

## Finest 146

### Chapter 146 A Shared Outing

He had slept well that night. Waking up the next morning, he discovered that it was no longer early. Remarkably, the Eldest Miss had allowed him a rare lie-in. She probably took into account that everyone had been tired from traveling the entire day before.

After washing and dressing, he pushed the door open only to see that the Eldest Miss had also just stepped outside. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot, indicating she had had a restless sleep the previous night.

Lin Wanrong knew she was worried about the affairs of the Chamber of Commerce. With a silent sigh in his heart, he said helplessly, Good morning, Eldest Miss. Did you sleep well last night?

She nodded and said, This is the first time in years I've gotten up so late. This is all because of your idea, making me also become lazy. Although she pretended to reproach him, her face was graced with a smile.

After breakfast, everyone headed out, heading straight to the West Lake. Lin Wanrong accompanied the Eldest Miss at the front while Si De, Xiao Feng, and Xiao Cui trailed far behind them.

After a leisurely stroll, they saw the shimmering waters of West Lake. The jade-like waves were mirror-like, the shadows of the bridges reflected on the water, birds chirping away, peach and plum trees in greeting, all around them was a picturesque landscape, radiating a myriad of charm for anyone to appreciate. Scholars and tourists hustled about, creating a lively scene.

The Su Causeway started from the foothill of Nanping Mountain to the north of the Qixia Ridge, spanning about five to six miles. Poplars and green peach trees were planted in abundance along both sides of the embankment. Six single-arch stone bridges connected the embankment, collectively known as the Six Bridges of Su Causeway.

As Lin Wanrong and the Eldest Miss strolled on Su Causeway, the sunlight shining on the lake gave off a faint golden glow. A gentle breeze brought a refreshing coolness, truly comfortable.

The Eldest Miss seemed preoccupied, her spirits weren't particularly high. Lin Wanrong asked, Miss, do you know why this is called Su Causeway?

Xiao Yuruo chuckled and said, Don't you know the origins of Su Causeway? I thought you were the most intelligent man in the world.

Seeing her relaxed expression and hint of a smile, more beautiful than even the West Lake, Lin Wanrong responded laughingly, I'm smart about the big things, and confused about the small things. How could I remember such details?

She gave him a smiling look. You're so good at sophistry, she chided affectionately, then explained, Su Causeway was built by the poet Su Dongpo when he was the governor of Hangzhou. He dredged West Lake and used the excavated silt to construct it. To commemorate his contributions to West Lake, it was named 'Su Causeway.' Su Causeway at Dawn is considered the top sight among the Ten Scenes of West Lake, also known as Willows and Smoke of the Six Bridges,' listed as one of the Ten Scenes of Qiantang. It's one of the most famous views in Hangzhou.

She took a few steps, gazing at the crystal-clear lake water, and slowly recited, In the faint shadow of willows, flowers are bright and spring is just right. Lake fog dissipates, birds split the forest. Where does the oriole break the evening mist? A chirp past, dawn of Su Causeway.

Lin Wanrong gave her a thumbs-up. Eldest Miss is indeed highly educated, knowledgeable, and eloquent."

The Eldest Miss responded with a smile, "Why are you uttering such pleasant words out of nowhere, I don't believe you. This poem is someone else's work, I merely recited it. Yet, you who shun poetry, don't even know the source of this poem."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and said, "Do you need to study to recite poems? When it comes to poetry, I can easily spin it out. A thousand-foot flying rainbow hangs over the western lake, reminding us of the ancient Su Causeway. Don't say that past and present are different in the cycle of change, the chic once remembered the old topic.'

The Eldest Miss covered her mouth and chuckled, Did you write this poem? I don't believe it. You must have plagiarized it. You're a man who can't even write a few words, yet you recite poetry. Who would believe you?

Lin Wanrong was sweating. The Eldest Miss certainly saw through him. He laughed and said, Although I don't like to read and write, reciting poetry is all about talent. My talent is natural, others couldn't learn it even if they wanted to.

The Eldest Miss knew him well and understood he was bragging again, yet she felt a sense of unwillingness to part with this relaxed atmosphere. She teasingly glanced at him and said, If I believed you, the sun would rise from the west.

After a few words, the Eldest Miss's mood gradually improved, all thanks to Lin San's joviality. She looked both shy and delighted, and actually ran forward, as if she had returned to her teenage years.

Although it was morning, the Su Causeway was already bustling. Market-goers, performers, and business dealers had all gathered, making the causeway exceptionally lively.

The Eldest Miss seemed to regain her childlike curiosity and left Lin Wanrong behind, walking and observing. On the embankment, there were many performerstightrope walkers, jugglers, sword swallows, fire breathers, hoop diversall astonishing yet applause-worthy.

The Eldest Miss admired them and said, I wonder how these people trained to perform such martial arts?

Lin Wanrong laughed, These are all just tricks. In a real fight, they would be finished with a single blow.

Before the Eldest Miss could speak, she screamed in fright and hid behind Lin Wanrong. He looked in the direction of her gaze and saw a snake charmer with a huge python wrapped around him, asking for money in exchange for letting people touch the snake.

Women are naturally afraid of snakes, and the Eldest Miss was no exception. Although Lin Wanrong was fearless in a fight, he also kept his distance from snakes. He took the Eldest Miss's hand and quickly moved away from the snake charmer. He then breathed a sigh of relief and said, Why would these snake charmers use such a large snake to scare people? It would be more exciting if they used smaller, highly venomous snakes like bamboo vipers or king cobras.

Although the Eldest Miss was afraid of snakes, she knew that the snakes he mentioned were extremely venomous. She couldn't help but glance at him and said, You're wicked. Let go of me now!

Let go of you? What do you mean? Lin Wanrong asked, genuinely confused.

Let go of my hand, she said, blushing and slightly annoyed.

Oh, Lin Wanrong quickly let go of her hand and said awkwardly, Misunderstanding, purely a misunderstanding.

The Eldest Miss huffed, "I've never seen someone as bad as you." Her face flushed momentarily, but she then moved on without him. This time, she smartly chose places suitable for ladies to pause, such as market stalls, fragrant tea and fine fruits, wine necessities, colorful makeup and puppets, lotus boats and war horses, sweet cakes, musical instruments, and miscellaneous props, all too numerous to count.

The Eldest Miss had been studying commerce from a young age and had been distant from these trinkets for many years. Today, she had the chance to revisit her childhood dreams. Her excited face flushed red as she looked eagerly around, displaying a childlike curiosity and familiarity towards every item.

By the time Lin Wanrong managed to catch up with her, he found her staring blankly at a string of candied haws. Her pearly white teeth bit her bright red lips as if she was contemplating something.

The girl was craving, Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself. He approached the old man selling candied haws and asked, "How much for these?"

"Two strings for five Wen."

"That's too expensive. Will you sell three for ten Wen?"

The haw seller hesitated for a moment, then quickly pulled off three strings, saying, "Here are your three strings of candied haws. Take them."

After Lin Wanrong paid, he took the Eldest Miss's hand and handed her two strings of candied haws, saying, "My treat, eat."

The Eldest Miss blushed slightly and said shyly, "I just wanted to look. I didn't intend to eat."

These daughters of wealthy families care so much about their pride, thought Lin Wanrong, ignoring her refusal. He took a bite of the candied haw and said after a few chews, "It's really sweet. The taste is good. Try it quickly."

Unable to resist the temptation, she gently took a bite and felt a long-lost fragrant sweetness fill her mouth. It was surprisingly delicious, and she unwittingly finished the small string.

Looking at her, Lin Wanrong smiled mysteriously and said, "Delicious, isn't it?"

Her face turned red, and she retorted, "It's none of your business!" However, her tone was incredibly weak.

Seeing the teasing smile on his face, she knew that he had witnessed her previous demeanor. Annoyed, she suddenly said, "Lin San, your haggling just now was truly unparalleled."

"Of course," Lin Wanrong chuckled, about to boast, when he suddenly slapped his forehead, "Oh no, how could I have been so foolish today? My reputation is ruined. I, who always outsmart others, got fooled."

The Eldest Miss broke into a fit of laughter. The more she laughed, the more uncontrollable it became, to the point where she couldn't stand straight. She found it rare that Lin San, who usually took advantage of others, had been taken advantage of today.

In his eagerness to gain a verbal advantage, he had short-circuited, thus tarnishing his lifelong reputation. Lin Wanrong was secretly annoyed and managed an awkward smile, "No matter, no matter. Today, I am in high spirits. To suffer a loss is a blessing."

Hearing him claim that suffering a loss was a blessing was as laughable as hearing him say he was a good person. The Eldest Miss regained some of her dignity and said, laughing, "Let's see if you dare to bully others casually in the future."

After this minor incident, the Eldest Miss let go of some of her restraint. Whenever she saw any snacks, she would buy them with her own money and invite Lin San to try. Lin Wanrong, being treated, did not refuse. After all, it would be a waste not to eat when someone else was paying.

As they moved on, they saw an elderly man full of vitality painting by the lake in the middle of the Su Causeway. The painting was almost finished. It depicted the vast mists and ripples of the West Lake under a drizzling rain. The painting style was plain and natural, free from any pretentiousness it was a masterpiece of "Misty Rain over West Lake".

Lin Wanrong, who could barely be considered a half-painter and a critic, could find no fault in this painting. It was calm and natural, unlike the mountains and rivers painted by Hou Yuebai. This painting portrayed the simplest misty rain with no additional meanings, yet it was this simplicity and naturalness that truly demonstrated the artist's skills.

After the old man finished the painting, he seemed unsatisfied. He brushed seven characters onto the "Misty Rain over West Lake": "Long, long, long, long, long, long, long..."

Lin Wanrong almost burst out laughing. The old man had added a riddle, which was quite interesting. The Eldest Miss furrowed her brows and quietly suggested, "Could these seven characters be the first half of a couplet?"

By the time the old man had finished painting, a few spectators, all seemingly scholarly individuals, had gathered around. They may not be suited to fieldwork, but they were connoisseurs of literature and art. This "Misty Rain over West Lake", with its ethereal tranquility and hint of transcendence, not only demonstrated an unparalleled brush technique but also exuded an artistic conception that left people envious. Such a masterful work surely belonged to a renowned artist, but no one knew who this elderly man was.

After the old man finished writing the seven characters, he discarded his fine brush, his face filled with smiles. He seemed to know that people were watching. He turned around, looked at the many scholars, showed no surprise, and said with a smile, "Esteemed scholars, these seven characters form the first half of a couplet. If anyone can match it with a second half, I will gift them this newly completed 'Misty Rain over West Lake'."

Upon hearing this, everyone was astonished. The "Misty Rain over West Lake" was a rare masterpiece of recent times, valued highly. The old man must be a contemporary master, but he had yet to leave a seal, leaving his identity unknown. What surprised people even more was that the seven "long" characters actually formed the first half of a couplet, which was perplexing. The West Lake was home to many talented individuals, but faced with these seven characters, they were all at a loss.

The Eldest Miss pondered for a while and then sighed lightly, "I am of humble talents and learning, I'm afraid this 'Misty Rain over West Lake' is not meant for me."

Lin Wanrong asked curiously, "Eldest Miss, although the 'Misty Rain over West Lake' is well painted, isn't it a bit overrated?"

The Eldest Miss responded, "Judging by the brushwork and the style of this elderly gentleman, he must be a renowned artist of our time. This 'Misty Rain over West Lake', although worthless in the eyes of those who do not appreciate art, is priceless to those who love it."

"Could it truly be worth a fortune?" Lin Wanrong perked up. He had guessed that the painting was valuable, but he hadn't expected it to be worth such a substantial sum. He didn't care much about paintings or famous artists, but this sum of money was a significant temptation.

"Priceless!" the Eldest Miss declared firmly.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "If that's the case, miss, then I'll figure out a way to acquire this painting. After selling it and converting it to money, we can split the sum."

The Eldest Miss said with amusement, "Lovers of art, upon hearing your words, would surely expel you." Then, she exclaimed in surprise, "Do you mean to say that you can complete the couplet?" She knew that Lin San had little regard for things like poetry, but she had witnessed his sharp wit. Could he truly have a solution?

Lin Wanrong chuckled lightly, "It's just a riddle. How could it stump a genius like me, who is bursting with talent and capable of anything? Let's get this straight, miss, I'm not trying to show off."

Intrigued, the Eldest Miss smiled, "Don't worry. For such a matter, the more you stand out, the better. This event that brings glory to the Xiao family can't be compared to the incident where you hit Young Master Hou."

After laughing a bit, Lin Wanrong took a pencil from his pocket. Under the gaze of the crowd, he stepped forward and swiftly wrote seven large characters on the blank piece of paper next to the painting.

As the crowd pondered, they saw a servant boy approach, bringing with him a seemingly suitable response. However, when they noticed the object in his hands, a piece of charcoal disguised as a writing brush, they couldn't help but shake their heads in amusement. This was no writing brush; it was quite clearly a charcoal stick.

Once the servant boy finished writing, all eyes descended upon his work. To their surprise, the characters appeared lively and spirited, like a dragon in flight and a dancing phoenix. The seven characters that he had etched onto the white paper perfectly matched those of the previous line, long, long, long, long, long, long, long.

"What do you mean by copying the previous line?" one scholar queried.

Lin Wanrong grinned cheekily, "Copy? You seem to misunderstand, my friend."

Several other scholars responded impatiently, "Leave, don't waste our time here. Did you even solve the couplet?"

Lin Wanrong disregarded them and turned to the elderly man, "Elder, what do you think?"

The elder laughed, "Young man, did you really just copy the previous line?"

I've been playing with such word puzzles since my childhood, Lin Wanrong thought, feeling somewhat bemused by the elder's cunning. However, he just smiled and said, "If the elder thinks I copied, then I copied. All literature under the sun is fundamentally a copying of sorts, what's the harm in me doing the same?"

The elder stroked his beard and smiled, "This young man certainly has some understanding. In that case, please recite the couplet. If you're correct, I'll certainly gift you this 'Misty Rain over West Lake'."

Lin Wanrong responded with a smile, "The upper couplet is: long surge, long surge, long long surge'; the lower couplet is: surge long, surge long, surge surge long'. The horizontal inscription reads: 'Surge long, long surge'. Elder, is my recitation correct?"



The elder glanced at him and laughed, "I have traveled through many provinces, and this couplet has been posed over a dozen times. Today, you are the first to solve it correctly. You are indeed exceptional."

Upon hearing Lin Wanrong's recitation of the couplet, the crowd suddenly understood. It was a homophonic couplet, symbolizing the surge of the Qiantang River, perfectly complementing the 'Misty Rain over West Lake'. It was strikingly apt.

As the meaning of the couplet dawned upon them, they felt it was a simple puzzle with little worth. The scholars began to lament, how could they not have thought of this? They had allowed this humble servant boy to win the 'Misty Rain over West Lake'.

The Eldest Miss also realized the solution, stifling a laugh as she looked at Lin Wanrong. He must have known the answer to the riddle beforehand, which was why he was so confident.

The elder laughed heartily, "Such wisdom you have, young man. This 'Misty Rain over West Lake' indeed finds its rightful owner. Please accept it."

The old man was genuinely talented, the landscape painting was purely scenic, very natural, and it was the kind that calmed the heart, it could fetch a good price. Lin Wanrong was about to gleefully accept it when several scholars interrupted, "Elder, we do not accept this."

The elder, surprised, asked, "Why do you not accept?"

One of the scholars protested, "Although the couplet was a stroke of genius, the person who responded did so cleverly, hence we are not convinced. This 'Misty Rain over West Lake' is no common item, we wish to admire it. Please, elder, propose another question so we may compete again."

The elder laughed, "How can one stand without his word? I did say that whoever solved the couplet would receive the 'Misty Rain over West Lake'. Now that this young man has done so, how can I go back on my word?"

Lin Wanrong nodded in agreement. The old man truly had some honor. Considering this, I must sell this 'Misty Rain over West Lake' at a good price to not let him down.

The elder glanced at Lin Wanrong and continued, "However, since you, scholars, have shown such enthusiasm, I am quite delighted. So, let's do this. Let the young man who won the painting propose another couplet. If anyone can answer it correctly, I will paint another 'Misty Rain over West Lake' right here on the Su Causeway. I assure you that the two paintings will be completely different in artistic conception and taste."

A sense of pride appeared on the elder's face, seemingly confident in his painting skills. Painting two 'Misty Rain over West Lake' paintings at the same time, in the same place, but with different aesthetics and taste the significance of this was clear to all present. Yet no one doubted the elder's abilities. His deft execution in the previous painting demonstrated he still had more to offer. Furthermore, even if the two paintings were identical, given the elder's skill and technique, it would still be a major selling point, a treasure coveted by art lovers.

The scholars happily agreed. The elder looked at Lin Wanrong and laughed, "Young man, can I ask for this bold request?"

Lin Wanrong, who had a fond impression of the elder's amiable demeanor, smiled and replied, "Since the elder has spoken, how can I refuse? But, elder, if no one can answer my couplet, you should give me the second painting."

Upon hearing this, the Eldest Miss broke into a charming smile. This Lin San really didn't like to suffer losses. His statement had placed him in an invincible position: if someone got the answer, he would lose nothing; if no one did, he would get the second 'Misty Rain over West Lake'. Given his cunning nature, he would not make it easy. The scholars had indeed met their match a person bad to the bone.

The elder laughed heartily, demonstrating his boldness, "Young man, feel free to propose the couplet. If no one can solve it, not to mention one, I can make ten paintings."

This man is confident! Thought Lin Wanrong. Even my 'Food for Immortals' couplet hasn't been solved by anyone yet. However, today you've been generous, elder, so I'll give you face and make it a simple one.

Lin Wanrong strolled a few steps and smiled, "Since today is about homophonic couplets, let me dare to propose another of the same kind."

In the past, it was always the scholars testing others, but today, it was Lin Wanrong's turn to test them. With a sly grin, Lin Wanrong picked up a pencil, and a few of the sharper scholars hurriedly spread out white paper. With a faint smile, Lin Wanrong wrote, "The sea water ebbs day after day."

This couplet was Lin Wanrong's favorite when studying language in middle school. They were word games, which perfectly suited his playful nature. How could he not enjoy them?

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong's words, everyone fell into contemplation, including the Eldest Miss and the elder. With the precedent set earlier, they all knew that this was a homophonic couplet, but how to interpret it, how to read it, was a significant challenge. Most couldn't even figure out how to read it, let alone come up with a corresponding couplet.

The Eldest Miss gave a slight smile. After a moment's thought, she understood how to read the couplet, but forming a matching one was beyond her abilities. She couldn't help but glance at Lin Wanrong with a smile. This man was quirky and unpredictable, and she wondered where he got these obscure and eccentric couplets.

Lin Wanrong glanced around, seeing that apart from the Eldest Miss and the elder, the other scholars looked troubled, apparently at a loss.

"Anyone able to form a response?" Lin Wanrong laughed. He found delight in stumping the scholars, teaching them that there were always people superior and things beyond one's understanding. This would prevent them from always looking so high and mighty, as if the world would stop spinning without them.

The scholars were left speechless. Just moments ago, they had accused Lin Wanrong of trickery, but now, they couldn't even find a trick to grasp. They felt their study of poetry and literature had been in vain.

Seeing no one respond, Lin Wanrong turned to the elder, laughing, "Elder, since no one has responded, I will take this second 'Misty Rain over West Lake'."

The elder quickly said, "Wait, wait, young man, please allow me to think a little more."

Lin Wanrong appreciated the elder's attitude. This was a truly learned and insightful man, humble, approachable, and experienced. His learning, demeanor, and charisma were something those pompous scholars couldn't compare with.

Lin Wanrong smiled lightly, "Take your time, elder."

The Eldest Miss stepped forward, laughing, "Enough is enough. This elder is kind. Do not make it harder for him."

Lin Wanrong shook his head and said earnestly, "Eldest Miss, you are mistaken. I am not troubling him; I am respecting him."

The Eldest Miss was taken aback, then gradually understood. For someone like the elder, being asked a challenging question was the greatest pleasure and comfort, a real mark of respect.

The Eldest Miss shot Lin San a glare and said with a laugh, "You're always good at arguing, fine, you're right."

Upon seeing the Eldest Miss's glowing cheeks and her radiant smile, even more enchanting than the peach blossoms in March, Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. He thought to himself, "What's going on? My resistance to this young girl seems to be decreasing. If it continues, I might willingly let her have her way with me in a few days."

The Eldest Miss felt a tremor in her heart as she noticed him staring at her. Her cheeks flushed as she huffed, "What are you looking at? If you keep staring, I'll gouge your eyes out."

"I'd still keep looking even if they were gouged out," Lin Wanrong laughed.

"How rude, I've never met a man as despicable as you," the Eldest Miss couldn't withstand his gaze and quickly retreated a few steps, turning her head away and softly warning, "If you continue to act so frivolously, I'll ignore you."

Well, Lin Wanrong thought, that was a weak threat. But seeing the faint anger on the Eldest Miss's face, he knew that he couldn't tease her too much at once. Girls tended to be shy, so it was better to tease them a little every day, allowing her resistance to gradually break down until he breached her boundaries.

As Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, the Eldest Miss saw a lascivious look on his face and quickly stepped back, her heart pounding. His lecherous gaze was just too irritating.

As Lin Wanrong was lost in his fantasies, the elder suddenly clapped his hands and exclaimed with joy, "I've got it!"

His voice was so loud that it startled everyone who was deep in thought. The elder looked elated as he took a fine brush and swiftly wrote beneath Lin Wanrong's couplet, "The floating clouds dissipate day after day."

Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned. This old man indeed had some skills; the couplet was impeccable, as if made for each other.

Upon seeing the elder's response, everyone heaved a sigh of relief, though there was also a hint of disappointment the dream of acquiring 'Misty Rain over West Lake' had completely shattered.

The elder, full of joy, looked anxiously at Lin Wanrong and asked, "Young man, what do you think of this lower couplet?"

Seeing the elder's excited expression, as if he were a child, Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled, "Elder, your talent is highly commendable. I'm truly impressed."

"No, no, no," the elder said, shaking his head, "Young man, it's your ability to come up with a suitable response, incorporating the previous couplet into this one. That's the true talent."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, claiming the credit for his good education. He didn't know how to write the characters for 'shameless', but he claimed it was his own learning that deserved praise. However, he appreciated the elder's flattery, and laughed heartily, "Elder, you flatter me, let's say we're equally talented."

Seeing the two of them praising each other, the others were left puzzled as to how to read the couplets but were too embarrassed to ask. They had no choice but to listen to the two men's conversation.

The elder spoke excitedly, "In the past, when I made drawings, I never signed them. But today, here by the Qiantang River and on the Su Causeway, I've met such a talented young man. This is truly serendipity. I might need to break my rule."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Elder, you flatter me. Your painting is incredibly good. It should sell for..."

The Eldest Miss quickly glared at him, and Lin Wanrong suddenly realized his mistake. He had almost blurted out something he shouldn't have.

The elder gave a small smile, "Young man, do you intend to sell this painting of mine?"

Huh, the more we talk, the smarter this old man seems to be, Lin Wanrong thought, intrigued. This elder was no ordinary man. He chuckled awkwardly and said, "Elder, you are so just. If I were to lie and deceive you, it would be highly disrespectful. To be frank, my knowledge of poetry and painting is rudimentary at best. This painting would be wasted on me. Why not set a price and sell it to someone who can truly appreciate it? Wouldn't that be beneficial to both parties?"

In this era, scholars highly valued their ink treasures. Many were reluctant to link their works with money, believing that it would tarnish their integrity and degrade their creations. Lin Wanrong's proposal startled the Eldest Miss, who thought, "You usually are quite cunning. Why are you so brash today?"

Though the Eldest Miss had some insight in judging character, she was not as adept as Lin Wanrong. Seeing the elder's affluent attire but peaceful demeanor, Lin Wanrong saw no need to hide anything and told him directly.

The elder laughed heartily, "Young man, your honesty is admirable. If this painting could be converted into real gold and silver, it would indeed be a wonderful thing. Business is about transforming goods into money. If everyone in this world had your mindset, our Great Hua would surely flourish."

His words delighted Lin Wanrong. From the elder's response, he not only didn't find it disgraceful, but he even seemed pleased, seemingly having no objection to the idea of business. This was indeed a rarity.

"You're a businessman, aren't you, young man?" the elder asked.

Lin Wanrong nodded. The elder laughed, "Since you do business here in Jiangnan, perhaps we might meet again someday. I'll certainly sign my work today."

He picked up a small brush and wrote four characters in the corner of 'Misty Rain over West Lake'. With a smile, he tossed the brush aside and left nonchalantly.

## Chapter 148 Scholar of Talent and Learning

"Damn, the old man really left with style." Lin Wanrong watched his departing silhouette, then redirected his attention back to the painting of Misty Rain over West Lake. The ink on it was still wet, revealing four small characters: "Shanyin Xu Wei."

He was familiar with Shanyin, which was known in later years as Shaoxing, but who was this Xu Wei? Not only was his painting superb, but his couplet writing was first-rate as well. Lin Wanrong felt a tinge of regret; he could have acquired two 'Misty Rain over West Lake' paintings. Unfortunately, the old man had some real talent, and he had managed to match the couplet, leaving only one painting of Misty Rain over West Lake.

Lin Wanrong looked at the characters "Shanyin Xu Wei" with indifference, but the scholars around him burst into exclamations, "Shanyin Xu Wei? He is Mr. Wenchang, Master Xu, the Senior Scholar of the Hall of Literary Brilliance."

The Eldest Miss rushed over, looking at the small characters written with delicate strokes and exclaimed joyfully, "Is it really Mr. Wenchang, Master Xu?"

Lin Wanrong was confused, "Eldest Miss, who is this Master Xu, Mr. Wenchang you speak of? Who exactly is he?"

The Eldest Miss gave him a glance, "You just had a poetry match with someone, and I thought you were knowledgeable. I didn't expect that you wouldn't recognize Mr. Wenchang. This Shanyin Xu Wei, also known as Wenchang"

"Xu Wenchang?" Lin Wanrong leaped up in excitement. Hell, that name was all too familiar. Hadn't he watched cartoons about 'The Smart Xu Wenchang' and 'Wenchang's Battle with Yan Song' as a kid? Weren't they about this literary genius?

After a moment of excitement, Lin Wanrong calmed down. This was a completely different world. Since the era of Chu and Han, history had changed drastically. There were no Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, nor a treacherous minister like Yan Song. The Xu Wenchang of his previous life, despite his overwhelming talent, lived a life of frustration, never attaining a high-ranking post. However, the Xu Wenchang before his eyes was the Senior Scholar of the Hall of Literary Brilliance in the Great Hua dynasty, holding a position of extreme honor.

Therefore, they were two completely different people. The only similarity might be that they both were named Xu Wei and possessed unparalleled talent. Although the river of history flowed in different directions, occasionally it would produce two equally brilliant waves. This Xu Wei was one such wave.

"Do you know Mr. Xu?" The Eldest Miss, sensing Lin Wanrong's tone, hesitated before asking.

"Eldest Miss, you're teasing me again. How would I know such an important person?" Lin Wanrong laughed, clarifying that this Wenchang was not the Wenchang he knew. Nevertheless, in his heart, he was absolutely a celebrity. Merely for the name Xu Wenchang, Lin Wanrong held him in high regard.

The Eldest Miss thought about it and agreed. They had talked about poetry and theory for quite some time without recognizing each other. She then continued, "Mr. Wenchang is the most learned scholar under the heavens. Even before the Emperor ascended the throne, he was the chief strategist in the imperial household. Now, he is the chief Senior Scholar of the Hall of Literary Brilliance and concurrently holds the title of Minister of Revenue. His calligraphy and paintings are usually unsigned, so people can only judge their authenticity from his style. Now, this 'Misty Rain over West Lake,' is the only one that he has unusually affixed his seal to. It is the only one in the world and is hard to obtain even with a fortune. I didn't expect that you would have such luck to encounter this noble person."

Was this 'Misty Rain over West Lake' painting the only piece Xu Wei had ever signed? Lin Wanrong thought to himself. If so, it must be worth a fortune! An overwhelming wave of amusement washed over him as he remembered Xu Wei's role as the Minister of Revenue. Of course, the man would have a profound understanding of commerce.

He pondered for a moment before asking, "Eldest Miss, if Mr. Xu is the Minister of Revenue, wouldn't he be stationed in the capital? What brings him to the West Lake? And why would he take the leisure to paint a scene of the Misty Rain over West Lake?"

Being a quick-witted young lady, she gasped, "Lin San, are you suggesting that Mr. Xu came here for the annual meeting of the Jiangsu-Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "You mentioned it yourself, Eldest Miss. Jiangsu-Zhejiang is the top commercial region in the country, unparalleled in stature. Every year, prominent figures from the capital attend the annual meeting. This year should be no exception. Given Mr. Xu's unexpected appearance by the West Lake, I find it hard to believe there's anything else that could have attracted his attention."



The Eldest Miss joyfully replied, "If this is true, Lin San, with Mr. Xu's high regard for you, our Xiao family might encounter less trouble."

"Eldest Miss, let's not celebrate too soon," Lin Wanrong warned, "These are just our speculations. We still don't know the real reason why Mr. Xu came to Hangzhou."

The Eldest Miss confidently replied, "This time, I'm sure we're right. He must have come for the affairs of the Chamber of Commerce. If you maintain a good relationship with him, that would be a great thing."

"A good relationship?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "My dear Miss, we only exchanged a few words and shared a couplet. How does that count as a good relationship? I'm just thankful that he didn't blow his top when I mentioned selling his painting."

"Don't worry about that," the Eldest Miss smiled, "You don't understand Mr. Xu's character. He's normally very stern and hardly ever praises anyone. The fact that he complimented you today means he holds you in high regard. He won't cause us any trouble at the meeting. Now, are you still considering selling that painting?"

"Sell it, of course," Lin Wanrong replied, "The better the painting I have, the less it's worth to me. Instead of ruining a great piece, I'd rather sell it to someone who appreciates its value. That's how it would truly attain its maximum value." The Eldest Miss nodded in agreement. Lin San's words did make sense.

Who would have thought that a simple outing to West Lake would lead to an encounter with the esteemed Minister Xu Wei, and even result in winning his painting and matching his couplet? Lin Wanrong grinned at the Eldest Miss and said, "See, getting out more isn't necessarily a bad thing. Look, we scored big today."

The Eldest Miss gave him a subtle smile, "I'll give you this one. Today's donation for the temple incense will be on me."

"You're giving the incense money to the Buddha?" Lin Wanrong was astonished, "Why not give it to me? I'm a living Buddha after all."

The Eldest Miss lightly stepped forward and then turned back to say, "More like a living devil." She covered her mouth and laughed.

Despite the length of the Su Causeway, the two of them, engaged in their playful banter and laughter, traversed it rather swiftly. When they were near the end, the Eldest Miss turned to Lin Wanrong, remembering something she had been meaning to ask, "Lin San, you haven't yet explained to me the couplet you exchanged with Mr. Xu."

Lin Wanrong looked at her in surprise, "A person as intelligent as you, Miss, how can there be anything you don't understand?"

The Eldest Miss sniffed in mock annoyance, "I don't know where you've picked up such obscure phrases. I can't possibly know them all."

At that, Lin Wanrong gave a long, teasing 'Oh,' eliciting a blush from the Eldest Miss, who quickly urged, "Tell me quickly."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "That couplet, when broken down, is quite trivial. The first line reads: 'Tide of the sea, morning tide, morning tide ebbs.' The corresponding line is: 'Floating clouds swell, continually swell, continuous swell dissipates.'"

The Eldest Miss pondered this for a moment before sighing, "Mr. Wen, the most scholarly man in the world, indeed lives up to his reputation."

"Hey, Miss, can't you spare a compliment for me too?" Lin Wanrong grumbled, "Not only did I match the couplet of the most learned scholar, but I also challenged him with one of my own. He was almost unable to respond and was singing my praises. Since you've dubbed Mr. Xu as the best, could you consider me for the second place?"

"Oh?" the Eldest Miss exclaimed, "So you're aiming for second place? I was thinking of placing you alongside Mr. Wen, as the best." She then lightly lifted her skirt and ran forward, laughing.

Dammit, this girl is teasing me, Lin Wanrong thought, watching the Eldest Miss's vibrant figure. He had a sudden feeling that the Eldest Miss was changing. If before she was like a woman in her thirties, now she seemed more and more like a girl in her teens.

It was autumn now, and among the Ten Scenes of Qiantang, they could only see a few. Places like Pinghu Autumn Moon, Broken Bridge Remnants of Snow were out of sight, and it was not yet the time for the Evening Bell at Nanping Hill. The only place left was Lingyin Temple.

Legend had it that Lingyin Temple was established by a foreign monk who found the landscape of Hangzhou exceptional, deeming it a place where "immortals could hide". Therefore, he built a temple here, named Lingyin, meaning "hidden by the spirits".

With nine towers, eighteen pavilions, and seventy-two halls, Lingyin Temple housed over three thousand monks. In the previous dynasty, someone had rated the temples of Jiangnan, and Lingyin Temple, with its grandeur, was listed as the foremost among the five Zen monasteries, renowned across the world.

When the Eldest Miss and her group arrived at Lingyin Temple, it was during the peak hour of worship. The temple was bustling with worshippers, creating a lively scene.

Lin Wanrong took a look at this world-famous ancient temple. The Lingyin Temple indeed embodied the meaning of "hidden". The entire magnificent temple complex was nestled deep within the lush greenery of West Lake's peaks and springs.

At the front of the temple, on Feilai Peak, and along the cliffs and valleys of Qinglin Cave and Yuru Cave, there were hundreds of stone statues from different dynasties. The most impressive was the Maitreya Buddha, sitting with a jovial smile and exposed belly.

Although the Eldest Miss had been to Hangzhou multiple times, this was her first visit to Lingyin Temple. Seeing the grand scale and bustling atmosphere of the temple, she was filled with admiration, sighing, "The number one temple in Jiangnan truly lives up to its name."

Lin Wanrong had never been particularly enthusiastic about the rituals of burning incense and worshipping Buddha, but seeing the Eldest Miss's interest, he suggested, "In that case, Eldest Miss, why don't you go in? Make a generous offering, pray for some auspicious fortune sticks."

The Eldest Miss, however, discerned his implied meaning and asked, "Aren't you coming in with us?"

With a laugh, Lin Wanrong replied, "I'll take a stroll around the temple first and join you later." The Eldest Miss nodded without any further words, leading her three companions into the temple.

Lin Wanrong loitered around the outside of the temple, aimlessly observing the female worshippers offering incense. Finding it uninteresting, he decided to enter the temple, but just then, he noticed a figure standing in a tranquil bamboo grove in the distance. The man was slowly reciting a poem, "The osmanthus falls in the midst of the moon, and its heavenly scent floats beyond the clouds. Picking vine to climb the distant tower, carving wood to extract the distant spring. The frost is thin, causing flowers to bloom more, the ice is light, the leaves have yet to wither. The early years are still remote and different, searching for a match to wash away the noise. Waiting to enter the road to the heavenly platform, watch me cross the stone bridge."

By God, another poet! These days, it seems that any sighting of a beautiful scene triggers people to recite a few lines of poetry. It's become quite a trend.

The bamboo grove was serene. Around ten burly men were standing guard, scanning the surroundings vigilantly. The man reciting poetry appeared entirely at ease. He was dressed in a satin yellow robe and was leisurely walking in the grove.

Taking his retinue of bodyguards along, he must be either wealthy or noble, Lin Wanrong thought. Just as he was about to turn back, he heard the man call out, "Young man, would you care to join me for a chat?"

#### Chapter 149 Born to Deceive

Lin Wanrong looked around, making sure he was alone, then smiled at the man and said, "Elder Brother, were you calling me?"

Upon hearing the honorific, the man in the yellow robe broke into a smile and replied, "Indeed, I am talking to you."

Surprised, Lin Wanrong thought, 'I don't even know you, so why are you seeking me out?' The man reassured him with a smile, "Don't worry, I bear you no ill will. Do you know Wei Xian?"

"Wei Xian? No, I don't know him," replied Lin Wanrong.

"Are you sure? It seems to me that you address him as Uncle Wei," the man continued.

"Uncle Wei?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed in astonishment, "How do you know him?"

So, Uncle Wei's real name was Wei Xian. Lin Wanrong only then realized the similarity between this name and another notorious Wei Zhongxian, they differed by only one character. What a close call!

[TL: Wei Zhongxian, born Wei Si, was a Chinese court eunuch who lived in the late Ming dynasty. As a eunuch he used the name Li Jinzhong. He is considered by most historians as the most notorious eunuch in Chinese history]

The man laughed, "He and I go way back. How could I not know him? I know not only him, but also you. You are Lin Wanrong, currently serving in the Xiao family. The alias Lin San was given to you by Wei Xian, am I right?"

With those words, Lin Wanrong couldn't harbour any doubt. Indeed, the alias Lin San had been given to him by Old Wei. Only Old Wei and Lin Wanrong knew the details behind it.

"Well? Are you convinced now? Shall we come closer and talk?" the man chuckled, his eyes sparkling with an authoritative aura, commanding respect even in his mild demeanor.

"Sir, do you really know Uncle Wei?" Lin Wanrong stepped forward, sizing up the man. At first glance, he seemed middle-aged, but upon closer inspection, it wasn't necessarily so. Despite being well-groomed, his face was somewhat sickly pale, indicating poor health. His temples were streaked with grey, suggesting that he was probably in his fifties or sixties.

Noticing Lin Wanrong approaching, the nearby strongmen grew tense. However, the old man in the yellow robe gave a slight shake of his head, and they settled down.

The yellow-robed elder squinted at him and asked in a calm yet resonant voice, "So you are Lin Wanrong?" His voice, though soft, had a strange rhythm, like a heavy drum echoing in Lin Wanrong's ears, making him feel oppressed. Damn, this old man is rather peculiar.

"I am Lin Wanrong. May I ask why you were looking for me, sir?" This was truly strange. Though the elder spoke with a smile, Lin Wanrong could always sense waves of pressure. It was as if the yellow-robed elder carried an aura of authority that compelled obedience.

Since his arrival in this world, this was the first time Lin Wanrong felt restrained. It was as though no amount of skill could be exercised in front of this man.

Lin Wanrong glanced at the elder, who was gazing back with an inscrutable smile, making him feel like a mouse cornered by a cat.

A staring contest? I can do that. A surge of stubbornness welled up within Lin Wanrong, and he met the elder's gaze wordlessly, albeit a bit reserved at first. Gradually, however, he grew used to it. After all, this man was just another human with two eyes and a nose, just like him. There was nothing to fear.

Once he freed his mind, the pressure on him drastically reduced, and the elder's gaze lost its sharpness.

"Sir, you didn't seek me out just to look at me, did you? Perhaps you're inviting me to a meal? If there's something you need, please speak frankly. I'm not one for formalities," Lin Wanrong said with a laugh, feeling increasingly at ease in the presence of this austere elder. There were few in this world who could dominate him in terms of aura.

The elder laughed heartily, his intense aura softening considerably, and said, "Wei Xian wasn't wrong; you really do have an incredibly thick face."

Damn, thought Lin Wanrong, this old man didn't beat around the bush. This was a direct insult to his face. He chuckled and responded, "In this world, the least important thing is one's face. Same face, different lives. Some laugh outwardly and cry inwardly; others laugh inwardly and cry outwardly. The face is the least reliable thing in the world, so what use is it?"

The elder roared with laughter, his voice echoing through the entire bamboo forest, startling several birds nestled within. His aura was truly extraordinary. Lin Wanrong glanced at him, puzzled by his uproarious laughter. Was he trying to intimidate people?

After a few laughs, the elder began coughing violently. An attendant hurriedly offered him some medicinal pills. After swallowing the pills, his breathing stabilized, a bit more color returned to his face, and he looked at Lin Wanrong with a smile. "I didn't expect such profound insight from someone so young. You're absolutely right, a face is the least useful thing in this world. A person can have a beautiful face, but who knows what's inside their mind? What use is such a face?"

After pausing for a moment, he smiled and said, "I've heard from Wei Xian about your way of thinking, and seeing it firsthand today, it certainly holds some merit. Would you mind having a chat with this old man?"

Lin Wanrong laughed and replied, "Sir, I'm already here, why would I mind? To be honest, Uncle Wei is my life savior, and you are his friend. So you're my friend as well. Why would I mind chatting with a friend?"

The elder in the yellow robe glanced at him and commented, "What a smooth talker." A sharp gleam flickered in his eyes as he asked, "You said Wei Xian is your life savior, but if there comes a day when you must kill him, would you do it?"

The elder's eyes seemed to pierce through him, but Lin Wanrong remained unfazed and laughed, "Is there such a possibility? Even if there is, I wouldn't do it. What differentiates humans from beasts is our thoughts and feelings. If I were to betray Uncle Wei, how would I differ from a beast?"

"A woman's mercy!" The elder closed his eyes and sighed, "Those who aspire to great things must not be constrained by trifles. You... you are still too young."

Sweat, a man in his twenties, still being called young. Lin Wanrong didn't know what the elder had gone through, but he didn't argue, and instead laughed, "Sir, did you seek me out just to discuss these matters?"

The elder's expression changed, and he smiled, "Not entirely. What's your lineage?"

"I'm also uncertain how to answer that question," Lin Wanrong helplessly shook his head. "I guess you could say I'm from Jingchu."

"I heard that you're the one behind the business operations of the Xiao family, is that true?" The elder asked.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "You could say so."

The elder nodded, "You indeed have a knack for business. If everyone in the world were like you, focusing on commerce, would there still be calamities?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "If you wish for a world without calamities, it's quite simpleensure that people's livelihoods are secure."

"Oh," the elder looked at him with interest, "Do elaborate."

"Livelihood, or 'minsheng,' essentially means the people's wellbeing. For the common folk, wellbeing means nothing more complicated than having food to eat and clothes to wear. The people of Great Hua are kind-hearted. If their basic needs are met, why would they cause trouble?" Lin Wanrong explained.

"Satisfying basic needs is crucial, of course. The problem lies in the hearts of those who harbor ill intent," the elder said, looking at him. "Take the rebellion of the White Lotus Sect, for instance. It was the result of people with ill intent exploiting the situation."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Sir, I must respectfully disagree with you there. The rebellion of the White Lotus Sect originated from an uprising by starving citizens. Only later was it exploited by unscrupulous individuals, resulting in their current wicked behavior. If the people had food and clothing, why would they entertain thoughts of rebellion?"

A cold glint flickered in the elder's eyes, "The chaos of the White Lotus undermines the foundation of Great Hua. In your opinion, how should we eradicate it?"

Damn, why is this old man discussing these matters with me? Lin Wanrong laughed, "Sir, isn't this matter beyond my remit?"

The elder in the yellow robe smiled, "I'm just casually chatting with you. Share your thoughts."

Lin Wanrong had no fondness for the White Lotus, and since the elder was Uncle Wei's friend, he said, "Isolate and divide them, target their leaders, attack from both inside and out, and govern with strict laws."

The elder pondered for a moment, nodding his head, and then asked, "What are your thoughts on the significant threat of the northern invaders?"

"Northern invaders?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Why was the elder asking about this? The more he heard, the more peculiar it sounded, with a tone strangely reminiscent of Qingxuan. He



chuckled and replied, "What else can be done? If others have invaded, apart from fighting back, what other options do we have?"

"If everyone thought like you, there would be no worries," the elder grunted. "Those barbarians have only temporarily taken a few of our cities, and they haven't yet penetrated the heartland of Great Hua. Yet, within the court, opinions are divided and arguments are rampant between those advocating war and those calling for peace."

Lin Wanrong shook his head. Damn, what's wrong with our people? Always eager to cause internal strife. When the enemy is at our gates, we should be preparing for battle, not discussing peace.

"The treasury is empty, our soldiers lack combat power, we lack capable generals, and our nation lacks a strong army. Many court officials suggest we should first sue for peace and then plan our next steps," the elder looked at him, "What do you think?"

"Sue for peace, my ass. To hell with them," Lin Wanrong cursed in rage.

The elder smiled faintly, "So you're in favor of war?"

Lin Wanrong snorted, "If we can win, we fight. If we can't win, we fight even more. If we don't win in one year, we may lose cities, but we can fight again next year, and continue to fight until we win. If we dare not even fight, then we lose the people's hearts. Lose the city or lose the country, Sir, which one would you choose?"

"Lose the city or lose the country?" The elder sighed, then chuckled, "What a choice lose the city or lose the country. I didn't expect such wisdom from a commoner like you. The court officials can't see as clearly as you do."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "It's not that they don't understand, it's that they understand too well. If the country is lost, they can simply surrender and still hold high positions. Only the emperor sitting in the Golden Throne is the most anxious. While others can surrender, he cannot. Who do you think truly understands? It's all about the people's hearts"

"Ha ha ha ha" The elder in the splendid robe laughed heartily, "Well said, it's all about the people's hearts. Since ancient times, it's always been the human heart that causes trouble. Lin Wanrong, you're young but you have a thorough understanding of human nature. Excellent, truly excellent."

His enthusiasm growing, the elder continued, "If you choose to fight, considering the barbarians' strong physiques and fierce combat power, and our soldiers of Great Hua being at a disadvantage, how would you fight?"

Damn, why is he asking me this? I've never fought in a war. Lin Wanrong gave a wry smile, "Sir, I've never been to court, nor to the battlefield. I'm not well-versed in matters of war."

The elder waved his hand, "That's even better. You can say anything. If you had been to court, perhaps you would be unable to speak freely. Just tell me, if someone like you, unfamiliar with state affairs and warfare, were thrown into the mix, what would you do? Perhaps you can see clearer than those of us in the middle."

Noticing the elder's dignified demeanor and eloquent speech, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, this friend of Uncle Wei's must hold an influential position, speaking with such authority and with no hesitation on state affairs and warfare. He must wield significant power in the capital.

Being a shrewd businessman, he said with a smile, "Sir. These matters are beyond the reach of a commoner like me. Perhaps it's better if I don't speak."

The elder chuckled, "I know you're a businessman. I asked you to speak today, but I won't let you waste your words for nothing. Consider me in your debt. Come find me in the capital one day, and I'll grant you a wish."

As expected, this elder is indeed a figure of importance. I wonder what position he holds and how Uncle Wei came to know such a prominent figure.

The elder in the yellow robe took a token from his waist and said, "Consider this a token. If you come to the capital one day, show this at the yamen, and someone will take you to see me."

He handed the token to Lin Wanrong. When Lin Wanrong looked at it, it was the size of half a palm and made of pure gold, heavy in his hand. Both sides were engraved with a golden dragon and nothing else.

"Sir, are you from the palace?" Lin Wanrong asked with astonishment. He had never seen this kind of object before. It somewhat resembled an imperial edict token, although such tokens should have at least one side engraved with a character, typically "Imperial," symbolizing the emperor's authority. The higher-level ones had the character "I," implying the emperor's personal presence.

rarity indeed. However, he had never seen one with dragons engraved on both sides. From the weight of the gold token, he estimated that it could be worth quite a sum.

Seeing Lin Wanrong playing with the gold token, the elder laughed, "When you come to the capital one day, you'll find out who I am. Today, just speak freely. If you, an outsider, had to deal with state affairs and warfare, what would you do?"

A few silver pieces worth of talk for a gold token what a profitable deal. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Since you, Sir asked, I'll speak frankly. It's true that there are foreign enemies in the north, but they are not as strong as we imagine. They surely have enemies too, and the enemy of our enemy is our friend. Why wouldn't we, Great Hua, ally with them and fight the strong enemy together? 'Make distant friends and attack nearby enemies,' that's the idea."

"Moreover, these nomadic tribes, despite their strong military power, are prone to infighting. Disputes between fathers and sons, brothers are intense. Why wouldn't we take advantage of this? There are many strategists in Great Hua, plenty with persuasive skills. If someone were to infiltrate the enemy, stirring up unrest with a silver tongue and promises of lofty benefits, internal divisions could be created. It's not an impossibility." Lin Wanrong finished in one breath, even impressing himself with his own ability to bluff convincingly.

"Someone persuasive and eloquent?" The elder murmured, glancing subtly at Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong felt a twinge of anxiety. Oh dear, I was referring to me. I inadvertently involved myself. If I were to go to the enemy's territory for persuasion, it would be a deadly mission. I can't afford such a losing business.

The elder was silent for a while, then spoke, "For an outsider like you, the method seems simple and practical, with some truth to it. What about warfare? What are your thoughts?"

Lin Wanrong had been bluffing his way through, and seeing the elder seemed satisfied, he thought to himself: All this comes from summarizing history and watching countless TV dramas. Offering a few broad and empty strategies should be easy enough, right? These words were like floating clouds in the sky seemingly profound but intangible and vague.

When it came to warfare, Lin Wanrong bluffed, "I've never been on a battlefield, but it's universal to play to one's strengths and avoid weaknesses. For example, if the enemy excels in cavalry, trap them in city or alley warfare. If they excel in infantry, confine them to cavalry battles. The nomadic tribes are experts in cavalry but poor at sieges. Moreover, logistical support would undoubtedly be difficult to maintain when deep within foreign territory. On our Great Hua's own soil, a single call

to arms could inspire 'an inch of land, an inch of blood; a hundred thousand youths, a hundred thousand soldiers.' With Great Hua's citizens scattered across the land, potential soldiers are everywhere. How could we lack soldiers or say we cannot win?"

Lin Wanrong found himself too engrossed by the end of his speech and quickly composed his emotions.

The elder looked at him and said, "If your words were spoken in the court, you might become a target of criticism. 'An inch of land, an inch of blood; a hundred thousand youths, a hundred thousand soldiers.' If everyone in my court, civil and military officials alike, throughout the country, shared your mindset, what concern would there be for the nomadic tribes not being defeated and our lands not being reclaimed?"

He sighed and smiled, "However, in matters of war, enthusiasm alone is not enough. Your words might seem sensible on paper, but they may not necessarily be practical on the battlefield."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Sir, while my words might be simplistic, somewhat armchair strategizing, they could be considered a general guideline. Just to outline the principle, identify and utilize talent wisely should suffice. As for how specifically to execute, it should be left to our Great Hua's military officers and generals. The court provides them with salaries so they can defend our homeland. If not, what use would they be?"

The elder nodded, smiling, "I didn't expect you to have such insight. Wei Xian didn't misjudge you."

An attendant walked over, whispered a few words to the elder, who nodded in response. Turning to Lin Wanrong, he said, "I have some matters to attend to and must leave now. If you ever come to the capital, find me as I've instructed. Remember, remember."

Watching the elder board the sedan and hurry off under the escort of the attendant, Lin Wanrong was still puzzled. How did I end up discussing national affairs and military strategies with this old man out of nowhere? I almost convinced myself with the bluffing.

He looked at the gold token in his hand, its substantial weight reassuring. He tucked it into his bosom perhaps the only gain from this lengthy discourse.

Chapter 150 The Marriage Fortune Stick

As the day approached noon, he suddenly remembered that the Eldest Miss and others were still at the Lingyin Temple. A sudden worry hit him. He had lost track of time while talking with the elder and wondered anxiously what state the Eldest Miss was in by now.

He rushed into the temple, finally finding the group. He saw the Eldest Miss, deeply engrossed in her prayer to the Bodhisattva in the Grand Buddha Hall.

Lin Wanrong quickly pulled aside Si De and asked, "The Eldest Miss hasn't been looking for me, has she?"

"No," Si De replied, "The Eldest Miss said you're always busy, so they told us to take our time and enjoy the visit. She's been very devout, praying to each and every Bodhisattva in the temple and lighting incense."

Every single Bodhisattva? Lin Wanrong broke out in a sweat. There were over a hundred statues of Buddhas of varying sizes in the Lingyin Temple. When exactly was she planning to finish her prayer?

The Eldest Miss was currently praying to a standing statue of the Goddess of Mercy, who held a vase of pure water to deliver all beings from suffering. Beneath her was a statue of Sudhana, signifying the story of Sudhana paying homage to Guanyin.

The Grand Buddha Hall was solemn and majestic, with an awe-inspiring atmosphere. Right at the center of the grand hall was a statue of Sakyamuni sitting on a lotus, about seventy to eighty feet tall. It was exquisitely and solemnly carved, full of lifelike charm.

Seeing as he was at the temple, Lin Wanrong thought it wouldn't be appropriate to leave without doing something. He too prayed before the Bodhisattva, asking for great wealth and a multitude of wives in the coming years.

After finishing his prayers, Lin Wanrong saw a fortune-telling booth nearby, with an old monk seated there. He laughed to himself, realizing that fortune-telling was essentially a psychological game. Most temples would have a kindly old monk looking like a high-ranking monk to make you believe even if you were skeptical.

Xiao Feng came over and said, "Brother Lin, asking for a fortune here is quite expensive."

Seeing the fortune stick in Xiao Feng's hand, Lin Wanrong smiled, "So, have you asked for one already?"

Xiao Feng nodded and said, "One tael for a fortune and two for the interpretation. It really is quite costly."

Sweat. Lin vaguely remembered that it was the same price last time at the Rosy Cloud Temple outside Jinling City. It seemed that the price of incense was uniform everywhere.

Xiao Feng had spent one tael on a fortune but was reluctant to spend another two on interpretation. He handed the stick to Lin Wanrong and said, "Brother Lin, you are knowledgeable. Can you help me interpret this?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "I didn't expect to be seen as knowledgeable in your eyes, Xiao Feng. Alright, I'll interpret this for you."

Interpreting fortunes was all about trickery. The vaguer and more mysterious it was, the more people would believe it. Lin Wanrong had no doubt about his ability to trick others. He took the stick from Xiao Feng and read the four-line verse on it:

"Morning and night, rely on the Buddha for support,

Only then can danger be turned into safety.

If guided by a noble person,

Wealth and prosperity will follow."

Did this really need interpretation? Lin Wanrong sighed and shook his head. Such ambiguous language could be interpreted in many ways.

"Xiao Feng, what did you want to ask?" Lin Wanrong asked with a smile.

"I wanted to ask about my mara, I mean, my financial fortune," Xiao Feng answered somewhat embarrassedly.

Seriously? This was obviously a fortune about wealth, and yet he had the audacity to say it was about marital fortune. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, unabashedly saying, "Xiao Feng, this is a good fortune, ranking above average."

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong speaking so convincingly, Xiao Feng promptly asked, "What do you mean by an above-average fortune? Quickly, Brother Lin, explain!"

Lin Wanrong replied, "Well, the first line of the verse does not need explaining. It means that the quality of your life is entirely at the mercy of the Bodhisattvas in this temple. So, you must respect them properly. Even if you encounter dangers, they can automatically resolve them. As long as you receive the help of a noble person, wealth and prosperity will come rolling in."

The verse was easy to understand, but interpreting fortunes needed someone else's expertise, especially someone like Lin Wanrong, who easily fooled Xiao Feng into understanding the complexity of the prediction.

Respectfully, Xiao Feng said, "Brother Lin, you truly are a wise man. But I wonder if this fortune can tell about marriage prospects too?"

Good heavens, this lad was a penny-pincher. He had asked for a wealth fortune stick and now wanted it to predict marital fortunes too. It was quite outrageous. Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Brother Xiao, one must be sincere when asking for a fortune for it to work."

Xiao Feng chuckled awkwardly and decided not to inquire about his marriage prospects. Instead, he sneakily kept his eyes fixed on Xiao Cui, a maid accompanying the Eldest Miss.

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong's ability to interpret fortunes, Xiao Cui also ran to spend a silver tael to get a fortune stick. Handing it to Lin Wanrong, she asked, "Brother San, could you interpret this for me too?"

Lin Wanrong laughed and replied, "Of course, but may I ask what question you have in mind, Sister Xiao Cui?"

Xiao Cui's face brightened, and she lowered her head in shyness, whispering, "About marital prospects."

Damn it, just as I expected, all these young maidens want to ask about this. Every girl is romantic at heart, and when in a temple, they undoubtedly ask about marital prospects. Lin Wanrong took her fortune stick and read the verse written on it: "The red string signifies the previous life, no need to ask for a matchmaker, everything can be achieved. In the quiet moonlit night within the new pavilion, suddenly a phoenix's song can be heard."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Sister Xiao Cui, congratulations, this is a top-tier fortune."

Xiao Cui's spirits lifted immediately, no longer caring about her shyness, she asked, "Is it true? Brother San, quickly interpret it for me."

"This red string, also known as the red thread, represents the matchmaker, the Old Man Under the Moon. The first two lines mean that the matchmaker has paired you with someone, even if you don't seek it, destiny will come uninvited, commonly referred to as 'fated to be together.' The last two lines suggest the bridal chamber, and the phoenix's song indicates a perfect match. This prediction suggests a person who is destined and will naturally achieve what they desire. If this isn't a top-tier fortune, I don't know what is. Congratulations, Sister Xiao Cui."

Xiao Cui was overjoyed, sneaking a glance at Xiao Feng, who was also looking at her. They began to exchange romantic looks.

Lin Wanrong laughed to himself. It seemed these two had been involved with each other for a while, pretending to seek a marriage fortune was just an act. What a fine pair of lovers they were!

Following this, Si De also went to get a wealth fortune stick, which also turned out to be a top-tier fortune. Lin Wanrong's interpretation delighted everyone.

Si De suggested, "Brother San, all of us have asked for fortunes. Why don't you try your luck too?"

Seeing everyone in such high spirits, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and agreed, "Sure, I'll go and get a fortune stick too."

He rushed to the altar, spent a tael of silver, and also sought a fortune stick. Looking at it, it read: "The fish is trapped in the deep pool and has not yet turned into a dragon, the splendid light above shines sometimes gloriously, there is a path in the azure cloud that must be reached, and the mountains are towering toward the nine heavens at sunset."



Lin Wanrong, accustomed to tricking others, was at a loss when it came to his own fortune. Although the prediction seemed simple, he didn't know how to interpret it.

"Let me do it," a gentle voice sounded next to him. Everyone looked up and saw that it was the Eldest Miss who had been devoutly worshipping the Bodhisattvas just now.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's hesitation, the Eldest Miss laughed and said, "What, you don't believe me?"

"How could that be?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I'm just afraid that the quality of the prediction is so good it might scare you."

The Eldest Miss playfully retorted, "I'd be a fool to believe you." She gently took the fortune stick from his hand and glanced at it. After pondering for a while, she said, "Congratulations, Lin San. This is a superior fortune and it has a dual interpretation."

"A dual interpretation? What does that mean?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

"Your fortune stick, it interprets both career and marriage fortunes. If this isn't a dual interpretation, then what is?" the Eldest Miss chuckled.

Lin Wanrong was baffled. He had only asked for a career fortune stick, but when it reached the Eldest Miss's hands, it magically had a dual interpretation. It was truly mysterious.

The Eldest Miss explained, "This fortune stick about wealth is clear in the verse, even though there will be ups and downs, you will ultimately achieve success in your career and wealth."

Lin Wanrong had never doubted this. The Eldest Miss continued with a smile, "As for this marriage fortune, it needs a good interpretation. The first line means you're like a fish trapped in a deep pool, yet to turn into a dragon, meaning your marital fate has not yet arrived. The second line suggests that you will eventually marry a good wife and enjoy wealth and honor. The last two lines mean, once your marital fate arrives, you will rise straight to the top, becoming immensely wealthy. If this isn't a top-tier fortune, what is?"

After the Eldest Miss interpreted his prediction, it really made sense. Lin Wanrong thought about his relationship with Qiaoqiao and Yushuang. He was on good terms with them both. Moreover, what did this matter of marital fate have to do with wealth and honor?

He thought for a while and then started to laugh helplessly. These were the things that young girls liked to engage in. Why should he, an adult man, care about these things? Was he just killing time after a full meal?

Xiao Cui saw the Eldest Miss also holding a fortune stick and exclaimed in surprise, "Eldest Miss, you also asked for a fortune?"

The Eldest Miss's face reddened slightly, and she gently nodded. Lin Wanrong was startled. This girl who always prioritized business was asking for a fortune in this temple. It must be about the wealth of the Xiao family. He chuckled, "Eldest Miss, let me interpret yours too."

The Eldest Miss's face turned even redder. She said softly, "What do you need to interpret? I'll go and ask the old monk later."

Seeing the Eldest Miss's bashful expression, Lin Wanrong was puzzled. If she asked about wealth, there was no need to be shy. Could it be that she asked about marriage?

The Eldest Miss noticed his gaze lingering on her. She couldn't help but softly huff, "What are you looking at?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "This fortune stick is important. It's indeed safer to ask a monk to interpret it."

Seeing his sly demeanor and eyes filled with amusement, the Eldest Miss knew he had guessed the purpose of her divination. A flush of warmth spread across her face.

She had taken the fortune stick earlier without a glance, but now she couldn't resist looking. It read:

"Happiness and joy, groping in the dark

Mirage of the moon on the water, a castle in the sky

Filling the sea with pebbles, tossing pearls to sparrows

Seeing but not noticing, resulting in a delay

Meeting without a meeting, encountering without an encounter

The moon sinks into the sea, the person is in a dream."

Other people's fortune sticks, whether they asked about marriage or wealth, were all clear and easy to understand. Why was hers so obscure, seemingly saying something, and yet nothing at all? The Eldest Miss was puzzled.