

Finest 141

Chapter 141 Fragrance in the Dark Night

Lin Wanrong was sweating profusely. Good heavens, the Eldest Miss had barged in at such a time - what were the odds?

As he pondered his next move, a voice called out from outside, "Yuruo, Yushuang, are you both in the room?" It was Madam Xiao's voice. Xiao Yuruo quickly threw on her robe and responded, "Mother, we are both here." Not bothering to change, she hurried to open the door.

Lin Wanrong wiped the sweat off his forehead, feeling immensely lucky. Madam Xiao had arrived like a lifesaver.

Madam Xiao, who had just bathed and whose hair was still damp, with a flush on her face, entered the room. Seeing both her daughters present, she walked up to them and said, "You two girls, so you are here."

The elder daughter nodded, "Mother, I am leaving for Hangzhou tomorrow and came to chat with Yushuang."

The younger daughter, Xiao Yushuang, threw herself into her mother's arms and exclaimed, "Mother, I also want to go to Hangzhou."

Madam Xiao, affectionately tapping her younger daughter's nose, said, "Nonsense, your sister is going there on serious business. What would you be doing there?"

Xiao Yushuang pouted slightly, "I am also going for business. I want to learn and ease the burden on Sister and Mother."

Madam Xiao and her elder daughter shared a heartening smile. Xiao Yuruo laughed and said, "You are still young, how about I teach you in a year or two? Besides, you are still in your month of worshipping Buddha. It has only been a few days, you can't be so insincere, can you?"

Thinking it over, Yushuang agreed. She had made a promise before Buddha and must keep it. "Then I will wait for Sister here at home. But, Sister, remember the matter I discussed with you last time."

Madam Xiao inquired curiously, "Yushuang, what matter did you discuss with Yuruo?"

The elder daughter replied, "Mother, Yushuang wants to pursue her studies."

Yushuang hastily added, "Yes, Mother. I can't learn anything alone at home. I want to go out and learn more so I can help Sister."

Madam Xiao expressed her worry, "How can I rest easy with you, a young girl, going to study alone in a foreign place?"

Xiao Yuruo comforted, "Mother, rest assured. After the New Year, I will go north to the capital to oversee our business there. Yushuang can go with me. She can study in the capital under my care. What do you think, Mother?"

Seeing the love between her daughters, Madam Xiao was moved. She said softly, "With Yuruo looking after Yushuang, I can be at ease. But if both of you go to the capital, and I am left alone in Jinling, how will I cope with missing you?"

Her words brought tears to the eyes of her daughters. Yushuang choked back her tears, "Mother, why don't you come with us to the capital?"

Madam Xiao, with affectionate eyes on Yushuang, said, "Silly girl, if we all go to the capital, what happens to our home here in Jinling? You both go ahead. I will come to see you whenever I can."

Lin Wanrong, hiding behind the screen, was quite uncomfortable as he listened to the family chatter of the three women. Yushuang seemed to have completely forgotten about him. Damn, this was a new low in his pursuit of girls. He was trapped in a room by a mother and her two daughters, unable to escape. It was truly a tragedy.

Madam Xiao let out a sigh, "Yuruo, after the New Year, you will be twenty. It's about time you consider matters of marriage."

The younger daughter immediately clapped her hands and laughed, "Great, we will help Sister choose the best husband in the world."

Xiao Yuruo, blushing, said, "Mother, there's no hurry about this. I'm not worried."

Madam Xiao sighed again, "Yuruo, you've been learning the business with me since you were fourteen. You've worked hard over these years. You mustn't delay matters of marriage any longer."

The elder daughter spoke with bitterness, "Mother, even if I have to delay a few more years for the growth of the Xiao family, I have no regrets."

Madam Xiao looked at her and said, "You've been so busy with business that you haven't given these matters any thought."

Madam Xiao sighed, "You are not young anymore; these matters need to be addressed promptly. I originally thought well of Young Master Tao and wanted to propose marriage on your behalf, but it seems you have no feelings for him. I know most of the Young Masters in Jinling city, but I can't find a suitable candidate. When we move to the capital, you must pay attention. If you meet a Young Master you like, you mustn't let him slip away. It's truly not easy for a woman to find a man she likes."

The elder daughter blushed, "Mother, don't worry. Do I look like someone who can't get married?"

Madam Xiao sighed, "I'm not worried about you getting married, I'm worried about you not marrying well. Yuruo, listen to your mother, you mustn't sacrifice your happiness for the sake of the Xiao family. If that happens, I'll never find peace."

Madam Xiao knew her daughter's mind all too well. The elder daughter was good in all respects, except that she cared too much about the family business. She would sacrifice anything for it. This determination made her a strong woman in the Xiao family, but Madam Xiao feared it would ruin her happiness.

The elder daughter hummed softly and lowered her head, lost in her thoughts.

Madam Xiao's eyes reddened, and she sighed deeply, "Our Xiao family has a hard fate, without a single man. If we had a man in the family, there would be no need for us women to bear these

burdens. Yuruo, you could comfortably be a lady, choose a good husband and marry. All these worries wouldn't exist."

Having been a widow for many years, raising two daughters on her own, Madam Xiao had endured countless hardships. Now, her sorrow welled up and she couldn't help but shed tears.

Seeing her mother crying, the elder daughter was reminded of the hardship they had suffered over the years and also began to cry softly. Though the younger daughter was young, she felt for her mother and sister. Mother and daughters held each other and wept.

Listening to the whimpering cries of the three women, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but shake his head. Women were indeed troublesome, recalling the past, nine out of ten would end up in tears. Weren't people born to endure suffering? Isn't that just life? If one didn't want to suffer, would marrying a man do the trick?

He sighed for a while, thinking about the three Xiao ladies outside, they did seem quite pitiful. A widow and her daughters, doing business, managing a large household, it was not easy indeed.

After a while, Madam Xiao, being older, stopped crying and told her daughters, "Yuruo, Yushuang, stop crying. You wouldn't want the servants to see and make a laughing stock out of us."

Mentioning the servants, Xiao Yushuang suddenly remembered that Lin Wanrong was hiding behind the screen. Had he heard their emotional breakdown? But he wasn't really an outsider, she thought sweetly.

"Yuruo, how's the business progress recently?" Madam Xiao asked.

The elder daughter nodded, "This month, our cloth business has seen a further decrease in sales and profits. However, our business direction has slowly shifted, so the impact isn't that significant. The underwear we've introduced has been well-promoted among the ladies in Jinling City. It seems to be selling well, and as for the perfume, needless to say, we're sold out, with orders received until the second month of next year. The soap we just introduced a few days ago has also been well received. Fubo and his team are setting up a production workshop, and we'll soon start formal production."

Madam Xiao nodded, "That Lin San is indeed a talent."

Seeing her mother praise Lin San, Xiao Yushuang's eyes brightened as she said, "Yes, mother, I told you he's a talent."

Madam Xiao looked meaningfully at her younger daughter and sighed, "It's a pity he's a servant."

The elder daughter also said, "This Lin San is intelligent, articulate, brave, and responsible. He's truly remarkable. His contributions to the resurgence of our Xiao family are immense."

Hiding behind the screen, Lin Wanrong listened and couldn't help but feel pleased. Was she talking about him? How did the Eldest Miss change her tune so quickly? Just a while ago she accused him of being a smooth talker, now he was lauded as articulate.

Madam Xiao nodded, "Indeed, we must retain such talent. Remember, he only signed a one-year contract with us."

The younger daughter gritted her teeth, "Mother, if you want Lin San to stay with us forever, I think he would agree."

You little girl, one can eat food freely, but words mustn't be spoken lightly. When did I ever say I'd stay in the Xiao family forever? Damn, I still plan to marry you and bring you back to serve me in the Lin family.

Xiao Yuruo continued, "Lin San does have some talent, but he's a bit too self-important. We must not let him get too arrogant, he needs to be humbled."

Madam Xiao laughed, "Yuruo, you should take this trip to Hangzhou with Lin San as an opportunity to teach him properly. It's rare for our Xiao family to produce such a talent, and if taught well, it would greatly benefit you."

Listening to their conversation, Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly, was he such a useless person? To be taught by Xiao Yuruo? It should be him teaching her!

Madam Xiao continued, "Yuruo, you and Lin San should get along well. Don't argue with him as you did before."

Blushing, the elder daughter said, "I didn't argue with him, it's him who's so annoying."

Madam Xiao replied, "You have a gentle temperament with others, but why can't you maintain it with Lin San? In this aspect, I find Lin San better than you. He is thick-skinned and fears no one. I've never seen him at a disadvantage."

Lin Wanrong felt proud at first, but at the end, he snorted quietly, was he really thick-skinned? That was his broad-mindedness, his cultivation, these women really lacked understanding.

The elder daughter thought about Lin San's face and couldn't help but laugh, "I agree, he indeed has a thick face. His audacity seems borrowed from a leopard. Just today, he dared to hit the son of the Prefect."

Madam Xiao exclaimed, "Did that really happen?" The Second Miss was equally shocked.

The elder daughter recounted the day's events. Xiao Yushuang took a long breath and said, "Sister, if Lin San says it's fine, it will be. He never jokes about serious matters. If he's not confident, he wouldn't promise."

Ah, a kindred spirit. Lin Wanrong thought, this was the most satisfying thing he'd heard all night. He almost wanted to hold this girl in his arms and give her a dozen kisses.

The elder daughter nodded, "Although he's a bit crude, he is careful with his tasks. I heard he's friendly with Governor Luo's son and daughter, so things shouldn't go wrong. But we can't let him run wild, we should use this opportunity to teach him a lesson."

So that was her plan. Lin Wanrong finally understood that the Eldest Miss was just looking for an excuse to discipline him. Damn, was he that arrogant? He didn't feel so. He just scolded those who deserved scolding and fought those who deserved fighting.

Madam Xiao laughed, "Then you should manage him well. But don't go too far. He's not someone who responds to force."

The elder daughter nodded, "I understand, mother. I will teach him well."

Lin Wanrong couldn't help but feel a mix of annoyance and amusement. Did he respond to softness? He didn't feel that way. Truly, like mother like daughter, both Madam Xiao and the elder daughter were master schemers.

After more conversation, Madam Xiao led the elder daughter to her room, instructing her about the next day's journey to Hangzhou.

The younger daughter pulled him out, pouting, "There, you've heard all about our family affairs."

"Not at all, I only heard half of it," Lin Wanrong laughed.

The room was suffused with the lingering fragrance of rose perfume, a scent so profound that Lin Wanrong took a deep breath to capture it. Was it the elder daughter or Madam Xiao who preferred this strong rose perfume?

"Do not speak of what you've seen and heard tonight to others," the Second Miss warned.

"And you must help my sister well, not bully me, nor her," the Second Miss stated assertively.

Lin Wanrong innocently asked, "But what if she bullies me? You know, I'm an easy person to be bullied."

Xiao Yushuang said, "Then you must let her bully you. She's my only sister and I allow her to bully me because she's kind to me. You and I are... well, you have to let her bully you too."

This left Lin Wanrong feeling dazed, the logic of young girls was truly peculiar.

After being authoritative for a while, the Second Miss suddenly became tender, gently holding his hand and asking softly, "Lin San, will you miss me when you're away?"

"There's only one moment I would think of you," Lin Wanrong said with a smile.

Her eyes reddened and her nose tingled, just as she was about to explode, she heard him continue, "-- when I breathe."

"You're annoying, so annoying!" Tears finally fell from the Second Miss' eyes, but she was extraordinarily happy. "You rascal, always teasing me."

She sniffed a few times, sighed softly, and her long lashes were wet with tears. "With your words, I could die content. You rascal, you've harmed many. If I die, it will be from missing you."

Lin Wanrong felt somewhat dizzy. Just how many romance novels had this girl read? Her words moved him so deeply. Turns out, after all the fuss, this little girl was the biggest schemer.

Their conversation was cut short as Yushuang, worried about her sister returning, had to hurry Lin Wanrong out. The supposed wolf of the west chamber tonight turned out to be just a shadow of the name. Lin Wanrong regretted this. Seeing the Second Miss' eyes as charming as a painting, bashful beyond words, he gently pecked her lips.

She felt both joy and embarrassment, pushed him out the door, quickly locked it, her heart pounding. She only felt that this rascal was thoroughly incorrigible, down to his bones.

Stealing the Second Miss' first kiss, Lin Wanrong was extremely pleased. The lingering fragrance in the dark night was truly a delightful sensation. He gave the chamber one last lingering look before stealthily slipping out of the courtyard.

No sooner had Lin Wanrong's figure disappeared from the doorway than the Eldest Miss Xiao appeared from somewhere. Watching his retreating figure, she stomped her foot in anger, "Shameless, rascal, indecent..."

Chapter 142 Enemies on Narrow Road

On the second day, in the small hours before dawn, Lin Wanrong was sound asleep when he heard a woman calling from outside his door, "Lin San, it's time to get up."

Blinking sleepily, Lin Wanrong recognized the voice as that of the Eldest Miss. He puzzled over her early rise. 'What could that girl be up to this early? Doesn't she fear getting panda eyes from lack of sleep?'

"Lin San, get up quickly. We need to leave," the Eldest Miss's voice came again from outside. With no choice, Lin Wanrong groggily got dressed, opened the door, and found the sky still filled with twinkling stars, with Venus shining brightly. Dawn was still more than an hour away.

The Eldest Miss was already fully dressed, with a long cloak draped over her. Her face was slightly red from the cold wind. She glanced at him and said, "I knew you'd still be sleeping. Wake up quickly. We're leaving now."

Suppressing a yawn, Lin Wanrong asked, "Eldest Miss, it's still early, is there such a rush?"

Xiao Yuruo snorted, "We're heading to Hangzhou, a journey of hundreds of miles. If we don't start early, how can we get there in time? You're so lazy, always making excuses. Next time I'll find a drum to beat near your ear and see how you can continue to slack off."

'There it comes,' thought Lin Wanrong, 'her excuses to discipline me. Heh, she's underestimating me.' He hastily washed his face with cold water. The weather was getting colder, so he put on a few more clothes and followed the Eldest Miss out.

Seeing his efficient movements, the Eldest Miss's face softened slightly. "Don't let it happen again," she said. "I shouldn't be the one to wake you." 'If you didn't, I would sleep until broad daylight,' thought Lin Wanrong.

Upon reaching the gate, Lin Wanrong felt a pang of guilt. Not only was Madam Xiao standing there, but Xiao Yushuang was also there, her face flushed, evidently having waited for a while. The Second Miss smiled sweetly at his arrival, warming Lin Wanrong's heart.

'I must be the laziest servant of this era,' thought Lin Wanrong, chuckling to himself. He stepped forward and said, "Madam, Second Miss, good morning."

The Madam nodded and smiled, "Lin San, did you sleep well last night? We wouldn't have woken you so early if we didn't have to set off."

The Madam's words were heartwarming, but Lin Wanrong knew it was her way of winning him over. After all, flattering words cost nothing.

"Thank you for your concern, Madam. I slept well last night," Lin Wanrong responded, feigning gratitude.

The Madam nodded and smiled, "Yuruo is a woman and can't travel alone. You'll need to take extra care on the trip to Hangzhou."

"Of course, of course. With the Eldest Miss's wise leadership, the journey will surely be smooth and safe," Lin Wanrong replied dismissively.

The Second Miss looked at him with a smile, biting her lip lightly as if wanting to say something, but hesitated with her mother and sister present.

Seeing that everyone was nearly ready, the Eldest Miss said to the Madam, "Mother, you and Yushuang can go back and rest. We are setting off." Xiao Yushuang hurriedly stepped forward, grasping the Eldest Miss's hand, "Sister, take care on your journey."

Xiao Yuruo nodded with a soft smile. The Second Miss turned to glance at Lin Wanrong once more, whispering softly, "Lin San, you... be careful."

"Thank you, Second Miss," replied Lin Wanrong, who stealthily drew a few steps closer. He was just about to grab the Second Miss's hand when the Eldest Miss blocked her sister and asked, "Lin San, have you prepared everything?" Seeing the sly smile flicker across the Eldest Miss's face, Lin Wanrong was annoyed. This girl was deliberately ruining his plan. Eventually, he thought, I'll ruin something for you too.

"Oh, everything is ready. Speaking of which, Second Miss, do you enjoy the Buddhist scriptures you're reading? The Temple of the Hidden Spirits [Lingyin Temple] by West Lake in Hangzhou is famous. Maybe I can find some better scriptures for you there? I'm not sure if there are any with illustrations."

The Second Miss covered her mouth to hide a laugh. That scoundrel! All Buddhist scriptures were the same, what was this nonsense about better or worse? He thought they were like the tabloids he sketched, coming in illustrated versions. He was clearly just making trouble to chat with her.

Seeing the annoyed look on the Eldest Miss's face, Xiao Yushuang quickly said, "No need, just look after my sister on this trip. And take care of yourself too, don't stir up trouble, avoid disaster, and come back early." Her voice faded to a barely audible whisper towards the end.

Madam Xiao stood at a distance, not quite hearing. But the Eldest Miss and Lin Wanrong were close enough to hear. Seeing Lin San's broad smile, the Eldest Miss huffed and said, "In that case, let's set off."

After she finished speaking, she turned to mount the carriage. The Second Miss used the opportunity of helping her sister to subtly toss Lin San a small paper ball. Lin Wanrong quickly caught it. The Second Miss's face flushed as she stealthily glanced at him before swiftly retreating. Lin Wanrong felt a pang of affection; little Yushuang had even learned this secretive gesture of passing notes, becoming more and more enticing.

The Eldest Miss lifted the curtain from inside the carriage, waving to her mother and sister. "Mother, Yushuang, go back and rest. We'll be back in just a few days." Madam Xiao nodded, but the Second Miss's nose was a bit sore. She continued to wave at the carriage, faintly seeing the scoundrel smiling and waving back at her. Her eyes reddened, filled with a mix of shyness and longing, as she leaned against her mother, tears wetting her eyes.

Lin Wanrong swung himself onto his black horse. This time, accompanying the Eldest Miss to Hangzhou, apart from Lin Wanrong, there were two house servants and a maid, the latter naturally joining the Eldest Miss in the carriage.

The remaining two house servants were both familiar faces. One was the quick-witted Si De, and the other was the honest Xiao Feng. Due to supply issues with flower petals, the perfume workshop could only produce a little over 500 bottles each month, leaving Xiao Feng, the foreman, with some spare time. Si De was familiar with Lin San, having gone with Fubo and a few others to set up the soap workshop. Both servants were personally chosen by the Eldest Miss, thinking that Lin Wanrong was familiar with them, and could handle them effectively.

Upon seeing the three men mount their horses, Xiao Yuruo stuck her head out from behind the curtain and said, "Lin San, on this trip to Hangzhou, you are the leader besides me. Make sure to handle them well, don't cause trouble, and don't let me and mother's high hopes down."

This little lady was rather cunning, deliberately putting him in charge of two people to arouse his sense of responsibility. It could be considered quite a clever move.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, saying, "Xiao Feng, Si De, you two follow me closely. Don't get lost."

"Yes, Brother San," both men said respectfully. Lin Wanrong was now a senior servant, ranking significantly higher than the two of them, and his status in the Xiao household was quite prestigious. Even Chief Steward Wang would likely have to refer to him respectfully as Brother San.

This rogue actually commanded respect, the Eldest Miss silently conceded. She nodded and said, "In that case, take care of each other."

The three men split into two groups, with Lin Wanrong and Xiao Feng riding side by side on the left side of the carriage, and Si De guarding the right side. The entourage then made their way out of the city.

By now, Lin Wanrong's horse riding skills had improved. Using Xiao Feng's body to shield him from the Eldest Miss's view, he quietly opened the small piece of paper that the Second Miss had thrown to him. Written on it was a neat row of delicate characters: "Hurry back. I'll be waiting for you!"

Lin Wanrong nodded with a smile. Although the words were brief, the emotion was profound. Little Yushuang was becoming more and more clever.

As their carriage passed by the Food for Immortals restaurant, Lin Wanrong saw from a distance that the light was already on in Qiaoqiao's room. Surprisingly, she had woken up so early. A warm current surged in his heart. He was considering asking the Eoung Miss's permission to check on Qiaoqiao, when he saw a charming figure standing outside the Food for Immortals restaurant. It was Qiaoqiao herself.

"Big brother" Qiaoqiao called out when she saw Lin Wanrong, and ran towards him like a gust of wind.

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, and quickly dismounted. "Qiaoqiao, what are you doing here?"

The weather was getting colder, and Qiaoqiao wore a small red jacket. Her cheeks were flushed as she tightly held Lin Wanrong's hand. "Big brother, I've been waiting for you."

Gently brushing away the frost from Qiaoqiao's hair, Lin Wanrong took her small, cold hand. "Silly girl, why are you here?"

Qiaoqiao gave a shy smile. "The Eldest Miss sent a message last night, saying that you were going to Hangzhou with her today. She asked me to prepare food for you."

As she spoke, Xiao Yuruo peered out of the carriage. "Qiaoqiao, thank you so much."

Qiaoqiao responded with a sweet smile, "Miss, why are you being so formal?"

With a wave of her hand, two waiters from the Food for Immortals restaurant brought over some food to put in the carriage. The young girl then handed Lin Wanrong a bamboo basket, saying, "Big brother, these are all your favorites. Just warm them up over a fire, and they're ready to eat."

Lin Wanrong took her cold hand and said, "Qiaoqiao, you mustn't stay up late anymore. Go to bed early and get up early. I've told you before, a woman's youth is precious. Staying up late is bad for your health, and I won't allow it in the future. Listen to your big brother and go rest now."

Qiaoqiao gave a soft murmur of acknowledgment, her head lowered. "Big brother, it's a long journey to Hangzhou. Please take care of yourself."

Lin Wanrong gently caressed her cheek, saying, "Silly girl, don't cry. I'll be back in just a few days. Hangzhou is quite near. I can make the round trip in a day and a night on horseback."

Wiping away her tears, Qiaoqiao quickly interrupted him. "Big brother, don't push yourself too hard. Traveling is not the same as staying at home, so you must pace yourself and proceed with caution. Don't rush."

Seeing the two of them in deep conversation, the Eldest Miss seemed a bit impatient. She said, "It's getting late, Lin San. We should be on our way."

In a low voice, Lin Wanrong asked Qiaoqiao, "Has the Eldest Miss paid for these meals?"

Qiaoqiao's tears turned to laughter as she replied, "Big brother, who else could be as calculative as you?"

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong's smile, she finally understood that he was only teasing her to lighten the mood. The girl felt a mix of happiness and embarrassment. It wasn't the first time they'd talked like this, but it always felt fresh. She didn't know where his charm came from.

After saying a lingering goodbye to Qiaoqiao, Lin Wanrong noticed that the Eldest Miss seemed a bit unhappy, so he kept quiet. It seemed to him that all this was deliberately arranged by the Eldest Miss, who had purposely informed Qiaoqiao in advance, under the guise of preparing meals, just to

give Lin Wanrong a proper send-off. Was this supposed to make him feel grateful? This Eldest Miss was indeed crafty.

As they neared the city wall, about to leave the city, they saw a group of officials in the distance holding up torches and posting something on the wall. It appeared to be a notice.

Lin Wanrong signaled to Si De, who cleverly rode his horse forward to take a closer look, then returned shortly thereafter.

The Eldest Miss, having noticed the scene, asked, "What kind of notice is being posted?"

Si De reported respectfully, "Miss, Brother San, it's a proclamation from the governor."

"Oh?" The Eldest Miss seemed surprised. Governor Luo rarely posted notices, so why today? Could something big have happened?

They hurried forward to get a closer look. Lin Wanrong strained to read the vertically arranged, traditional characters, his eyes blurring from the effort. After a few glances, he lost interest and asked Xiao Feng beside him, "I didn't sleep well last night and my eyes are tired. Tell me quickly, what's in this proclamation from the governor?"

Xiao Feng explained, "It's an announcement about new taxes. The governor says that to raise funds for river defenses to benefit the people of Jiangsu, they are introducing new taxes on brothels by the Qinhuai River, based on the principle of those with money pay money, those with strength provide labor. Once these taxes are paid, the brothels can go to the yamen to get their registration, officially open, and then operate legitimately with that document."

Intriguing, thought Lin Wanrong. This old Luo had a strategy indeed. The simple idea of raising taxes had been brilliantly intertwined with the issuance of operating licenses. Thus, government-sanctioned and clandestine brothels were clearly marked with fixed prices. The nature of these brothels was always half-public, half-hidden, and the court had neither explicitly permitted nor forbidden them. Old Luo had exploited this ambiguity to make some money. Paying this special industry tax amounted to obtaining a pass from the yamen, turning the brothels into public, legal establishments. Driven by huge profits, even if the taxes were high, those owners would pay willingly.

Old Luo's strategy was indeed impressive. Lin Wanrong marveled inwardly as he heard Xiao Feng continue: "Governor Luo has also said that he has ordered Commander-in-chief Cheng of Jiangsu to

deploy troops to repair the defenses along the Yangtze River immediately. He has also called on the people of the province to generously donate money for this purpose. At this crucial moment, the military and civilians of Jiangsu must unite to protect their homes. Anyone who fails to heed the order would be a sinner for all time, guilty of destroying Nanjing and Jiangsu."

Despite the discord between Cheng De and Luo Min, Luo Min was, in name at least, the highest military and political official in Jiangsu, and Cheng De had to obey his orders. Old Luo's strategy was to create public opinion first and then pass the ball to Cheng De, exactly the method Lin Wanrong had taught him the day before.

The Eldest Miss found the brothel business despicable, but she too was a businesswoman. Speaking in commercial terms, the introduction of new taxes was unfavorable to businesspeople. She sighed, saying, "It's tough for those in business, yet the introduction of new taxes can be decided by a single word from the government officials. I wonder which wicked advisor came up with this idea."

Cold sweat trickled down Lin Wanrong's forehead. Wasn't he that 'wicked advisor'? He couldn't shoulder this undeserved blame. He quickly defended himself, "Miss, while it's true that we're all in business, there are differences. The obscene profits in the brothel business need no explanation. However, these profits are soaked in the tears and blood of women. The money that ends up in the hands of these unfortunate women is less than one-tenth of the total. So where do the enormous profits go?"

The Eldest Miss appeared thoughtful. Lin Wanrong continued, "The existence of brothels has its own reasons. Simply put, there is a demand, so they can survive. It would be better to be open and regulate them, imposing heavy taxes on their huge profits. This both limits their development and provides a source of tax revenue. Isn't it a win-win situation?"

What a limit to development, he thought. It's pure nonsense meant to deceive people. Demand generates a market, an unchanging truth. Imposing heavy taxes on these brothels would not greatly affect those vampiric owners. The burden would cleverly be shifted to the customers under some pretext. Naturally, Lin Wanrong understood the workings of this system.

Inevitably, the value of those brothel girls would skyrocket, he thought, visiting a brothel would now cost more. Sighing, he said, "Don't blame me for this. Even pork is becoming more expensive these days, let alone brothel girls. If there are willing buyers and sellers, who can blame men for their preferences? It's all a contribution to the river defense, after all."

The Eldest Miss glanced at him, "Lin San, you're defending Governor Luo so ardently. Could it be that you're the one who came up with this idea?"

"Impossible," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "How could I possibly come up with such a brilliant idea? I assume Governor Luo must have sought the most intelligent person in the world to devise such a masterstroke."

The Eldest Miss snorted, choosing not to respond. Just as they were about to leave, the crisp sound of horse hooves reached their ears. A woman in official attire rode up on a white horse, an air of authority about her. She called to the officers, "Have you finished posting everything here, gentlemen?"

Looking up, Lin Wanrong saw it was Tao Wanying, that little lass. She was an official in the Jinling Prefecture, naturally involved in the posting of these notices.

Wanying seemed to have a certain influence, for the officers nodded in unison, "All done."

She gave a slight nod, preparing to ride off. But as she turned, her eyes landed on a black horse standing near the posted notice. The man sitting atop the horse had a mischievous look in his eyes, a smile playing on his lips as he gazed at her. Wasn't he that violent Lin San?

Chapter 143 Wrathful Punishment of the Obnoxious Lady

Her face was alight with joy, teeth clenched tightly as she called out loudly, "Officers! Arrest that suspect Lin San on the black horse, Master Hou will surely reward you greatly."

Upon hearing Miss Wanying's words, the constables swiftly moved into action, encircling Lin Wanrong and bellowed, "Lin San, dismount and surrender!"

Lin Wanrong smirked slightly, greeting Wanying, "Good morning, Miss Wanying. Working so early today? That must be tiring. May I ask why you all have me surrounded?"

Furious, Wanying replied, "Lin San, you assaulted Master Hou's son yesterday. I saw it with my own eyes. Today, I'm taking you in. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Laughing, Lin Wanrong retorted, "Miss Wanying, the country has its laws, families have their rules. If you wish to arrest me, it's simple, present an arrest warrant from the city Prefect. Then there's no need for you to act, I'll come along willingly."

Wanying hesitated, wondering if Lin San knew something. After returning to the city hall the previous day, the Prefect had been enraged at the sight of Master Hou's son. But after discussing matters with Lord Luo later in the evening, the Prefect's attitude had completely shifted. His fury seemingly vanished like smoke, saying that since Master Hou's son initiated the fight, it was difficult to judge the matter. He wished to dismiss it and even forbade them from seeking revenge on Lin Wanrong.

Wanying didn't understand why the Prefect had such a change of heart. But out of concern for Master Hou's son and feeling quite furious, she found no outlet for her anger. Now running into Lin San early in the morning was perfectly convenient for her. She decided to take him down first and report later.

Observing her reaction, Lin Wanrong knew that Old Luo must have settled the matter, which made him feel even less fear. Smiling, he said, "Miss Wanying, please produce the warrant."

Wanying blinked and loudly proclaimed, "I'm here to arrest you under the order of the Prefect. Once we return to the city hall, you'll see the warrant."

The Eldest Miss, having heard Wanying's voice, peeked out of the carriage, "Miss Wanying, you're here too?"

Upon seeing Xiao Yuruo, Wanying was delighted, "Sister Yuruo, you're here too? Where are you going so early?"

The Eldest Miss didn't answer her question, only asking, "Miss Wanying, why are you arresting Lin San? Do you have a warrant from Master Hou?"

Wanying had always been keen on pairing Xiao Yuruo with her own brother and had always tried to please the Eldest Miss. But given that Lin San had hurt Master Hou's son yesterday, she was indeed infuriated. She replied, "Sister Yuruo, let me arrest Lin San first, then we can chat."

Observing her evasion, Lin Wanrong sneered, "Miss Wanying, if you try to arrest me without a warrant, that's essentially robbery on the highway, no different from being a bandit. You should think this through."

Wanying bit her cherry lips, angrily ordered, "Officers, quickly arrest Lin San."

The constables, appearing quite partial to Miss Wanying, swarmed around even though they knew she had no warrant. They roared out, "Lin San, get off the horse and surrender immediately!"

Damn it, Lin Wanrong thought, I've already warned you, but you still want to push your luck. He smirked disdainfully, "Miss Wanying, I've already reminded you once. If you try to take me without a warrant, you're just bandits. And against bandits, I won't show any courtesy."

"Insolent! Get down right now!" One of the constables who was closest to Lin Wanrong growled in anger, attempting to reach for the reins of Lin Wanrong's horse.

Lin Wanrong kicked him, sending him sprawling to the ground, "Since you insist on playing the bandit, I won't show any courtesy. Even if it escalates to the governor, I'm not afraid of you."

The constables of Jinling, typically displaying their might and power, had never been treated like this. They unsheathed their steel blades, charging at him.

Seeing her companions taking action, Miss Wanying also lightly urged her white horse forward, charging directly at Lin Wanrong. Despite her petite figure, her equestrian skills were exceptional. She was completely stable on the horse and even managed to extend a horse whip, aiming a brutal strike at Lin Wanrong's face.

"Be careful, Lin San!" The Eldest Miss cried out from the carriage.

This Miss Wanying was too ruthless, Lin Wanrong thought, cursing under his breath as he met her head on. His riding skills had become adept, and his martial arts prowess made dealing with a few constables an easy task. Seizing the opportunity, he grabbed the horsewhip. Miss Wanying pulled several times with all her strength, her face flushed red from the struggle, but the horsewhip remained immovable.

"Let go," Miss Wanying commanded angrily.

Lin Wanrong yanked the whip suddenly. Wanying cried out in pain, her grip loosening, and the whip fell into Lin Wanrong's hands.

Infuriated, Wanying drew the long sword she carried and aimed it at his chest, thrusting fiercely.

Damn, this girl is ruthless, thought Lin Wanrong, his fury fully ignited. He swiftly turned his horse, narrowly avoiding the stab, and with a powerful kick, he struck the neck of Wanying's white horse.

The white horse let out a long neigh, its wild nature triggered. Its front hooves reared up, threatening to throw Wanying off. Luckily, Wanying was skilled in horse riding. She held tightly onto the reins and clung to the horse's belly with her legs, preventing herself from being thrown off. Even so, she was drenched in cold sweat from the shock.

Seizing the moment, Lin Wanrong reached out, snatching her long sword. He forced her wrist with strength, causing Wanying to scream in pain as her wrist swelled red.

Lin Wanrong snorted, releasing her wrist, stepping back a few paces, and then swiftly turned around. He thrust the stolen sword into the ground and looked coldly at Wanying.

Seeing that Miss Wanying was at a disadvantage against Lin Wanrong, the constables cried out, their swords and blades ready, they charged together, "This criminal dares to resist arrest, let's take him down together, brothers!"

Seeing the bolstering presence of her companions, Miss Wanying regained her momentum. She clenched her fists tightly, her face flushed with determination. With a shrill cry of "Charge," she spurred her white horse forward like an arrow once again.

Witnessing their obstinacy, even the most patient of temperaments would have lost their composure, let alone Lin Wanrong, who was not one to shy away from a confrontation. He chuckled, instructed Si De and Xiao Feng to "Protect the young lady," then, he too, kicked his horse into a dash.

The exhilaration of a cavalry charge was truly something else imposing and suffused with an aura of lethal determination. It was no wonder that the young Miss Wanying relished it so. Lin Wanrong, skilled and audacious, urged his black steed straight towards Wanying. As they passed each other, Wanying timed her move perfectly, lashing out with a punch aimed directly at his face.

Lin Wanrong deftly dodged her attack, lowering his body while his hands darted out with lightning speed.

Wanying felt a sudden weightlessness, and a scream tore from her lips. She was suspended mid-air, held by her waist in his hands as if she were a mere clay doll. Her horse galloped on beneath her, her outstretched fist frozen in mid-air.

"Let go of me, let go of me!" Wanying shrieked. The fury and humiliation of a young lady being held in such a way were unimaginable. She screamed again, kicking out wildly towards the belly of Lin's black horse.

Damn it, she's still so savage even when captured. Lin Wanrong pressed hard against her waist, and suddenly, Wanying's strength ebbed away.

Lin Wanrong flipped her upside down, holding her by her ankles. This new position, with her head down and legs up, was even more embarrassing than before. Wanying felt a rush of blood surge to her head.

"You vile scoundrel, Lin San! If I, Tao Wanying, don't kill you, then I'll forsake my own name," Wanying sobbed.

The young lady called out anxiously, "Lin San, don't harm Miss Wanying, she's just a girl!"

"Just a girl? Damn it, she didn't seem like 'just a girl' when she tried to kill me," Lin Wanrong retorted, eyeing the constables encircling him. He challenged, "Anyone else want to try?"

"You... you assaulted an official. We won't let you off," one of the constables plucked up the courage to say.

"Official? You had no warrant yet attempted to arrest and kill methat's banditry. I'm not afraid to bring this to any court," Lin Wanrong shot back angrily.

Despite being held by Lin Wanrong, Wanying remained defiant, crying out, "Brothers, this Lin San first offended the Young Master, then assaulted the officers of the yamen. Where does a commoner get such audacity? I suspect he's in league with the White Lotus Cult. We should arrest him and report back to the Master."

To accuse Lin Wanrong of attacking the Young Master was one thing, but to allege that he was colluding with the White Lotus Cult was touching a nerve. If Wanying's previous actions could still

be described as a protective measure, her current words were nothing short of naked slander and fabrication.

Upon hearing this, the Eldest Miss burst out in anger, "Miss Wanying, I swear on my personal integrity about the matters with the White Lotus Sect that I have been through with Lin San. He is absolutely not a demon of the White Lotus Sect. If you slander him like this, you are slandering me, and you are slandering my Xiao family. You have no official documentation today, but you want to block the road and arrest someone from my Xiao family. Do you really think there's no law in this Jinling City? Although my Xiao family can't compare to your Tao family, we are not so easily bullied. Miss Tao, if you give me a reasonable explanation today, that would be the end of it. But if you do not, I am going to report to the Prefect and the Governor to seek justice for my Xiao family."

It seemed like the Eldest Miss was truly enraged. It was one thing for Miss Wanying to persistently cause difficulties, but now she was accusing Lin San of colluding with the White Lotus Sect. If others did not know Lin San, she knew him the best. In the Xiao family, apart from her mother and younger sister, the person she relied on and trusted the most was indeed Lin San. Tao Wanying's words not only smeared Lin San but also belittled the Xiao family, igniting the Eldest Miss's anger.

Xiao Yuruo's words were very heavy, stern, and utterly ruthless, not hesitating to have a falling out with Wanying.

Lin Wanrong glanced at the Eldest Miss upon hearing these heartwarming words. The Eldest Miss, however, gave him a disgruntled look, indicating that if he hadn't beaten up that young noble, there wouldn't have been so many issues.

Tao Wanying seemed to realize the inappropriateness of her words and hurriedly said, "Sister Yuruo, I didn't mean that, ahem, ahem" Apparently, she had been held upside down by Lin Wanrong for too long, and her circulation had somewhat stagnated, making it difficult for her to speak.

Xiao Yuruo said to Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, let her go. If she dares to cause trouble again, I will personally go to the government office and beat the drum for you to redress your grievances." Seeing that the Eldest Miss was standing up for him so strongly, Lin Wanrong had to show some respect. He lifted Tao Wanying around her waist with a strong upward motion, keeping her body as far away from his own as possible to signify that he had no intention towards her.

Tao Wanying urgently said, "Lin San, you scoundrel, let go of me quickly. Sister Yuruo, I didn't mean that. I don't suspect you of colluding with the White Lotus Sect"

The Eldest Miss waved her hand and said, "Miss Wanying, we need not discuss this matter any further. Today, your suspicion of Lin San equates to suspicion of me and the Xiao family. We have nothing more to talk about. Lin San, please let her go."

Lin Wanrong asked, "Eldest Miss, do you want me to just let her go like this?"

The Eldest Miss nodded, and Lin Wanrong obediently replied, "Understood, I will let her go just like this."

With that, he abruptly let go of his grip on Tao Wanying, who was being held sideways. Without any support, Tao Wanying fell straight onto the ground. She let out a soft cry as her bottom hit the floor, feeling both embarrassed and angry, and struggled to articulate, "Lin San, I won't let you off"

The Eldest Miss knew that Lin San had deliberately caused Wanying to make a fool of herself. She couldn't help but glare at him before her eyes turned cold. Turning to Wanying, she said, "Miss Tao, remember my words today. While the Xiao family may consist of women, we do not fear any provocation."

There is always a natural adversary for everything. Although Tao Wanying was wild by nature, she was somewhat fearful of the Eldest Miss. In a subdued voice, she said, "Sister Yuruo, I didn't mean it that way. It's just that this Lin San has been excessively bullying, and I"

The Eldest Miss didn't bother to engage her in conversation. Instead, she addressed the few officials, "Dear officers, you have wrongfully detained a person today. While the Xiao family may not be a prominent lineage, we are not to be wronged in this city of Jinling. I know that today's events are not related to you, and I do not wish to pursue it, but I ask that you stop making things difficult for us."

The officers originally thought this would be an easy capture, but they didn't expect to encounter such tough resistance. In the first place, they were on the wrong side, and the Xiao family was not to be bullied by just anyone. The blame rested on Miss Tao, who had failed to clarify the situation, and they considered themselves unfortunate.

At this point, Tao Wanying didn't know what to do. She looked desperately at the Eldest Miss, her eyes full of pitifulness. No one would have imagined that just a moment ago, she had been fiercely threatening to kill someone.

Seeing Tao Wanying holding her waist with one hand and her bottom with the other, the Eldest Miss knew that she must have taken a hard fall. She couldn't help but glance at Lin San again, only to see him staring at Wanying's bottom with a smirk.

Did he have a peculiar interest in women's rears? The Eldest Miss felt her face heat up. She huffed, waved towards the carriage, and commanded, "Let's move on."

Chapter 144 Journeying Together

Lin Wanrong turned his horse's head, waved to Si De and Xiao Feng, and the group began their journey towards the outskirts of the city. Wanying watched the carriage of the Eldest Miss, longing to call out yet daring not to. Her face wore an expression of disappointment. As Lin Wanrong passed by her, he bestowed her with a slight smile.

Wanying, having suffered enough under his hand, was startled by this unexpected smile. She recoiled, putting some distance between them, and cried, "What are you up to?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Just passing by, purely incidental. Everyone can see it. Why are you so nervous? Could it be that you have a guilty conscience?"

Wanying retorted, "What could I possibly feel guilty about? Do you think I'm scared of you?"

As she spoke, she hurriedly retreated a couple more steps. This Lin San was dangerous. Having suffered at his hands numerous times, she thought it best to keep her distance.

Lin Wanrong gave a light laugh, giving her a once-over, and suddenly commented, "You look quite fetching in that uniform."

Seeing his neatly arranged white teeth when he smiled, Wanying was struck with an ominous feeling. It was as if she were a lamb fallen into the mouth of a wolf. The numerous losses she had suffered under him unconsciously provoked a sense of dread in her heart. Despite this, she was determined not to show weakness, and she asked with a mix of fear and anger, "What... what are you going to do?"

Lin Wanrong looked at the uniformed "policewoman", a slight smile gracing his face. To his surprise, she shared the surname Tao? Things were becoming more interesting and exciting.

Wanying felt his gaze was almost tangible, as if it could see right through her. Fear welled up inside her. But the Eldest Miss called out, "Lin San, we should get going."

Lin Wanrong let out a hearty laugh, "Miss Wanying, today's affair was rather interesting. Let's do this again sometime."

Having said that, he spurred his horse and left. Wanying retreated several steps. This day's events, she felt, would stay with her forever. She couldn't imagine what might come next time.

Lin Wanrong urged his horse to catch up with the group as they exited the city. The Eldest Miss spurred her carriage to go faster, and Lin Wanrong had to whip his horse to keep up with her pace.

Beside him, Xiao Feng asked, "Brother Lin, where did you learn to fight like that? It seemed quite effective."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "I didn't learn from anyone. It's self-taught, got better with practice."

The curtain of the carriage stirred, as if Xiao Yuruo had heard his words. Lin Wanrong glanced at his horse, thinking: This Eldest Miss, her temper changes too quickly.

Without exchanging further words, the group pushed their steeds forward. After traveling for two to three hours, they reached the midday. The Eldest Miss didn't search for a town for a meal. When they passed a forest, she commanded everyone to rest within the woods, to eat lunch before continuing their journey.

After riding for three straight hours, Lin Wanrong felt uncomfortable all over. Upon hearing the command, he swiftly dismounted.

The Eldest Miss got down from the carriage. Seeing Lin Wanrong and the others sitting under a distant tree, she hummed in disapproval and, with Xiao Cui in tow, chose a spot far from them.

Seeing the Eldest Miss's displeasure, Lin Wanrong asked Si De, "Who has the Eldest Miss taken offense with?"

Si De shook his head, "I'm not sure, but I noticed that she seemed upset since we left the city. I don't know what's wrong."

The bookish Xiao Feng suddenly said, "Brother Lin, I fear the Eldest Miss may be angry with you."

"Angry with me?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback. He had been very considerate towards her today; he stopped when she asked him to. Why would she be angry with him? But thinking back, the Eldest Miss had indeed seemed out of sorts since they left the city. It did seem likely that it had something to do with him. This Xiao Feng, usually so wooden, seemed to have occasional flashes of insight.

Born shameless, Lin Wanrong got up and walked over to Xiao Yuruo, smiling as he said, "Eldest Miss, we've been traveling quite hastily these past few hours. You must take care of your health. Being a girl, you can't be as resilient as us sturdy men."

The Eldest Miss turned her head and instructed her maid, "Xiao Cui, go with Xiao Feng and Si De to fetch the food from the carriage, start a fire to warm it up, and let's have our midday meal here."

Once the maid had gone, the Eldest Miss continued to look away, not paying him any attention. At this point, Lin Wanrong was certain that Xiao Yuruo was indeed angry with him. Her temper seemed to have grown stranger recently, becoming increasingly harder to figure out.

"Eldest Miss, we still have hundreds of miles to go to Hangzhou, you can't possibly stop talking to me." At this point, whoever was thick-skinned enough to speak first would do so. The Eldest Miss's defense of him today had moved Lin Wanrong somewhat, so he decided to be the one to break the silence.

The Eldest Miss huffed, and Lin Wanrong continued, "I must thank you for solving that big problem today. That Wanying, like a wild pony, is not something just anyone can handle."

"Thank you? Thank me for what? Did I solve that problem for you?" The Eldest Miss responded coldly, "Miss Luo and the Governor had already solved it for you. You were fully prepared. What could a lone woman and child like the Xiao family do to help you?"

Though her words were tinged with resentment, they were not entirely unjustified. She knew that if she hadn't intervened today, who knew how Lin San would have tormented Wanying.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "I reported to the Eldest Miss yesterday. Young Master Luo Yuan and I are friends, the matter was naturally resolved."

The Eldest Miss huffed, "With the Governor's children backing you, can you just do as you please and insult young ladies?"

Insult? I sweat, is that little filly someone anyone could just insult? Moreover, I had no interest in her at all. Lin Wanrong laughed wryly, "Eldest Miss, that girl wanted to kill me, I was forced to defend myself. Besides, with that girl's ferocious appearance, it's hard to harbor any thoughts of insult."

The Eldest Miss glanced at him, "Even if it was self-defense, did you have to humiliate Wanying like that? Your behavior was excessive."

Excessive? I had only seized that little girl, played a game of 'pull the leek' with her and spanked her small bottom. How could that be excessive? Did you really want that girl to kill me before you'd be pleased? Damn, I don't know what you girls are thinking in your heads.

Lin Wanrong said solemnly, "Eldest Miss, you saw what happened today. That Wanying was so aggressive. If it weren't for my skills, I would've suffered a lot today. If someone weaker had encountered her, they would have been harmed by her. I merely taught her a lesson, that isn't excessive, right?"

"You didn't have to put her in that position. It's so embarrassing. I fear you deliberately took advantage of her." The Eldest Miss's face turned red as she defended Wanying.

Am I the type to take advantage of people? Lin Wanrong gave a sneaky grin, "Eldest Miss, you don't fully understand me. I might take advantage of women, but only those I fancy."

The Eldest Miss's face turned red, and she muttered, "You, you have no shame."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "I'm just telling the truth. It might be a bit coarse, but it's not unreasonable."

Seeing the Eldest Miss blush and fall silent, Lin Wanrong sighed gently, "Eldest Miss, I truly admire you. You, a young woman, constantly toiling and traveling. I can't imagine the sorrow and hardship you've endured. It's a feat even many men can't achieve."

The Eldest Miss bit her lower lip, "Do you think I want it to be this way? There are hundreds of mouths to feed in the Xiao family. If there isn't someone at the helm, I fear we wouldn't last a day."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Eldest Miss, if the pressure is too much, it will become a burden, leading to depression."

"What's depression?" the Eldest Miss asked.

"For example, do you often worry about the Xiao family's business failing, and does it prevent you from sleeping?"

The Eldest Miss glanced at him, murmuring, "How did you know?"

Lin Wanrong replied earnestly, "It's quite obvious. Your worries are written all over your face. Actually, your insomnia is a sign of excessive psychological pressure. You need to vent your emotions in time."

"How can I vent?" Xiao Yuruo wondered.

Lin Wanrong replied tiredly, "It's simple. When you're tired or frustrated, lock yourself in a room, tie two sandbags, and punch them hard. Curse as you like. Since it's only you, you can let loose."

"You're the one who's acting out." The Eldest Miss laughed and retorted, "If I want to hit someone, you'd be my first choice. You enjoy bullying people the most. Even a hundred punches wouldn't relieve my frustration."

With that laugh, the gloom in her eyes vanished, her pink cheeks and cherry lips were like blossoming spring flowers, alluring and enchanting.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "That's right, you should smile more, brighten up a little, it makes you even more beautiful."

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" the Eldest Miss scolded, her face tinged with a blush and a hint of embarrassment.

Lin Wanrong let out a sigh, lay back, hands clasped behind his head, and gazed at the withered tree branches, lost in thought. "Eldest Miss, do you have any goals in life?"

Xiao Yuruo had a surprisingly pleasant conversation with Lin Wanrong, and she responded with a smile, "My goal is to manage the Xiao family well, so that everyone can take pride in it."

"Admirable." Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs up.

The Eldest Miss, a girl in the bloom of youth, found talking with Lin Wanrong relaxed and comfortable. This brought out a touch of long-absent girlish feelings in her. She smiled, "What about you, Lin San? Do you have any goals?"

"My life goal?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Wealth and beauties!"

The Eldest Miss humphed, "How vulgar!"

"Vulgar?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "Alright, let's elevate it. How about, career and love, are you satisfied with that?"

The Eldest Miss smiled at him, "Who would believe you? You never act seriously."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "I'm truly wronged. Why is it that when I'm the most serious, no one believes me?"

The Eldest Miss giggled, "Because you have never been serious."

After a few exchanges, their distance seemed to lessen, and the Eldest Miss's face softened. Meanwhile, a maid named Xiao Cui brought over some hot pastries and said, "Miss, here are freshly baked osmanthus cakes. Please try them."

The Eldest Miss signaled for her to set the pastries down, and the maid left to help another servant.

Speaking of eating made Lin Wanrong's stomach growl. He was about to find Xiao Feng for food when the Eldest Miss passed him the plate of pastries, "You should try some."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I would be embarrassed. I'm a rather shy person." Despite his words, he "shyly" grabbed an osmanthus cake and stuffed it into his mouth.

The Eldest Miss covered her lips and laughed lightly, "You always feign modesty. You eat as though others owe you."

She also picked up a small piece. She was still somewhat unaccustomed to eating in front of a man. Her cheeks turned pink as she slowly placed the pastry in her mouth, taking a small bite. It was exceptionally delicious, and she began to chew slowly.

Lin Wanrong was less particular, swallowing a large piece of osmanthus cake in a few bites. He sighed, "Qiaoqiao's cooking skills are truly remarkable."

The Eldest Miss paused, "Isn't this made by the chefs from 'Food for the Immortals'? How could you say it's made by Qiaoqiao?"

Lin Wanrong replied, "If it were made by an ordinary chef, at most they would add some honey fruit sugar. Qiaoqiao knows my taste, so she added peanuts and osmanthus seeds. This kind of flavor, only she could achieve."

The Eldest Miss hummed in response, saying nothing more. She put the unfinished pastry back, stood up and said, "Take your time eating, I'll wait for you in the carriage." After her words, she gave him a fleeting look before heading directly towards the carriage.

Lin Wanrong was in the middle of his pastry, but his heart filled with surprise. Was she already full? Her figure was quite good, she didn't need to diet, did she? This girl was really easy to take care of!

When they set off again, the Eldest Miss had her curtain lowered, obscuring whatever she was doing inside.

Considering that she had only eaten half of an osmanthus cake, Lin Wanrong gave the remaining pastries to Xiao Cui to pass into the carriage. In a moment, Xiao Cui brought out the untouched pastries and said hesitantly, "Third Brother, Eldest Miss said that these pastries suit your taste, and she's not accustomed to them."

The Eldest Miss's mood seemed to be unpredictable, and Lin Wanrong couldn't figure it out, nor did he intend to. He shook his head helplessly and whipped the horse to lead the way forward.

Jinling was hundreds of miles away from Hangzhou. They changed horses at a large town at noon, and under the Eldest Miss's urging, they continued on their journey. By the time they entered Hangzhou, it was midnight, and both the people and the horses were exhausted.

Hangzhou was more bustling and lively than Jinling, even at this late hour. The lights from the various pavilions were still brightly lit, and many bars were still noisy and busy.

Lin Wanrong, drowsy atop his horse, inadvertently looked up and saw a figure in the distance, back facing him, sitting atop a nearby tavern. The figure was somewhat familiar.

Chapter 145 Matters of the Chamber of Commerce

"Uncle Wei?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback, his sleepiness instantly dispersed. He turned towards the carriage, "Miss, I've run into an acquaintance. I'll be back shortly." The Eldest Miss hastily lifted the curtain, only to see him dismount and rush towards the tavern.

Upon entering the tavern, Lin Wanrong immediately headed upstairs. This third floor, quite spacious, was where he spotted the location earlier. However, there was no one there, not a trace of Uncle Wei to be found.

How strange, he thought. Could my eyes have deceived me? That blind old man had clearly returned to his hometown. How could he be here in Hangzhou? Pondering this, he left the tavern dejectedly.

From one of the private rooms above, several pairs of eyes had been observing him. A somewhat pale middle-aged man, dressed in a yellow satin robe, carrying an air of elegance, watched Lin Wanrong depart, and spoke faintly, "Is this the Lin Wanrong you spoke of?"

"Master, it indeed is him," replied an old man standing next to him. He was blind. On hearing the middle-aged man's inquiry, the blind old man answered respectfully.

The middle-aged man gave Lin Wanrong an interested look, nodded, and said, "The lad is quite shrewd. I decide to have a leisurely sit and he happens upon me. Are all of the recent dealings of the Xiao family his idea?"

"According to my informants, it indeed seems to be the work of Lin Wanrong," replied the blind old man.

The middle-aged man laughed, "He does have his ways, making some money. He carries himself with pride and determination, not someone easy to provoke. He fits your description, quite intriguing indeed. The person in the carriage, is she from the Xiao family?"

"Yes, in my opinion, that should be the Eldest Miss Xiao," the old man responded with great respect.

"Miss Xiao?" A hint of nostalgia crossed the middle-aged man's face. He sighed, "Twenty years have passed in the blink of an eye. I never thought her daughter would grow up so quickly."

He seemed to be lost in his memories for a moment, then asked, "You've been in the Xiao family these years, how has Miss Guo been doing?" His expression changed swiftly. After asking this, he resumed his tranquil, undisturbed demeanor.

"Master, in my opinion, Miss Guo has had a hard time these years. The elder and younger masters of the Xiao family passed away one after the other, and it's been tough on her managing the household. It wasn't until the Eldest Miss grew up that she had some respite."

The middle-aged man nodded, "I wonder if she still remembers me? I was too cautious back then and missed my chance."

The blind old man hastily said, "Master, it was your restraint back then that made great things possible. I admire you immensely."

"Restraint? I've endured too much." A fierce light flickered across his face, then he asked, "Does Miss Guo know about your identity during your time at the Xiao's?"

"She does not. I only mentioned that I was a servant of an old friend of the elder Master Xiao. Miss Guo trusted me entirely. When I left the Xiao family, I recommended this Lin Wanrong to them," the old man explained.

The middle-aged man's face returned to its calm demeanor. "Considering what you've mentioned, this Lin Wanrong does seem to have some capabilities. Let him protect the Xiao family for now. We will observe the rest slowly."

Receiving praise from the middle-aged man was no small feat, and the blind old man quickly agreed, his hollow eyes shining with a profound light.

Lin Wanrong returned to the Eldest Miss's carriage. Xiao Yuruo glanced at him, asking, "What were you doing? You were quite rash."

Unable to find Old Wei, Lin Wanrong was not in the best mood. He nodded, saying, "I ran into an old friend. Oh, Uncle Wei. Miss, you should know him, right?"

"Uncle Wei?" Miss Xiao frowned, "Of course I know him. He served under one of my grandfather's closest friends and stayed with us, the Xiao family, for many years. He left only a few months ago. How do you know him?"

So, he was a servant of her grandfather's old friend. No wonder this Old Wei could retire comfortably at the Xiao's. Lin Wanrong recounted his association with Old Wei, to which the Eldest Miss nodded, saying, "So you were recommended by Uncle Wei. That explains it. Uncle Wei has always had a keen eye, and my mother has always respected him."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Eldest Miss Xiao also has good judgment."

"You are quite thick-skinned," Eldest Miss Xiao said softly.

The Xiao family's branch in Hangzhou had a large estate, located right by West Lake, considered a prime location within the city. The steward was a capable woman in her forties or fifties.

"Eldest Miss Xiao, you're finally here," the steward greeted her, gripping her hand with a smile.

"Madame Zhang, it's been a while. How have you been?" Miss Xiao seemed very fond of the steward.

Madame Zhang replied with a smile, "I've been well, thanks to Madam Xiao and Eldest Miss Xiao."

"This is my wet nurse from when I was a child," Eldest Miss Xiao introduced Madame Zhang to Lin Wanrong.

Ah, her wet nurse. No wonder they were so close. Lin Wanrong greeted Madame Zhang, "Madame Zhang, nice to meet you. Just from your kind and gentle look, I can tell you have a warm heart. My name is Lin San. I hope you can take care of me."

Madame Zhang burst into laughter, "So you're Lin San. I've heard about you from many people in the house. You're indeed handsome. Now that you're here in Hangzhou, you and Eldest Miss Xiao can live here without worry. I'll take care of everything."

"Madame--" Miss Xiao blushed and called out abruptly, perhaps detecting a potential misunderstanding from Madame Zhang's words.

Eldest Miss Xiao was being too sensitive. I hadn't even thought about it in that way. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself, causing Eldest Miss Xiao to blush even deeper and glare at him.

The reputation of the Xiao family was indeed well-deserved. Their Hangzhou branch was not only in a prime location next to West Lake, but also occupied a large area with several courtyards of various sizes.

Madame Zhang led the group into the residence. Miss Xiao assigned rooms for everyone before turning to Madame Zhang and asking, "Madame, when is the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce's meeting scheduled according to the invitation?"

Madame Zhang replied, "It is set for the day after tomorrow, at the Qingyu Tower on Su Causeway. Chairman Yu from the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce has already delivered the invitation."

That meant there were at least two days left before the event. Xiao Yuruo nodded, saying, "In that case, let's stay here in Hangzhou for two days. It will be an excellent opportunity to promote our soap and perfume."

Madame Zhang exclaimed with delight, "Miss, is the perfume ready for delivery? Many ladies and young misses from various families have been asking about it. I've had to turn them away several times."

Miss Xiao laughed, "Given that they've waited this long, they can wait a little longer. There are only one hundred limited edition bottles available in Hangzhou. Register the ladies' names and we can notify them when the perfume arrives."

Madame Zhang acknowledged the instruction. Seeing how well the perfume was selling, Eldest Miss Xiao felt thrilled. She glanced at Lin Wanrong and asked Madame Zhang, "How did the soap I sent you a few days ago fare?" It turned out that the day after Lin Wanrong completed the experiments, Eldest Miss Xiao had quickly dispatched a messenger to deliver the soap to Hangzhou, to gauge its reception.

Madame Zhang replied, "Miss, everything you send is exceptional. After the perfume, the soap is the most popular item. Unfortunately, we didn't have many samples, so only a few close acquaintances received them for trial. The response was quite good, and the price was just right."

Eldest Miss Xiao smiled slightly, saying, "The soap will be available in large quantities within half a month, Madame Zhang, so there's no need to worry."

After conversing with Madame Zhang, Eldest Miss Xiao was in high spirits, even her fatigue seemed to diminish. Noticing everyone looking weary, she suggested, "Everyone has traveled a long way today and must be tired. Let's rest tomorrow. The West Lake is world-renowned. Why don't we take a stroll there?"

As she proposed this, her gaze fleetingly met Lin Wanrong's.

Lin Wanrong, having visited Hangzhou several times in his previous life, wasn't unfamiliar with West Lake. He laughed, "In that case, we'll accompany Eldest Miss Xiao tomorrow to avoid any mishaps."

Seeing the popularity of her perfume and soap in Hangzhou, Eldest Miss Xiao was in high spirits. She laughed, "Excellent. Everyone can come with me tomorrow. Despite my many trips to Hangzhou, I haven't had the time to explore West Lake. Tomorrow would be a good opportunity."

Eldest Miss Xiao was in high spirits and it was a chance to tour at the company's expense. Who would refuse? Lin Wanrong retired to his room and was about to sleep when a knock at the door disturbed him. A maid named Xiao Cui called from outside, "Brother San, Miss Xiao requests your presence for a chat."

What was going on? It was so late and they weren't even allowing him a moment's rest. This Eldest Miss Xiao really was a workaholic.

Miss Xiao's room was situated directly across the courtyard from Lin Wanrong's. As he entered, he saw her freshly bathed and groomed, her eyes twinkling with delight as she smiled at him.

The faint scent emanating from Eldest Miss Xiao stirred something within Lin Wanrong. He found her charming and beguiling when she was in such a gentle mood.

Xiao Yuruo glanced at him and said, "Lin San, please have a seat."

Perhaps because it was late, Miss Xiao's voice was soft and gentle. "We've been traveling all day, you must be tired," she said. "After we finish our talk, you should head back and rest."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "If a lady like you can hold up, why would I feel tired?"

Xiao Yuruo gave a bitter smile, "I'm used to traveling like this. I called you here today to discuss the annual meeting of the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce. In a couple of days, I'll take you to the event. It's a rare opportunity; you should observe carefully and learn as much as you can."

Lin Wanrong asked curiously, "Miss, what exactly is this Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce?"

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded, "In simple terms, the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce is an alliance of prominent Hangzhou Merchants. They lead various industries and control the business affairs of Zhejiang Province. They wield considerable power."

Understanding dawned on Lin Wanrong, and he asked, "Does Jinling have a similar association?"

"Of course," Miss Xiao nodded. "The Jinling Chamber of Commerce is no less powerful than its Hangzhou counterpart. A few years ago, our Xiao family was at the forefront of the Jinling association. However, as our fortunes dwindled, the chairmanship was passed to others. With its abundant resources, the provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang control the economic lifeline of the country. The Jinling Chamber of Commerce is arguably the most powerful in the nation, and they have a close relationship with their Hangzhou counterpart. They invite each other to their annual meetings. Last year's meeting was held in Jinling; this year, it's Hangzhou's turn."

Lin Wanrong understood that such interactions were common among business organizations. He asked, "What happens at these annual meetings?"

Eldest Miss Xiao replied, "They mainly discuss the business climate in Jiangsu and Zhejiang over the past year, as well as emerging industries and the Merchants. Both associations hold considerable power, so Chamber of Commerce from both provinces take pride in attending these annual meetings."

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment, "Eldest Miss, did you call me over so late because there's a problem with this annual meeting?"

Eldest Miss Xiao gave him an approving look. "Lin San, if this were like previous years' meetings, I would have nothing to worry about. But this year is different. Our recent business direction has undergone significant changes, which haven't escaped the notice of those with a keen eye. The profits from our perfume and soap are substantial, and I fear they may stir up waves at this year's meeting."

Lin Wanrong understood Eldest Miss Xiao's concern. The Xiao family had been declining in the past few years, despite their involvement in the textile business. Suddenly, they had found two incredibly lucrative ventures, which would certainly spark jealousy among others. The annual meeting was a grand gathering of wealthy Merchants from Jiangsu and Zhejiang; not attending wasn't an option, yet attending could invite trouble. This was indeed a predicament.

Lin Wanrong pondered for a moment, then said, "Eldest Miss, since our Xiao family is part of the Jinling association, shouldn't the chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce protect you?"

Eldest Miss Xiao gave a bitter smile, "Under normal circumstances, perhaps. But I fear this year might be different."

Lin Wanrong asked curiously, "Why?"

Xiao Yuruo glanced at him, "After all the trouble you've stirred up, how do you expect them to support me?"

Lin Wanrong looked surprised, "Is the chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce Tao Dongcheng?"

Miss Xiao shot him a glance, "At least you're not completely clueless. After our Xiao family fell, Tao Dongcheng took our place and became the leader of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce."

Suddenly, Lin Wanrong remembered something. "Tao Wanying is Tao Dongcheng's younger sister, right?"

Miss Xiao nodded, and Lin Wanrong let out a sly smile. Just as he expected, Tao Wanying's wild temperament was a sign that she wasn't exactly a straightforward person. He then asked, "Miss, I have one more question. Given the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce's national importance, will people from the capital be attending this annual meeting?"

Eldest Miss Xiao looked at him in surprise, "You do have a point. Given the unique status of the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce, the Emperor sends a representative to the annual meeting every year. I wonder who he will send this year."

As expected, the Emperor would not ignore the "Granary of the South". There would undoubtedly be important figures attending the annual meeting of the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce.

While Lin Wanrong pondered, Eldest Miss Xiao sighed softly, "I'm telling you all this to prepare you, so you're not caught off guard."

Seeing Eldest Miss Xiao's worried expression, Lin Wanrong reassured her, "Eldest Miss, every problem has a solution. Don't think too much about it. Have you forgotten what I told you today? You need to learn to relax and vent."

Eldest Miss Xiao gave a faint smile, "It was because I took your advice that I visited West Lake. If I had acted according to my usual temperament, I wouldn't have had the time."

Lin Wanrong laughed and fell silent, his mind still on the issues surrounding the Chamber of Commerce. Human greed was limitless. If things were indeed as Eldest Miss Xiao suggested, with everyone now watching the Xiao family, it might spell trouble for them.