued to watch Lin Wanrong's movements out of the corner of her eye.

Holding the pencil, Lin Wanrong lightly sketched a few strokes in the eyes of the portrait and added some on the face. He then clapped his hands and said, "Miss Luo, you should draw over the pencil marks."

The pencil marks were very faint; after several glances, the onlookers could not discern any specific features. Luo Ning, aware that he wasn't adept with a brush, hummed softly in acknowledgement. With her left hand pinching her sleeve and her right hand lifting a fine brush, she began to trace over the marks.

At first, she didn't fully understand what she was doing, but as she continued drawing, she became more and more amazed. By the end, her expression was one of excitement. She painted in even finer detail, and after a while, put down her brush and exclaimed joyfully, "Brother Lin, I get it now."

Everyone looked again at the table and saw the ragged old man in the painting, his eyes still harboring some sorrow but significantly lighter, and his face marked with faint traces of a smile.

Thinking back to what Lin Wanrong had said earlier, the crowd began to understand. The impoverished people working on the riverbank, despite their hardship and fatigue, were at least able to eat their fill. Naturally, they could smile. The sorrow in their eyes was born from the fear that once the embankment was finished, they would struggle to find enough food again. From their perspective, they would probably prefer the floods to return every year, giving them work on the embankment. When poor people smile, it often comes with tears; this was now a true portrayal in the painting.

In truth, Lin Wanrong wasn't very satisfied with this modification. Using sketching techniques to alter this traditional Chinese painting was a bit forced, but he had been harsh with his words earlier, pushing Luo Ning to the brink of tears. He had to salvage as much as he could.

Everyone let out a sigh of relief. To be honest, Luo Ning's painting, both in terms of stroke technique and the emotion it conveyed, was truly a remarkable piece. It would have been a shame had it been wasted. Now, it had been saved, which was indeed a stroke of great luck.

Wanying huffed, "Lin San, you lucked out. With just a few strokes, you now share in the credit for Sister Luo's painting."

'Goodness, this sort of correction to a painting with just a few strokes, if you're so capable, Miss, why don't you try doing it yourself?'

Hou Yuebai noticed that Lin San had some skill in painting, but he scoffed at his pencil technique. He thought to himself that Lin San was a person with lofty ideals but modest abilities. He had a talent for critiquing paintings, yet his own painting skills were mediocre. The next time he had a chance, he would challenge him in painting.

Only Luo Ning understood the power of Lin Wanrong's few strokes, which transformed the painting's atmosphere. 'Can I even claim this painting as my own now?' Luo Ning looked at the painting, her heart filled with sorrow and gratitude. Overwhelmed by emotions, she suddenly turned around and ran off.

Wanying quickly called out, "Sister Luo, where are you going?"

Luo Ning paused momentarily, yet she didn't turn back. In a soft voice, she said, "Wanying, please continue with the painting. I'm going over there to clear my mind, but I'll return soon."

Annoyed, Wanying cast a glare at Lin Wanrong and exclaimed, "Is this your handiwork?"

Lin Wanrong blinked in confusion, thinking, what does this have to do with me? Seeing Wanying puffed up in anger, he couldn't help but laugh and said, "Once upon a time, a white horse fell in love with a black horse..."

"You're asking for it!" Wanying, ever the fiery one, couldn't stand his teasing. With a swift and forceful kick, she revealed herself to be a martial artist. No wonder she was the city's top female constable.

Unwilling to engage in a drawn-out quarrel, Lin Wanrong walked away towards the embankment. Just as he was about to find a spot to relieve himself, he spotted a petite figure sitting on the ground, staring blankly at the rolling river.

Could it be? He'd only criticized her a little, and now she was contemplating jumping into the river? Panic seized him, and he blurted out, "Miss Luo, don't jump!"

Luo Ning turned her head at his exclamation, only to see Lin Wanrong rushing towards her. She offered him a smile and asked, "Brother Lin, what are you talking about?"

Lin Wanrong replied, "Miss Luo, you mustn't jump! I was only joking earlier. There's no need to be so desperate."

Embarrassed and irritated, Luo Ning retorted, "Brother Lin, what nonsense are you saying? Do I look like I'm about to jump into the river?"

"Well, that's a relief," Lin Wanrong wiped off his cold sweat, saying, "As long as you're not jumping, we can discuss everything."

Luo Ning thought he could be remarkably clever at times, yet incredibly obtuse at others, and she didn't quite know what to do with him. She stepped back a few paces, putting more distance between herself and the river, and said with a smile, "Now are you reassured?"

Unabashed, Lin Wanrong sat down beside her and said, "You scared me. I'm relieved you're not going to jump. Miss Luo, let me tell you, the water in the Yangtze River is muddy and yellow. If you're going to jump into water, don't pick this river. Xuanwu Lake, on the other hand, has clear water and picturesque views. It would be a far better choice."

Amused, Luo Ning looked at him and asked, "Brother Lin, is this your idea of comforting someone?"

Lin Wanrong responded with surprise, "Comfort? Why would I need to comfort you? Aren't you a strong woman who doesn't need solace?"

Luo Ning's expression darkened slightly. Shaking her head, she said, "Brother Lin, you're mistaken this time. I really feel terrible about myself."

Could it be that a small setback had made this incredibly talented woman lose heart? It seemed he needed to give a major boost to her resilience.

Luo Ning heaved a sigh, seated herself beside him, and gazed at the endless river. "In the past," she began, "I prided myself on my proficiency in the guqin, chess, calligraphy, and painting. I even outperformed the men, and that gave me such a thrill. But after seeing the couplets in the Food for Immortals, I felt discouraged. Your words yesterday and the feedback on my painting today made me realize that I am just a frog in the well, unaware of how vast the sky truly is. Just as you said, Brother Lin, being raised in an official's household, I've hardly interacted with the common folk. My experiences and insights are painfully limited, yet I'm so conceited. Now, I find myself rather distasteful."

This young lady is quite adept at self-criticism. Unlucky for her to run into me, but pressure leads to progress. Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "Miss Luo, you're sincere and compassionate. Everyone is too busy liking you to hate you. Holding on to your dreams is commendable. As for life experience, it can't be rushed. As you grow older and experience more, you'll understand."

Lu Ning glanced at him and said, "Brother Lin, I've always found it strange. You're only a few years older than me, yet you understand so much and grasp the human heart so well. How is that possible?"

That question was a tough one to answer. Lin Wanrong solemnly replied, "Actually, I've been asking myself the same thing. But, as you know, answering a question posed by a genius is indeed challenging."

It took Luo Ning a moment to pick up on his dry humor. Covering her mouth, she giggled, "Brother Lin, you never speak seriously."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Honestly, aside from 'genius', I can't find any other word to describe me."

"I feel the same way," Luo Ning said softly.

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter. This young lady was picking up on my humor. Interesting.

With a somewhat resigned expression, Luo Ning got up, saying, "Brother Lin, I'm going to paint. You're not allowed to follow me, or else, I'll 'die' again." She dashed off as if Lin Wanrong were a beast in pursuit.

Damn, am I really that terrifying? If you hadn't invited me, I wouldn't bother. After all that talking, he'd forgotten to relieve himself. Just as he was about to do so, a 'mud man' suddenly popped up beside him.

The figure was smeared with mud from head to toe, barefoot, with a somewhat familiar face. Lin Wanrong was taken aback, "Governor Luo, how did you get yourself into such a state?"

Chapter 137 Beat the Bastard

Luo Min chuckled, expressing awkwardly, "I slipped down to the riverbank earlier, carelessly stepping into the mud. How clumsy of me, how very clumsy."

Upon seeing the old man's rare show of modesty, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "I don't mind what I've seen, but the patrol officers from the Supervision Bureau...if they were to catch sight of you in this state, I'm afraid it might cause some complications."

Luo Min responded, "Why am I working so hard? Isn't it for the betterment of the people of Jiangsu province? Even if these imperial inspectors report this to the Emperor, I would dare to stand by my words."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Report to the Emperor? I believe that's the day you're eagerly waiting for. A light scolding in exchange for the Emperor's recognition of your benevolent deeds, indeed, a profitable business."

Lin Wanrong was all too familiar with this ruse. The sly old fox could sugarcoat his words all he wanted, with claims of "benefitting the people of Jiangsu," but Lin Wanrong didn't believe a word of it. Stripped bare, it was nothing more than a bid to climb the political ladder.

Knowing he couldn't deceive Lin Wanrong, Luo Min gave an embarrassed smile and admitted, "I won't hide it from you, Little Lin, there's some truth in what you're saying. But if I can climb the ranks while also benefitting the people, why wouldn't I do it?"

This old Luo was quite honest with Lin Wanrong. He must have been an ambitious man in his youth, but now, looking at his large belly, one could tell that those ambitions had long since soured within him.

Luo Min summoned Luo Ning to bring him a clean official robe. Seeing Lin Wanrong observing Luo Ning, Luo Min gently asked him, "Little Lin, what were you discussing with Ning just now? She seemed rather pleased."

When had he become 'Little Lin' from 'Young Master Lin'? They had only met twice. This Luo Min was rather presumptuous.

"Nothing much. Just some ideals, and life," Lin Wanrong unabashedly replied.

"Is that so?" Luo Min squinted in disbelief.

"What did you think we would talk about?" Lin Wanrong asked with a grin. The more he looked at Luo Min, the less he appeared to be Luo Ning's biological father. How could such a sleazy character father such a beautiful daughter? He reckoned the Luo siblings must take after their mother.

"Ning not only takes after her mother in looks, but also in character. Independent, decisive, and a bit aloof. I rarely see anyone converse with her so easily," Luo Min sighed, as if reminiscing about his long-deceased wife.

Lin Wanrong had no interest in engaging in gossip, so he quickly got to the point, "Governor Luo, you invited me here. I assume it's not merely to have a heart-to-heart conversation, is it?"

Luo Min burst into laughter, "I was so engrossed in our chat that I nearly forgot the main issue. Little Lin, how do you find the works on the embankment?"

"Pretty good, indeed. Large scale, plenty of people, very lively," Lin Wanrong feigned ignorance.

Luo Min forced a smile, "Is that all?"

Lin Wanrong asked curiously, "What else does Governor want me to notice?"

When one fox encountered another, the contest was one of patience. But Luo Min was restless, unable to hold back, "I won't hide it from you, Little Lin. I asked you here today for your insights on a matter - how we can quickly raise some silver."

I knew this old fox was up to no good, Lin Wanrong thought as he curiously asked, "Raise silver? Governor Luo, you are the Governor, the chief officer of Jiangsu province, controlling all fiscal authority. Why are you worried about silver?"

Luo Min sighed, "Young man, you're unaware of the hardships I face. The position of Jiangsu Governor may seem glorious, but it's far from easy. True, 'when Jiangnan is rich, the world is content,' but the annual tax revenue from Jiangsu is always closely monitored from above. With the instability in the north, a war with the nomads on the horizon, and the turmoil caused by the White Lotus cult, there are countless places where money is needed. The tax revenue from Jiangsu province goes entirely to the national treasury, not leaving a single coin in surplus."

There was some truth to his words. The lucrative position of Jiangsu Governor was undoubtedly targeted by many. Any shady dealings would need to be handled with utmost care. Moreover, with the current national crisis, and Jiangsu serving as the granary, it was normal to contribute more.

"This year, the Ministry of Household allocated only ten thousand taels of silver for the river defenses in Jiangsu province. Take Jinling city as an example, if we don't rush to repair the

embankments before winter, once the rainy season hits next year in the fourth or fifth month, the Xuanwu Lake will overflow, coupled with the floodwaters from the upper Yangtze. The city would be flooded both inside and out, causing catastrophic destruction. This is no exaggeration," Luo Min said helplessly, worry etched deeply on his face.

"Repairing the water system for just Jinling city and the embankments along the Yangtze River costs over a thousand taels of silver daily. Our Jiangsu province has a thousand-mile riverbank that passes through over twenty counties. Besides the Yangtze, there are also the Huai River, Tai Lake, and Hongze Lake needing maintenance. Adding it all up, there's a shortfall of over two hundred thousand taels of silver. What am I to do?" Luo Min lamented.

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment before speaking, "Governor Luo, forgive my frankness, but water management is a long-term project, which cannot be accomplished overnight. It might take at least ten years, if not a hundred. There's no point in hurrying."

Luo Min nodded, "I am aware of that, but I do not wish to repeat past mistakes. Four years ago, a great flood struck. To save Jinling, we were forced to release water from the upper-stream county, flooding miles of fertile land. I feel immense guilt towards the people of Jiangsu."

No wonder he was so troubled. There had been a devastating experience in the past, releasing floodwaters from the upper-stream to protect key locations was a last resort, and the resentment from the common people was understandable.

Lin Wanrong replied, "Governor Luo, I admire your determination. However, for the matter of raising funds, you should discuss it with the prefectural officials. I'm just a small domestic servant, at best managing an inn and earning some petty cash. Talking to me about these matters isn't beneficial."

Luo Min sighed, "Little Lin, I won't hide it from you. I've done everything I could solicited donations, levied assessments, tried all sorts of means but how could I possibly fill a gap of hundreds of thousands of taels of silver? Without the silver, the construction of the Yangtze River embankments will stop within days. If we don't repair these embankments before the frost, we'll be helpless when the flood comes next year."

"Little Lin, my daughter Ning mentioned your quick wit and resourcefulness. She has sought your help before. Therefore, I implore you to lend a hand in this. It would benefit the people of Jiangsu." Luo Min's words were earnest, so sincere that Lin Wanrong couldn't discern if they were true or not.

So, it turned out Luo Ning had recommended me to her father as a money-making genius, Lin Wanrong thought. But no matter how capable I am, can I conjure up tens of thousands of taels of silver in the blink of an eye? If I had such power, I wouldn't be here talking nonsense with you, I'd be back home counting my silver.

"Governor Luo, I have no position, power, or money, how am I supposed to help you?" Lin Wanrong said with a bitter smile.

"You may lack position, power, and money, Little Lin, but you possess intelligence and wisdom, which are priceless," Luo Min flattered.

From Luo Min's demeanor, it was evident he was desperate, or else he wouldn't be seeking help so frantically. Having grown up near the river, Lin Wanrong knew all too well what the embankments meant to ordinary people. He sighed internally, wondering if he really needed to play the savior this time.

Lin Wanrong paced back and forth on the embankment, lost in thought, while Luo Min remained silent. Luo Ning, who was on the other side, looked up at the two men on the embankment, their brows furrowed with worry. She sighed inwardly. Was there truly no solution, even for the cunning Lin Wanrong?

After walking a few steps, Lin Wanrong turned around, his gaze firm. "Governor Luo, I can suggest a plan. But whether you can execute it, and whether you fear being scolded, that will be your problem."

Luo Min replied with joy, "Just speak your mind. I, Luo Min, have been criticized more than once or twice. Another time won't make a difference."

Lin Wanrong nodded. Aside from his sizable belly and sly nature, this old Luo didn't seem to have any other flaws.

"Governor Luo, how much manpower is still needed to repair the embankments?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"We need at least three thousand able-bodied men," Luo Min answered, "But our funds and provisions have already been exhausted, I fear further conscription is no longer feasible."

"If you're looking to pay for manpower, of course it won't work. But there are plenty of able-bodied men in Jiangnan that you don't need to pay for. Why not utilize them?" Lin Wanrong suggested.

Delighted, Luo Min asked, "Where could I find such men?"

"The Jiangsu Commander-in-chief has three battalions of soldiers under his command, totaling tens of thousands of men. They're eating military rations without a war to fight. Why not have them repair the embankments?" Lin Wanrong proposed casually.

Luo Min was taken aback. Using soldiers for water conservation works was a bold idea. There was no precedent in the dynasty for such a move. Could it work?

Luo Min sighed, "Little Lin, you're not familiar with the workings of the officialdom. The Jiangsu Commander-in-chief, Cheng De, although nominally under my control, has never been willing to heed my orders. I fear it would be difficult to conscript his soldiers."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Governor Luo, that's a problem for you to consider. I'm only here to provide ideas."

As Luo Min wore a worried frown, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Everything depends on our actions. If Cheng De doesn't obey the command, then sue him. Say nothing else, but focus on his disregard for the lives of the people. Bring this to the capital, all the way to the Emperor, and let everyone know, let the people of Jiangsu recognize him. Who knows, someone might dump night soil at his door in the middle of the night."

Luo Min understood his implication. The plan was to tarnish Cheng De's reputation, preferably sully his master's name in the process, forcing them to dispatch their troops for the water conservation project.

Gritting his teeth, Luo Min declared, "Then, I'll issue an order to Cheng De tonight, while simultaneously sending an urgent eight-hundred-li report to the court, asking for a military order from the Ministry of War, and also petitioning the Emperor."

"Governor Luo, according to our laws in the Great Hua, what is the penalty for disobeying the imperial order?" Lin Wanrong asked lightly.

"A light punishment would be dismissal from office, a severe one would be execution," Luo Min replied.

"So, if you get the military order and Cheng De refuses to dispatch his troops, executing him on the spot wouldn't be excessive?" Lin Wanrong suggested, half-seriously.

Luo Min was taken aback. Indeed, this Young Master Lin was ruthless. He nodded, "According to the law of Great Hua, that's correct."

With a sly smile, Lin Wanrong said, "Governor Luo, I've given you a solution for the people problem. Whether you can solve it depends on you. Now, let's talk about the money issue."

Luo Min nodded. As Lin Wanrong had said, if he didn't show firmness to Cheng De, the latter would never yield.

"Governor Luo, in your opinion, what is the most profitable business in Jinling City?"

Luo Min pondered for a moment before answering, "Restaurants!"

Lin Wanrong almost spat blood. This old fox, was he eyeing my restaurants? He chuckled awkwardly, "Governor Luo, please stop joking. In Jinling City, the most profitable trade is the brothels. Along the Qinhuai River, brothels are aplenty, easily more than a hundred. They're veritable gold mines. Of course, the girls in the brothels sell their smiles and offer fleshly pleasures. They should make some money. But most of the silver doesn't end up in their hands. Can't you think of a solution from this?"

A light flashed in Luo Min's eyes, "You mean, levy taxes?"

"Not necessarily increasing the tax, but possibly creating new types. Governor Luo, land along the Qinhuai River is worth its weight in gold. There could be many reasons for taxation, such as property tax, land value increment tax, industry additional tax. The list is endless, I can't even count them all," Lin Wanrong said with a laugh.

The prospect of levying new taxes on brothels was indeed appealing, but as Lin Wanrong pointed out, even though it would only affect a small number of people, the backlash could be significant.

Noticing Luo Min's hesitation, Lin Wanrong silently cursed, 'This old fox, always wanting to appease everyone and remain a well-praised official. Is there such a cheap thing in the world?'

Luo Min nodded, "Little Lin, you make a valid point. Not only brothels, but also all industries making excessive profits can be heavily taxed. This way, it will not affect many, yet could gain public support. What do you think, Little Lin?" As he spoke, he squinted at Lin Wanrong, a significant look on his face.

A jolt of apprehension ran through Lin Wanrong. 'Damn, this old fox isn't planning to impose heavy taxes on my perfume and soap business, is he? I may have shot myself in the foot this time.'

Yet, Luo Min seemed to see through his concern, slyly chuckling, "Little Lin, your restaurant's profits are minimal, and the Xiao family's ventures are just starting. These taxes won't affect you for the time being."

'This old fox, benefiting from me and then acting like he's doing me a favor,' Lin Wanrong thought, both amused and annoyed. Just as he was about to retort, Luo Ning personally brought over two cups of aromatic tea. She smiled sweetly, "Father, Brother Lin, you must be tired. Have some tea."

After receiving Lin Wanrong's advice, Luo Min was in high spirits. Taking a sip of the tea, he said, "Ning'er, Young Master Lin has been a great help."

Luo Ning, who had been eager to hear their conversation, looked at Lin Wanrong with excitement, "Really, Brother Lin?"

Before Lin Wanrong could reply, a cacophony of noise and angry shouts echoed from a distance.

The three looked up to see a middle-aged commoner who was carrying a bag of mud. He had been so absorbed watching the scholars draw that he lost his grip, and the mud fell onto Hou Yuebai's table, smearing the landscape painting.

The commoner, a simple commoner, had never caused such a calamity before. His face went pale, and his legs shook. Trying to wipe the stains with his sleeves, he only managed to make the painting dirtier.

"Young Master, I didn't mean to..." Terrified, the old man fell to his knees, repeatedly bowing and crying.

Just as a warrior cherishes his sword, a scholar values his painting. Hou Yuebai had specifically made this landscape painting to impress Luo Ning. Seeing it ruined by a commoner, he was furious. He viciously kicked the old man in the face, shouting, "You lowly mud-legged peasant, is this painting for the likes of you to see?"

Crack! Enraged, Lin Wanrong flung his teacup onto the ground, took several strides forward and grabbed a young man carrying a bag of mud. "Brother, do you want to earn some silver?"

"Yes."

Lin Wanrong pulled out ten taels of silver from his pocket, picked up a rock, handed them both to the man, and said, "I'll give you ten taels. Come with me."

"What do you want to do, brother?" the man asked.

Gritting his teeth as he glared at Hou Yuebai, Lin Wanrong replied, "I'm going to beat the hell out of him."

Chapter 138 Scholar and Rogue

The young lad brimmed with youthful vigor. Witnessing an elder being bullied had already stirred his righteous anger, and now that someone had intervened, he responded promptly, "Good, big brother, I will listen to you. I don't need this silver."

Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs up, "Brother, no doubt about it, you are a real man!" As he spoke, however, he still tucked the silver into the lad's clothing.

The old man was kneeling on the ground, continuously bowing his head to apologize, tears and snot flowing freely. Hou Yuebai, however, was relentless. Just as he was about to kick the old man in the face again, a crisp sound erupted from the table, followed by a loud shout, "Fuck your eight generations of ancestors!"

Turning his head, Lin Wanrong was seen to have fiercely smashed a stone onto the table, creating a hole in the landscape painting spread across it.

"What...what are you doing?" Hou Yuebai was shocked. The menacing demeanor of this household servant named Lin San was alarming; he sensed that trouble was brewing.

Having finished cursing, Lin Wanrong said nothing more. With a swift dash forward, he aimed at Hou Yuebai's face and punched him hard.

He was a seasoned fighter who understood that the face was the best target in a fight. His punch was not powered by internal energy, but it was still more than what a pampered young master like Hou Yuebai could bear.

Caught off guard, before Hou Yuebai could even feel the pain, another punch from Lin Wanrong had hit him. His head buzzed, he felt dizzy and fell to the ground, rolling around a few times in pain before finally stopping. His eyes were swollen like a panda's, several scratches were visible on his face, and blood was already oozing from his nostrils.

Seeing Lin Wanrong take action, the young lad didn't hesitate either. He grabbed a stone and hurled it harshly at Hou Yuebai's leg, making the young master yelp in pain.

"Damn, that felt good!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed loudly. Beating up this so-called scholar in public was extremely satisfying.

The scholarly young men and women in the academy were taken aback. Lin San, who had been so cultured in yesterday's lecture, was now behaving so violently. They wondered: was this man a scholar or a rogue?

Lin Wanrong didn't care about their opinions. If he held back when witnessing such injustice, wouldn't he be the same as he had been in his previous life? What was the point of him being here?

"Young Master Hou--" Miss Wanying was too far to provide help. Seeing Young Master Hou being beaten, she rushed forward to stop Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, what are you doing?"

Without showing any emotion, Lin Wanrong glanced at her and said coldly, "Miss Wanying, didn't you see? I am beating a pig-headed fool."

Enraged, Wanying retorted, "You are assaulting Young Master Hou in public. Is there no law in your eyes? I will take you to the yamen!"

"Law? Miss Wanying, do you know why laws were made?" Lin Wanrong asked with a faint smile.

"Why?"

"Because once laws are established, people have laws to break." Lin Wanrong laughed out loud.

"You are outrageous!" Wanying shouted in anger.

A glint of cold light flashed in Lin Wanrong's eyes, "Miss Wanying, when this man surnamed Hou was beating others just now, why didn't you come to preach about the law? Now you're lecturing me about the law. How absurdly amusing."

His language was crude and he was assaulting people in public. This was starkly opposed to his behavior in the society the day before. Miss Wanying was furious. "Lin San, you're disrespecting the law and assaulting Young Master Hou. I will take you--"

Lin Wanrong glared at her, saying angrily, "You get out of my way."

He was so enraged and intimidating that Miss Wanying took a step back instinctively. However, she quickly regained her composure and shouted, "Lin San, I'm a constable from the Yamen, how dare you threaten me?"

Lin Wanrong ignored her, moving quickly past her to Hou Yuebai.

Young Master Hou hastily got up, standing behind a desk. His nose was still bleeding, and he said fearfully, "Lin San, what are you planning? Don't think I'm scared of you. I'm a scholar and I'm above fighting you and tarnishing my character."

"Screw your character," Lin Wanrong advanced a step, kicking over the desk. Hou Yuebai, scared, quickly jumped back, but stumbled over a stone and fell to the ground.

Lin Wanrong went over and kicked him in the buttocks, saying, "Young Master Hou, does stepping on people feel good?"

A gust of wind came from behind, it was Wanying, who seeing Lin Wanrong's audacity, had decided to apprehend him.

Lin Wanrong never had a fondness for Wanying. Angry as he was now, he grabbed her wrist, twisting it lightly, causing Wanying to cry out in pain.

"Don't assume people are easy to bully," Lin Wanrong said coldly, and with a push, Wanying staggered back several steps. Lin Wanrong did not look at Wanying again, instead he turned to the elderly man who had been wronged, "Uncle, which foot did he use to step on you?"

The old man, more scared of Lin Wanrong than Hou Yuebai, trembled and quickly said, "Young Master, I dare not say."

Lin Wanrong understood his fear and didn't press him. He turned to the crowd and said, "Listen up, everyone. Whoever comes up and kicks this surnamed Hou, I'll give them one tael of silver."

One tael of silver was a huge incentive. Hou Yuebai, pale and indignant, said, "Lin San, you dare?"

"There's nothing in this world I don't dare to do," Lin Wanrong replied smugly.

The young man who knew Lin Wanrong's style was the first to come forward. He gave a hard kick to Hou Yuebai, and Lin Wanrong laughed, giving him a tael of silver.

With one person setting an example, others followed. Two more people rushed forward. Hou Yuebai screamed, "Lin San, you villain!"

Lin Wanrong was enjoying handing out silver when Wanying, who wasn't giving up, rushed over and said fiercely, "Lin San, your crimes today are numerous. If I don't capture you and bring you to the Yamen, my name is not Tao Wanying."

Lin Wanrong sneered, "Then why don't you come and capture me now? But let me remind you, before you catch me, you should first catch your Young Master Hou, hehe."

This statement was true. Hou was the one who initiated the assault, the crowd had seen it, and by rights, he should be apprehended first.

Seeing Wanying stunned, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "One cannot deceive or insult the public sentiment. If you wish to arrest me, then come on, as long as you have the ability."

Young Master Hou, being kicked repeatedly, was both startled and agitated, constantly dodging, but no one nearby dared to intervene. Luo Ning, witnessing the spectacle presented by Lin Wanrong, found it both amusing and admirable. In an era where the commoners dared not fight the officials, what Lin Wanrong did required immense courage.

As part of an official's family, Luo Ning was inherently kind-hearted, which was evident from her charity towards orphans. She saw everything that had transpired. Hou Yuebai was indeed too oppressive, and she intentionally stayed back to watch Lin Wanrong teach the rich young master a lesson.

"Dad, you have to help big brother Lin this time," Luo Ning knew of Hou Yuebai's background; his father was the Prefect of Jinling and held significant power.

Luo Min smiled bitterly, "Didn't you see how cocky that little Lin is? He is fearless because he knows I will help him. Does he need you to plead for him? This little Lin, is as cunning as a fox."

Thinking about Lin Wanrong's half-scholar, half-rogue appearance, Luo Ning couldn't help but giggle. The cunning merchant must have been sure of his plan, hence his bold actions. And of course, his assurance rested on her own father, Luo Min. The two ideas Lin Wanrong suggested to him were invaluable.

Seeing Luo Ning giggling, Luo Min couldn't resist asking, "Ning'er, do you have some affection for this Lin Wanrong?"

A blush spread across Luo Ning's face, but she shook her head and laughed, "Dad, you're mistaken. I admire Brother Lin's knowledge and bravery, and find him quite interesting. But as for romantic feelings, I'm not there yet."

Luo Min, being an open-minded person, couldn't help but laugh, "I know, the husband our Ning'er wants must be both scholarly and martially skilled, a true all-rounder, right?"

Luo Ning blushed even deeper when her father guessed her thoughts correctly, nodding her head. Suddenly thinking of cunning merchant Brother Lin's talents, she figured he might manage as a

Prime Minister. But when it came to the martial aspect, clearly, that wasn't his forte, and she sighed regretfully.

Seeing Young Master Hou dodging left and right in a pitiful state, Wanying was distressed as she couldn't help him due to Lin San's firm hold. At her wit's end, she noticed Luo Ning approaching and called out eagerly, "Sister Luo, come quick, Lin San is bullying Young Master Hou."

Just bullying? I'm enjoying this, Lin Wanrong thought recklessly. With the backing of cunning old fox Luo Min, there weren't many people on this patch of Jiangsu land that he was afraid of.

Luo Ning walked over and feigned confusion, asking Wanying, "What's going on here?"

Wanying quickly explained the situation, downplaying Hou Yuebai's aggression while magnifying Lin Wanrong's "crimes". She even showed Luo Ning her red, swollen wrist that had been pinched by Lin Wanrong.

Luo Ning, who secretly wished for Hou Yuebai to suffer more, was surprised, "Wanying, are you saying this injury was inflicted by Brother Lin? Aren't you a skilled martial artist of Jinling's Yamen? How did this happen?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly. This Wanying girl knew only fancy, impractical moves. Could this be considered skillful?

Wanying looked somewhat embarrassed and hurriedly explained, "I was caught off guard, that's why I ended up like this. Sister Luo, let's help Young Master Hou first. He seems to be at his limit."

Luo Ning solemnly replied, "Wanying, it was Young Master Hou who started the fight. It seems he is more at fault here. Matters of Jinling Yamen should be handled impartially."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, sending Luo Ning a knowing glance. This girl was supportive when it mattered.

Wanying nodded and huffed, "I'll bring them both back to the Yamen then."

Luo Ning turned to Lin Wanrong, "Brother Lin, Young Master Hou has suffered quite a bit. What should we do next?"

Hearing Luo Ning speak so politely to this rogue, Wanying pouted and shot Lin Wanrong a fierce look.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "This is easy to solve. Have Young Master Hou publicly apologize to the old man, and compensate for medical costs, emotional distress, and loss of youth with two hundred taels of silver. Then, I might just let him off."

The first two terms were acceptable, but the third made Wanying scoff. "Loss of youth? The old man is already so old."

Lin Wanrong glared, "When I say loss of youth, I mean loss of youth. What's the issue? This old man, at his age, was beaten so much by this monkey. How much time and youth did he lose? Can money measure that?"

"What monkey?" Wanying snapped.

"Young Master Hou Yuebai, also known as monkey," Lin Wanrong replied with a smirk.

"You" Wanying was about to raise her hand when Luo Ning quickly stopped her, "Quickly tell Young Master Hou these terms. Otherwise, he'll suffer more."

Wanying knew that she had been at a disadvantage against this rogue, and so, she huffed and hurriedly went to negotiate with Hou Yuebai.

Lin Wanrong stretched comfortably, "That was a satisfying fight. Miss Luo, do you think Governor Luo can settle this matter? Please convey my deep gratitude to him."

What kind of people are these, Luo Ning thought, rolling her eyes. Both he and her father were crafty foxes, never willing to lose out.

Before long, Miss Wanying returned, hesitantly saying, "Young Master Hou agrees to pay the silver. But about the apology..."

Lin Wanrong understood her meaning. For a rich Young Master to apologize to a commoner was, in the eyes of these face-conscious literati, more important than life itself.

Lin Wanrong scoffed, "Refusing to apologize, huh? Well, I brought a few hundred taels of silver bills with me today. There's still plenty for a good beating. Brothers, let's continue. The price has increased, a kick costs one tael and five qian. Let's make him wail and his backside bloom. Let's let him taste what it feels like to be bullied."

Hearing his crude and arrogant words, Luo Ning found it both amusing and oddly endearing. As for Wanying, she found it distasteful. How could a man capable of composing poetry and painting also possess such a rogue-like character? Scholar and rogue indeed, he was aptly described.

Wanying went back to negotiate terms with Hou Yuebai. Luo Ning sighed, "Brother Lin, isn't this a bit too much?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Miss Luo, in my view, a person's dignity is priceless. If this monkey tramples over other people's dignity, he should naturally repay it with his own. It's only fair."

When Miss Wanying returned, it was with Young Master Hou's agreement to the terms. But Lin Wanrong suddenly stopped her, "Miss Wanying, please tell Young Master Hou that if he dares to retaliate against these people, I'll deal with him tenfold. Let him wait and see if he doesn't believe me."

"You, Lin San! I am a constable in Jinling City, and I'll arrest you for your blatant threats!" Wanying, who had been put out by Lin Wanrong's audacity, finally lost her patience.

"Whether or not I should be arrested isn't up to you." Lin Wanrong, backed by considerable power, was hardly intimidated by Wanying's threat. "Make sure you convey my words to Young Master Hou. If any unfortunate events happen in the future, don't blame me for not warning him in advance."

Just a typical rogue, Lin Wanrong pulled out a bundle of silver bills from his pocket. Wanying, burning with anger, left.

Luo Ning saw that apart from the top and bottom notes, the ones in the middle of his bundle were just fillers of cowhide paper. She chuckled, "Brother Lin, your trick has been exposed."

Lin Wanrong glanced at it and laughed heartily, "Sorry, I was in a hurry today and didn't bring enough silver bills, so I had to fill it with some scrap. Next time, I'll bring the real thing, how about we play with burning silver bills?"

Luo Ning thought to herself, Keep boasting. Even if you are making a fortune every day, could you really afford to burn silver notes?

Suddenly, a cheer echoed from the other side. They looked up to see Young Master Hou, gritting his teeth and apologizing to the old man, handing over the two hundred taels of silver bills. The old man trembled as he counted the money, tears of gratitude streaming down his face.

Who would be there to help you next time? Enough, I can't stand to see this. Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh and shook his head.

Luo Ning seemed to have seen through his worries, "Brother Lin, are you worried about them being bullied again in the future?"

"Where did you get that idea?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Do I look like such a kind person to you? This time, I only stood up for him because he was an old man. Next time, I wouldn't bother."

"Your words and your heart aren't aligned," Luo Ning giggled, "Brother Lin, you're a good-hearted scoundrel."

A scoundrel is a scoundrel, and you even add the words 'good-hearted' to it. Aren't you just insulting me?

Hou Yuebai gave Lin Wanrong an angry glance but didn't dare to linger in front of him and quickly left.

Lin Wanrong then took out his silver notes to distribute the money, which surprisingly came to sixty or seventy taels. Damn, these guys, did they inflate their count? He saw that Hou Yuebai walked away with ease; did he really look like someone who'd been kicked sixty or seventy times?

Although Lin Wanrong was stingy about the money, no matter what, today's events were thoroughly satisfying, satisfying to the core.

The ladies of Jinling Poetry Society looked at him differently. Half rogue, half scholar, he had such an aggressive appeal.

They stayed on the embankment until the afternoon. Lin Wanrong had grown up by the river and was familiar with these water facilities. He proposed valuable suggestions in a few places. Luo Min was delighted and kindly invited him to have lunch on the embankment.

Despite his high-ranking position, Luo Min acted quite humbly, eating from the same pot as the common workers. The simple and kind laborers couldn't help but be deeply moved.

A humble official? Give me a break. The chicken bones left from yesterday were still in this old fox's tent. I saw it with my own eyes. Lin Wanrong smirked at the old fox, who quickly lowered his head, embarrassed.

When Luo Min invited Lin Wanrong to eat, it was this same pot of food. Lin Wanrong didn't mind at all. Boiled winter melon in plain water and a big bowl of brown rice were savored with great enjoyment. It had been a long time since he'd had a meal like this. The feeling was bloody satisfying.

Luo Ning ate her meal slowly and gracefully. Watching Lin Wanrong devour his food without a hint of decorum, a warm feeling suddenly rose in her heart. Even a man of both literary and martial skills might not have a sense of satisfaction compared to this simple meal.

When they returned to the mansion, it was already evening. The Eldest Miss was pacing anxiously in the room. When she saw him, she first showed joy, then anger, scolding, "You bad man, did you enjoy your fight today?"

Chapter 139 Advocacy

"Oh, so it's about that," Lin Wanrong said, finding it peculiar. The news had spread surprisingly fast, even reaching the Eldest Miss Xiao.

The Eldest Miss huffed and said, "So, you do such terrible deeds and expect others not to know?"

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Miss, perhaps in your eyes, what I did was wrong. But from my perspective, it was absolutely necessary. There are things we must do and others we must not. If I had remained indifferent in that situation, I would question my very existence in this world."

Seeing the serious look on his face, the Eldest Miss glared at him and retorted, "How could you disgrace someone who hadn't offended you?"

Lin Wanrong recounted the incident, detailing how Hou Yuebai had insulted the old man as a 'muddy-legged, lowly commoner.' The Eldest Miss heaved a deep sigh upon hearing this.

Lin Wanrong continued, "Damaging someone's painting and compensating them for it is fair enough. But Young Master Hou not only struck people but also belittled and insulted them. If I hadn't stood up to him, I would've felt I'd let myself down."

The Eldest Miss remained silent for a long time. She was aware that in the eyes of these wealthy Young Masters, everyone else was seen as beneath them.

Even though she was a formidable businesswoman, she found it hard to blend in with the high society crowd. With a resigned sigh, she said, "Farmers and traders are the ones looked down upon the most. Isn't that also the case for our Xiao family?"

Farmers and traders were the lifeblood of the country, yet they held the lowest social status. Instead, those who could recite a few broken verses considered themselves the pillars of the state. This contrast made Lin Wanrong uncomfortable, but he was helpless to change it.

After a moment of reflection, the Eldest Miss looked at him and asked, "Did you hurt yourself in the fight?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Thank you for your concern, Eldest Miss. I've never been at a disadvantage in a fight."

She huffed, "Don't get too cocky. You're so high-handed out there. Is this how our Xiao family has spoiled you? Beating up the son of Jinling Prefecture's Prefect is no small matter."

Seeing the deep concern on her face, Lin Wanrong thought to himself that the Prefect of Jinling was merely a city mayor while old Luo was a provincial governor. With the governor backing him up, what was there to fear?

He smiled slightly, "Don't worry, Eldest Miss. I always act with discretion. This incident won't implicate the Xiao family. Have you forgotten? I have connections with Governor Luo's children."

The Eldest Miss glared at him, annoyed. "Do you think I'm afraid you'll get the Xiao family into trouble? Since you work for us, any mess you make, I will shoulder it. I don't need you to remind me."

Hearing the Eldest Miss's support, Lin Wanrong was deeply moved. This girl, despite her usual sternness towards him, stood up for him when it mattered. His efforts for the Xiao family had not been in vain.

Xiao Yuruo spoke, her frustration mounting, "You are a thorn wherever you go. This mess started because of you. If I don't punish you, I fear no one in this mansion will be convinced."

"Then deduct a month's salary from me," Lin Wanrong voluntarily suggested. For him to admit defeat was rare, but he felt he owed it to the Eldest Miss, given her noble stance this time.

"Wishful thinking!" Seeing the man casually downplaying his wrongs, the Eldest Miss was both amused and annoyed, "Three months' pay deduction and fifty beatings!"

Damn, she wanted to beat him again. Was she still holding a grudge because he had spanked her and was intentionally targeting him?

As far as being beaten was concerned, Lin Wanrong was absolutely against it. He spoke up, "Alright, I will step back further. Deduct half a year's salary, and let's call the beatings settled."

Half a year's salary amounted to more than a hundred taels of silver, which could afford him two more bouts with Young Master Hou. The thought made Lin Wanrong ache.

The Eldest Miss knew it was impossible to beat this troublemaker. She huffed, "Fine, we'll deduct half a year's salary. But you must agree to a condition."

"Go ahead." For once, the Eldest Miss was reasonable, which made Lin Wanrong slightly guilty. His tone softened, "Speak."

"From now on, you must restrain yourself and stop being so reckless. Be careful not to cause trouble for yourself," she implored with heartfelt concern.

"Alright," Lin Wanrong nodded, "As long as others don't provoke me, I won't bother them."

The Eldest Miss nodded, finding it quite a feat to get this mischief-maker to quietly listen to her.

Seeing the worry on her face, Lin Wanrong knew she was still concerned about him. Her nobility moved him, and he smiled, "Eldest Miss, rest assured, even the Governor himself would help me sort this out"

The Eldest Miss glared at him irritably, "Don't you think I know that? It was Miss Luo who sent someone to inform me about your fight today. Although she asked me not to worry, this mess you've made is quite significant. How could she, a young lady, possibly handle everything?"

Lin Wanrong had an epiphany. So, it was Luo Ning who had sent someone to inform the Eldest Miss. She was considerate, knowing the Eldest Miss would be furious if she heard the news from anyone else. Luo Ning's words would certainly soften the blow. What the Eldest Miss worried about was that even though Luo Ning was the Governor's daughter, she might not be able to resolve an issue involving the Prefect's son. Little did she know, Lin Wanrong had already won the Governor's favor and was safe and sound.

After a long silence, Xiao Yuruo finally spoke, "Lin San, I'm going to Hangzhou tomorrow. You should come with me."

"Go to Hangzhou? What for?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"The Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce has invited me to their annual meeting. This could be an excellent opportunity to broaden your horizons. You should go and learn something," the Eldest Miss said seriously. Taking Lin Wanrong to such an important meeting showed her determination to train him as a core member of their cause.

Yet Lin Wanrong understood another layer in her words. The current situation in Jinling City was tense; going to Hangzhou with her would be a way to avoid the turmoil.

Ordinarily, Lin Wanrong wasn't worried at all. If that old fox Luo Min couldn't even handle this small matter, his position as the Governor of Jiangsu would have been in vain. Moreover, he had some so-called influential figures backing him.

But seeing the Eldest Miss's thorough arrangements, he couldn't bear to go against her. After all, it was a business trip cum vacation paid for by public funds. Going to Hangzhou wouldn't be a bad idea, so he nodded, "Then, thank you, Eldest Miss."

Xiao Yuruo graciously replied, "In that case, you should rest early. We will set off early tomorrow."

As she was about to leave, she heard Lin Wanrong say, "Eldest Miss, there's one more thing."

"What is it?" Xiao Yuruo asked.

"Second Miss is alone in Rosy Cloud Temple, eating vegetarian food and praying. It's inconvenient and unsafe. I think we should bring her back. Our mansion's yard is large enough to build her a small Buddha hall. If we put up statues of Buddha and Bodhisattva, it will fulfill her wishes," Lin Wanrong suggested.

The Eldest Miss rolled her eyes at him, "Do I need you to tell me that? I brought her back this afternoon."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong was overjoyed. Things were turning out just as he had hoped.

"Lin San, I'm warning you seriously, don't you dare bother Yushuang," Xiao Yuruo sternly said. Even she couldn't remember how many times she had had this conversation with him, but it seemed to have less and less effect.

Lin Wanrong laughed, his ears almost calloused from hearing the same admonishment repeatedly. Suddenly, he asked, "Eldest Miss, what did you and Qiaoqiao talk about last night?"

Her face reddened slightly as she replied, "We talked about private women's matters, none of your business!"

"I, of course, won't interfere in your women's private matters. But if someone badmouths me, I will certainly have to intervene," Lin Wanrong laughed.

Undeterred, the Eldest Miss retorted, "You deceived Qiaoqiao so much, I have to show her your true colors. You mustn't think all women are easy to bully."

"Do you know my true colors?" Lin Wanrong smirked.

"You are a villain who only knows how to tease women. I have seen through you long ago," the Eldest Miss huffed and turned to leave, ignoring him, "We will set off early tomorrow."

Knowing that the Second Miss had returned to the mansion, Lin Wanrong's heart itched. The day they had met secretly, they had been caught by the Eldest Miss at a critical moment. Now that she had returned to the mansion, he had to go see little Yushuang, or else he would be letting down her deep affection for him.

With this in mind, he stopped a passing maid, "Sister, the Second Miss returned today. Do you know where she is staying?"

"Brother Lin San, the Second Miss is staying in the courtyard of the Madam," said the maid.

Lin Wanrong was familiar with the embroidery towers of the Eldest and Second Misses, but he seldom ventured into the courtyard where Madame Xiao resided. Not being very familiar with the layout, it took him quite a bit of time and several wrong turns before he found the place.

It was a secluded courtyard, reserved solely for the Madam. The premises were primarily staffed by maids, even the one guarding the entrance was a young girl. Both guards and dogs were strictly forbidden within its confines.

As for surreptitiously sneaking in, Lin Wanrong was an experienced hand. He drew a piece of broken silver from his pocket and with a flick, gently tossed it a few meters ahead of the maid guarding the entrance.

The maid heard a soft sound, and looking down, her eyes lit up at the sight of a shiny piece of silver lying not far from her. Seeing no one around, she quickly darted a few steps to pick up the silver piece and pocketed it. Taking advantage of the distraction, Lin Wanrong stealthily slipped through the mansion's gate.

Inside the courtyard, he noticed that lights were glowing in both the east and west wing rooms, with maids constantly bustling about. Lin Wanrong hid behind a tree, his heart thumping wildly. This felt like trespassing into a matriarchal society. If he were discovered, he feared he might be set upon by vicious dogs.

With lights glowing on both sides, should he go east or west? After a moment of hesitation, Lin Wanrong reasoned that traditionally, precedence was given to the east, so he decided to head that way first.

After cautiously taking a few steps, he crouched down near a clump of bushes. He noticed several maids carrying steaming buckets of water into a small house.

Following their path, Lin Wanrong peeked through the slightly ajar door of the room. What he saw had him frozen in place, as if under a spell, standing there in a daze.

Chapter 140 The Wolf of the West Chamber

Peering through the partially ajar door, he saw a woman sitting in a half-human-high wooden barrel, her nudity partially concealed by the wooden pillars, revealing only her bare waist and back.

Amid the rising steam, her hair was pinned up high, her neck was as white as jade, and her skin smooth and soft. She was gently massaging her shoulders, exposing her sleek and beautiful back. Several maids were constantly moving in and out, pouring freshly heated water into the barrel.

Lin Wanrong tried hard to tear his gaze away, grumbling internally about his misfortune. He had mistakenly intruded upon Lady Xiao's bathing. It was his bad luck, but he couldn't deny that her skin was well-maintained. He wondered what her secret was.

Don't look. Don't look, he chanted silently to himself, but his gaze was stubbornly fixed on the scene. After a great internal struggle, Lin Wanrong wiped the sweat from his forehead, collected his scattered thoughts, and quietly shifted towards the west wing of the mansion.

Madam Xiao resided in the east, so the west must belong to the Second Miss Xiao.

Upon reaching the west wing, Lin Wanrong noted the scarcity of maids and the quiet ambiance. He knew then that this must be where the Second Miss Xiao lived.

Lin Wanrong smirked, thinking to himself that this night might play out like a scene from "Romance of the West Chamber". Although there was no go-between like in the story, he thought, wasn't there still Yingying? He was determined to be the wolf of the West Chamber.

The chamber was eerily quiet. He could not hear a sound, nor could he tell if the Second Miss Xiao was inside.

Learning from his previous indiscretion, Lin Wanrong first peered through the small gaps by the window. There, under the flickering candlelight, was a petite and slender figure, dressed in plain clothes, sitting in front of a shrine, holding a piece of paper. A slight smile played on her face, and he immediately recognized her as the Second Miss Xiao.

Seeing no one around, Lin Wanrong gently pulled on the door. It swung open easily. He reasoned that it was not surprising for the door to be unlocked as only maids frequented this part of the mansion. With this in mind, he quietly closed the door behind him.

Upon entering, he noticed that the Second Miss Xiao was completely engrossed in something, a faint smile on her face. Lin Wanrong tiptoed closer and found that she was holding a portrait. The man depicted in the portrait was somewhat handsome, wearing simple clothes, a crooked hat, and an odd grin on his face, clearly not a respectable figure.

Damn it, who drew this? They made me look like a fool. Is this how I'm supposed to present myself? The thought of this unflattering image falling into the hands of Yushuang was unacceptable, as it undermined his handsome image.

Annoyed, Lin Wanrong chuckled and asked, "Second Miss, what are you looking at?"

Startled by the sudden voice, she hurriedly put away the portrait and stammered, "No... nothing."

When she realized that the voice belonged to a man and a familiar one at that, she was even more surprised. She lifted her gaze, only to see the man from the painting standing right in front of her.

Xiao Yushuang was both shy and joyful as she spoke softly, "Lin San, how did you get here?"

"I came to see you," Lin Wanrong grinned, catching her small hand, "What were you just looking at?"

Blushing, Xiao Yushuang struggled to free her hand from his grasp. Her eyes lowered, a rosy hue spread across her cheeks. "Nothing, I wasn't looking at your portrait."

Lin Wanrong could hardly contain his laughter at her adorable reaction. However, he noticed her reluctance to let him hold her hand. He felt slightly surprised. Why had she grown distant in just two days?

"Lin San, how did you get in?" Yushuang asked in a hushed voice.

"I missed you, so I came," Lin Wanrong said, reaching out to hold her hand again.

Predicting his intentions, Xiao Yushuang lowered her head shyly and said, "My sister said that we, as ladies, must be reserved and maintain distance from men. She said you can't just hold my hand or do whatever you please. She warned that women like us would be at a disadvantage."

Lin Wanrong was utterly baffled. Of all the things Xiao Yuruo could have taught her sister, she chose to share this advice, tarnishing his image. Was he such an undisciplined man? Now the once passionate girl had become reserved, which saddened him deeply.

Ignoring her hesitation, Lin Wanrong firmly held her hand. "Your sister's words are right but apply to strangers, not me. We've been through life and death together, so why the formality?"

Yushuang hummed in acknowledgment, a slight blush flickering on her face. "I told my sister the same, but she said that her advice was specifically to guard against you."

Astonished and hurt, Lin Wanrong was left speechless. He had just been appreciating her elder sister and hadn't expected this. He wasn't a wolf. Why the need for such precautions?

Holding Yushuang's hand, he coaxed her gently, "So, do you like it when I hold your hand?"

Her face flushed crimson as she lowered her head and hummed in agreement. However, she withdrew her hand again, "My sister said that a man and woman can only hold hands after marriage. We're not yet" Her cheeks reddened, and she couldn't finish her sentence.

A wave of despair washed over Lin Wanrong. The Eldest Miss's brainwashing skills were truly admirable. Within a few days, she had turned the lively Yushuang into a model of traditional feminine decorum. She would have been wasted not being a political teacher.

"Yushuang, do you miss me?" Lin Wanrong decided to take a slow approach. He had initially planned a beautiful night, but it seemed the heavens had other plans.

"I do!" the young lady whispered. This time, when Lin Wanrong grasped her hand, he applied some force. The little lady struggled a bit, but finally let him hold her hand. Her face was a lovely shade of pink.

"Do you think of me when you read your scriptures during the day?"

"I do!"

"Do you think of me when you sleep at night?"

"I do!"

"Do you prefer listening to me or your sister?"

...

This question had the Second Miss stumped. She furrowed her brows, speaking softly, "Lin San, can I listen to both you and my sister?"

"What if I want to hold your hand, and she says I shouldn't? Whose advice would you take then?" Lin Wanrong revealed his cunning.

Even though the Eldest Miss had become more reserved, she hadn't lost her wits. She let out a gentle huff, "You're such a bad person. You've already held my hand, and now you're asking whom I should listen to? You're doing this just to tease me."

In her retort, the lively girl that he knew was back. Lin Wanrong's heart soared with joy, he chuckled, "I'm not teasing you. I just noticed you've changed under your sister's influence, and I wanted to correct it."

Xiao Yushuang pouted, "But I think what my sister said makes sense. You're terrible, always teasing me. I should indeed be cautious around you."

This was the vibrant and youthful Yushuang he knew, Lin Wanrong thought gratefully, nearly moved to tears. Holding her hand, he said, "Second Miss, you've finally returned to your old self."

"Don't talk nonsense, I'm me, and I've never changed." Yushuang boldly caught his large hand, her dimpled smile returning.

Lin Wanrong grinned, asking, "Did it get tiresome chanting scriptures in the temple every day?"

"Not tiresome, just that I couldn't see you." Xiao Yushuang's eyes welled up with tears. "When I returned today, I thought you would be at home. I looked for you all day, but there was no sign of you, you unfaithful man"

He was stunned. When had the Second Miss learned to say such words? Had her sister taught her that as well?

Quickly trying to placate her, Lin Wanrong said, "I had no idea you were coming back today. You know I often have various matters to attend to, but no matter how chaotic things get, I'm always thinking of you."

The youthful Yushuang blushed at his shameless words. Her eyelids dropped low, her face flushed, and her heart pounded uncontrollably.

Comforting the young lady was something Lin Wanrong excelled at. He gently caressed her hand, asking, "Who taught you to say 'unfaithful man'? Your sister?"

Xiao Yushuang's face turned red, she hurriedly said, "No, my sister would never say such things to me. I learned it from books."

"Books? What books?" Lin Wanrong wondered. "Aren't you studying scriptures at Rosy Cloud Temple every day?"

The young lady giggled, "Who told you I study scriptures every day? That's silly. I only chant them during morning and evening prayers. I have time to read other books. Since you didn't visit, I had to find some other books to alleviate my boredom."

Lin Wanrong then understood. The books the young lady read in her spare time were probably love stories like "Romance of the West Chamber". The girl was over sixteen, a time of burgeoning feelings, and reading romance novels was understandable.

"Second Miss, when I have some free time, I'll write some books for you. They'll be much better than any other random books you're reading." Lin Wanrong boasted without shame. After all, the stories he told were all classics. Winning over young girls like Yushuang was easy for him.

The young lady's face lit up. "That's great, that's great, Lin San. You should write down the stories you've told me. I love them." But soon, as if remembering something, she changed her mind. "Actually, let's not. You can just narrate the stories and I will transcribe them."

She knew that Lin Wanrong's calligraphy was mediocre but didn't want to embarrass him by pointing it out. Instead, she offered to write herself. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily; he was thoroughly charmed by this thoughtful young lady.

"By the way, Second Miss, who was in the portrait you were looking at earlier? So handsome, so tall and straight... it looked a lot like me, didn't it? Did you draw it?" Lin Wanrong shamelessly asked.

Xiao Yushuang giggled and replied, "Humph, aren't you vain. That's not you at all. That's a bad man, the worst of all."

"Even a bad man can be so handsome? That's just not fair," Lin Wanrong exclaimed in surprise.

The Second Miss' face turned red as she gently hit him. "You're so annoying!"

She said he was annoying, but her tone implied affection. Lin Wanrong grabbed her small fist and planted a kiss on her cheek. He grinned, "Did you draw the portrait?"

With a startled yelp, she shyly retorted, "You bully, always teasing me. Yes, I drew it. So what?"

"Nothing at all," Lin Wanrong sighed. "I just think my real image should be a bit taller, more handsome, more upright."

Covering her mouth, the young lady chuckled shyly. "Humph, you think you look good? I like to draw you just as you are. It serves you right for not visiting me. I hate you so much."

Damn it. The more she behaved like this, the more enticing she became. He hadn't courted a woman in days and was losing his touch. Lin Wanrong regretted to himself.

Her expression softened considerably, her voice gentle. "Lin San, in my eyes, you're the bad guy who likes to tease people. Every day, I think about how you tease me, and I feel both annoyed and delighted. But once I see you, even if it costs my life to save yours, it's worth it."

Lin Wanrong felt his plan to win her over tonight had utterly failed. The young lady was innocent and lovely, yet her words had a strong impact. He had not succeeded in charming her; rather, he was the one charmed.

She nestled against him, whispering, "Lin San, will you always treat me this way? My sister says a man's promises can't be trusted."

Damn it, he was in a quandary. If he didn't make a promise, she would surely be upset. If he did make a promise, her sister's words would negate it.

As a smart man, Lin Wanrong knew what to choose. Even the wildest woman likes to hear sweet nothings, and what he would say was the truth.

"Yushuang, I will always love and protect you"

"Yushuang" Lin Wanrong's words were cut off by a soft call from outside. The voice was unmistakably that of the Eldest Miss Xiao.

The Second Miss' face paled, and she said anxiously, "Oh no, I forgot! My sister is supposed to sleep with me tonight. Lin San, what should we do"

This commotion was utterly irritating to Lin Wanrong. Why did this girl always disrupt his plans? But this time it was different; he was intruding into Madam Xiao's inner courtyard. If he were discovered, the consequences would be dire.

In a panic, the Second Miss suggested, "Perhaps you could hide under the bed."

Could that work? Hiding under a woman's bed seemed to have ominous implications. Lin Wanrong shook his head adamantly. "No."

The Second Miss agreed that it seemed inappropriate. Suddenly, she noticed a wardrobe behind the screen used to hang clothes. She quickly pulled Lin San into it, urging anxiously, "Stay hidden here for a while, and don't make a sound."

Lin Wanrong was concealed by a multitude of vibrant clothes. He couldn't help but pull off his servant's cap in lament. A servant trying to seduce the young lady and getting trapped in her room what a predicament! As the proverbial wolf of the West Chamber, he was faring poorly.

The Second Miss opened the door, and there stood Xiao Yuruo, puzzled. "Yushuang, what are you doing? Have you gone to sleep yet?"

The Second Miss' face flushed slightly. She whispered, "No, I was just reciting some Buddhist scriptures and got a bit lost in thought."

The Eldest Miss took her hand, gently advising, "You silly girl, if you're tired, you should rest early."

Yushuang replied coyly, "But sister, you hadn't arrived yet. How could I fall asleep?"

"You naughty girl." Xiao Yuruo affectionately pinched her cheek and after a pause, asked, "Yushuang, has Lin San been to see you?"

At her sister's words, the Second Miss blushed, hastily replying, "No, no, absolutely not."

The Eldest Miss gave her a dubious look. "Really?"

Yushuang nodded vigorously. The Eldest Miss nodded approvingly. "Good. While Lin San is indeed capable, he is ostentatious and his sweet talk can easily win over a woman's heart. You're young, I worry you may be fooled and suffer."

Was this how she truly perceived him? From behind the screen, Lin Wanrong cried foul. That was not fair at all.

"Yushuang, do you still carry the small knife I gave you?" the Eldest Miss asked.

"Mm-hmm." The Second Miss retrieved a sharp little knife sheathed in a scabbard from her bosom. Lin Wanrong broke into a cold sweat upon hearing this. Damn it, this courtship was perilously fraught, he'd almost ended up with a knife in him.

"If anyone dares to bully you, use this knife to stab them. Our chastity as women is of utmost importance. Even if we die, we must not let a villain have his way," the Eldest Miss said solemnly.

The Second Miss murmured an affirmative, then hesitantly asked, "Sister, if it's Lin San, should... should I stab him too?"

"Dare he?" The Eldest Miss said angrily. After a moment, she added softly, "Although his mouth gets him into trouble, he's not too bad in other respects. You can just intimidate him, but don't actually stab him. Otherwise, I " She paused, then changed her words, "Otherwise, we'll have to pay for his medical expenses. You know how he likes to inflate his demands for no reason."

The Second Miss chuckled. "You're right, sister. That scoundrel enjoys making outrageous demands. It's laughable." Her voice was loud, intentionally so for Lin Wanrong to overhear.

The Eldest Miss gently grasped the Second Miss's hand. "Yushuang, I'm leaving for Hangzhou with Lin San tomorrow. Let's have a long talk tonight. We'll be gone for several days."

The Second Miss sounded disappointed. "Sister, you're both going?"

The Eldest Miss nodded. "Yes. I can't trust him alone at home. Who knows, he might bully you again. So, I'll keep him close and discipline him well."

Yushuang bit her lower lip to hide her disappointment. That scoundrel! He doesn't come to see me when I'm away, and now that I'm back, he's leaving again. Such a heartless man.

The Second Miss sighed. "Sister, be careful on your journey with Lin San. You mustn't let others bully you, and you certainly shouldn't let Lin San do so."

The Eldest Miss laughed lightly. "Bully me? I doubt he'd dare." As she said this, her own face flushed slightly. After all, hadn't he once taken advantage of her?

After a while of chatting, the Eldest Miss stretched languidly. "Let me change my clothes, then we'll continue talking."

As she spoke, she had already reached the screen. Unfastening her robe, she was about to step behind it.

The Second Miss was too late to stop her. Alarmed and anxious, she stood frozen, unsure of what to do next.