

Finest 151

Chapter 151 Encountering Xu Wei Again

Lin Wanrong was standing close to her, his eyes sharp. A mere glance was enough for him to perceive the content of the fortune stick she held. Unquestionably, it was a marriage fortune stick, yet upon reading the verse inscribed on it, even he, a notorious trickster, was baffled. What did the fortune stick truly imply? Why had it suddenly become so profound?

Upon catching Lin Wanrong's surreptitious glance, the Eldest Miss quickly hid the fortune stick and flushed, admonishing, "What are you looking at? I'll go ask the old monk for an interpretation."

With those words, she hurried off to find the old monk. Lin Wanrong shook his head, musing. Women were still women. Matters of matrimonial destiny had a profound impact on them. Even a strong woman like Xiao Yuruo could not avoid being affected by this tradition.

As the day slowly unfolded, the Eldest Miss returned from consulting the monk, her usual smile somewhat faded. An air of puzzlement had subtly replaced it. What had the old monk said to render her in such a state?

Lin Wanrong thought to himself that the old monk was no different from him, a trickster who could hardly offer a useful piece of advice. The only difference was that the monk charged two taels of silver for his vague guidance, while he, the talented Lin Wanrong, offered his for free.

Their outing had been quite fruitful; not only did the Eldest Miss appear happier, but they had also encountered Xu Wei, a high-ranking official. Plus, there was the mysterious elderly man in the yellow robe. Who could he be, and how did Uncle Wei know him?

Regardless of his identity, as long as he posed no harm, there was no need for concern. This was Lin Wanrong's creed. Yet, he couldn't help noticing something odd about Eldest Miss Xiao. After the fortune-telling, she seemed burdened, as if the marriage fortune stick was causing her distress. Lin Wanrong didn't know what the old monk had said, leaving him powerless to help.

Upon returning to their quarters, the Eldest Miss announced that the following day would be free for everyone, but warned them to avoid trouble before retiring to her room. Xiao Feng and Xiao Cui appeared excited, probably planning to venture out together. Lin Wanrong chuckled, finding their budding romance amusing.

Back in his room, while safely storing the "Misty Rain over West Lake", a sudden thought struck him. Wasn't he supposed to find a buyer for this painting? The old man in the yellow robe would have been a perfect candidate. How could he have forgotten something so crucial after engaging in a deep conversation about the nation? A missed opportunity indeed!

The next morning, the Eldest Miss promptly returned to her strong-willed self and set out early to visit some well-known ladies of Hangzhou. With no particular destination in mind, Lin Wanrong decided to wander around the city. Despite its modest size, Hangzhou was easy to navigate and he had explored many small alleys, although he hadn't encountered many curiosities.

However, when he arrived near a residential area close to the Su Causeway in the eastern part of the city, he noticed smoke wafting through the air and a crowd of several hundred people gathered. Amid the hustle and bustle, everyone was kneeling on the ground, chanting in unison, "The White Lotus Virgin has shown her miracles."

"The White Lotus Virgin?" Lin Wanrong was unusually sensitive to the term 'White Lotus.' Upon hearing it, he hurriedly squeezed his way through the crowd. In front of him was a vast open area. In its center stood a statue made of white jade, representing a dignified woman with kind eyes, radiating a sense of immense compassion.

It was indeed strange. This white jade statue was not like any Bodhisattva from the temples Lin Wanrong knew. He had never heard of any 'White Lotus Virgin', and what was even more surprising was that half of this 'Virgin' was buried in the ground. The area was full of offerings and incense burners, with countless believers kneeling around, chanting "White Lotus Virgin."

A robust man climbed onto a high platform, proclaiming loudly, "Believers, brothers and sisters, the benevolent White Lotus Virgin has appeared!"

At his call, the crowd echoed back, "The White Lotus Virgin has appeared!" Despite the multitude of people, Lin Wanrong noticed that many "believers" were just spectators. He saw through the charade, suppressing a chuckle. Damn, they were all shills.

"For the past few months, you all have witnessed the power and merit of the White Lotus Virgin. The statue, though buried deep within the earth, grows by an inch each day. Why is this? It is the Virgin demonstrating her power to us, her followers. She will aid those of us who suffer. Our White Lotus Sect is the special envoy under her guidance, accumulating merit for all. Once you join the White Lotus Sect, we are all brothers and sisters. Everyone will have clothes to wear and food to eat, bathed in the grace of the White Lotus Virgin, gaining immeasurable merit."

The man roared with fervor. Immediately, many commoners prostrated themselves before the Virgin's statue and joined the White Lotus Sect.

Damn, what was this about growing an inch every day? What was this nonsense? This White Lotus Sect, bearing a name so similar to the White Lotus Cult, couldn't possibly be any good.

As Lin Wanrong was pondering, someone tapped his shoulder. He turned around to see a familiar, lean face. It was Xu Wei, the man who had given him the painting by the Su Causeway yesterday.

How could the old man be here? Lin Wanrong was taken aback; it seemed fate had a strange way of reuniting people.

Xu Wei chuckled, "Young man, we meet again."

Lin Wanrong smiled, "Mr. Xu"

But Xu Wei quickly silenced him with a hush, "This is not the place for a conversation. Please follow me."

Lin Wanrong followed Xu Wei to a nearby tavern. They seated themselves by a window, providing them a clear view of the White Lotus followers.

Xu Wei chuckled, "Young man, it seems we do have some destiny."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Minister Xu, I didn't expect to see you here."

Xu Wei shook his head, smiling, "Young brother, I saw you were quite candid yesterday. Why are you so hesitant today?"

Lin Wanrong wondered, "What do you mean, Minister Xu?"

"I came to Hangzhou in disguise to keep a low profile," Xu Wei explained with a smile. "You don't need to address me as a government official. Simply 'Mr. Xu' or 'Mr. Wenchang' will do. Like

yesterday on the Su Causeway, you can even call me 'Elder'. If you refer to me as Minister Xu', it would be too vulgar."

So that was it. This Xu Wei showed an audacious streak that was not characteristic of someone from the bureaucracy. Lin Wanrong nodded, "Since Mr. Xu puts it that way, I will respect your wishes."

Xu Wei sighed deeply, "Serving as an official in the court has many taboos. One must always be cautious in speech and conduct. Yet, out here, one can be carefree. I used to live such a free life as a scholar. Now, times have changed, and there are so many more constraints. It's quite lamentable."

Xu Wei had a certain charisma, speaking as if confiding a secret, as if he didn't see Lin Wanrong as an outsider.

Yet, Lin Wanrong was no fool. Xu Wei's words sounded pleasing and sincere on the surface, but upon reflection, he'd said nothing more than expressions of regret. Such was the art of conversation.

However, it was indeed rare for someone of Xu Wei's high rank to be so humble and affable to a lowly servant like him.

Lin Wanrong admired Xu Wei somewhat, smiling, "Mr. Xu, where do these words come from? You are esteemed for your scholarship and hold a high position. People all over the world admire and respect you. The affairs of the court and the affairs of the rivers and lakes are both part of life's experiences. To your broad-minded character, what's the difference?"

Xu Wei looked at him with delight, "Young man, your words are profound. The officialdom and the rivers and lakes are both life experiences. Good, good. You have hit the nail on the head."

Seeing Lin Wanrong, a seemingly lowly servant, talking confidently and sitting with a high-ranking official like him without any signs of embarrassment, Xu Wei was quite surprised. With his absolute confidence on the Su Causeway yesterday and his eloquent conversation today, this young man's intellect and spirit were anything but ordinary.

Lin Wanrong smiled, "Mr. Xu, I didn't expect to bump into you in this alley. This is quite unexpected."

Xu Wei laughed heartily, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon after our meeting yesterday. I must confess, I am not one to sit idle. In my youth, I enjoyed traveling and was fond of strange and

curious things. After joining the court, the many official duties kept me tied down, and I gradually gave up these pursuits. This trip to Hangzhou has given me a chance to take a break. I didn't expect to run into such a situation."

Xu Wei's extensive experience, broad knowledge, and fascination with novel things were what made him the best scholar in the land.

Xu Wei then said, "We've met twice now, but I still don't know your name."

Lin Wanrong smiled, "I dare not claim respect in front of an elder. I am Lin San, a mere servant of the Xiao family from Jinling."

"The Xiao family from Jinling?" Xu Wei gasped. "Are they descendants of the elder Xiao from years ago?"

Elder Xiao? Lin Wanrong was taken aback, then remembered that the patriarch of the Xiao family had once held the position of Minister of Rites, senior to Xu Wei. Wasn't that Elder Xiao himself?

"Indeed, indeed," Lin Wanrong hastily replied, realizing it would be advantageous to be on friendly terms with Xu Wei should he encounter him at the Jiangsu-Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce meeting the next day.

Xu Wei sighed, "Elder Xiao was once the Minister of Rites in the Great Hua, a man of propriety and a model for society. It's a pity that he has passed away, and no one could inherit his network."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong was utterly clueless and could only respond with an awkward smile.

Xu Wei let out a sigh, then asked, "Has Miss Guo been well these years? It's been more than twenty years since we parted in the capital. Time flies, indeed, like the old saying goes."

Miss Guo? Lin Wanrong was momentarily confused, then he realized that Madam Xiao's maiden surname was Guo. Guo Wuchang was her nephew from her maternal family. So, she was Miss Guo?

Thinking about these connections gave Lin Wanrong a headache. What did all this have to do with him? Surprisingly, he never knew that Madam Xiao had connections with high-ranking officials. It seemed she wasn't as simple as he had thought.

"Oh, I haven't been with the Xiao family for long, but Madam Xiao still looks the same and both her daughters are very dutiful. They seem to be doing well," Lin Wanrong cautiously replied.

Xu Wei asked, "The woman with you on the Su Causeway yesterday, was she Miss Xiao?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, and Xu Wei sighed, "She bears a striking resemblance to Miss Guo in her youth. I didn't dare to inquire rashly, and I never thought she would indeed be a descendant of an old friend."

Knowing Xu Wei's attitude towards the Xiao family, Lin Wanrong felt reassured. Even if there was a problem at the annual meeting the next day, Xu Wei would surely help.

Not wanting to continue discussing unrelated matters, Lin Wanrong asked, "Mr. Xu, did you invite me here to discuss the White Lotus Sect?"

Xu Wei snorted, "White Lotus gathering? It's nothing but the heresy of the White Lotus Cult."

Lin Wanrong thought to himself, as expected, it's those bastards from the White Lotus Cult, changing their strategies but not their nature.

Xu Wei asked, "Younger Brother, do you know about the White Lotus Cult?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "How could I not know? I was even abducted by them once."

"Oh?" Xu Wei exclaimed, curiously, "Younger Brother Lin, you have such a remarkable experience? That is indeed quite surprising."

Lin Wanrong recounted the time he and the Eldest Miss Xiao were captured. Xu Wei, a shrewd man and the Emperor's leading strategist, stroked his beard and remarked, "Something seems odd about this. From what I know, the White Lotus Cult only kidnaps for money; if they don't see gold or silver, they never let their hostages go. The fact that you and Miss Xiao managed to escape seems a little too easy."

Naturally, Lin Wanrong wouldn't mention the rescue by Xiao Qingxuan. Instead, he explained, "It was Tao Dongcheng, the son of Tao Yu, the owner of the Suzhou Silk Manufacturer, who borrowed military troops from Commander-in-chief Cheng. That's how we were able to escape."

Xu Wei smiled enigmatically and said with a hint of deeper meaning, "I see, that explains it. The White Lotus Cult's plot for Miss Xiao might not be as simple as just kidnapping for money."

There was something cryptic about Xu Wei's words, suggesting that he understood the intricacies of the situation. He paused and continued, "The White Lotus Cult is most rampant in Jiangsu and Shandong, and I suspect officials big and small in both provinces are involved."

Lin Wanrong thought to himself, is this even something you need to point out? In Jiangsu, aside from the cunning Luo Min, other people like Cheng De and the father and son Tao Yu were likely affiliated with the White Lotus Cult.

Xu Wei continued, "Luo Min, the Governor of Jiangsu, is a good friend of mine. I understand his predicament; it's tough being the chief officer of a province and not being able to command the Provincial Commander-in-chief."

Having been immersed in officialdom for many years, Xu Wei understood the complications all too well. He turned to Lin Wanrong with a smile, "Younger Brother Lin, if you encounter any difficulties in the future, go find Luo Min. Just mention that Mr. Wenchang recommended you, and he will naturally assist you."

Lin Wanrong thought, do I even need your influence? I've already accepted Luo Min's son as my junior brother, and that old fox treats me with great respect. Nonetheless, Lin Wanrong gratefully acknowledged Xu Wei's good intentions.

Xu Wei's gaze fell on the distant worshippers of the White Lotus Virgin, sighing, "When the White Lotus rebellion first occurred, it was a hunger riot and was somewhat justifiable. Unfortunately, it was manipulated by schemers and deviated from its original course, committing all sorts of atrocities. Even ordinary people came to despise them. Eradicating the White Lotus Cult is indeed a priority."

Lin Wanrong curiously asked, "Mr. Xu, given the White Lotus Cult's notorious reputation, why do they still have so many worshippers?"

Xu Wei explained, "That's their power of deception. The worshippers you see here, paying homage to the so-called White Lotus Virgin, do not know that this religious meeting is actually the White Lotus Cult. Along with their bewitching tactics, they have a strong allure for the common people, hence what you're seeing."

Lin Wanrong glanced at the distance and saw some devoted worshippers, who began prostrating from the entrance of a far-off alleyway. Their reverence for the White Lotus Virgin was bone-deep. He shook his head and remarked, "The scariest thing in the world is to bewitch people's hearts. Mr. Xu, what do you mean by 'bewitching tactics'?"

Chapter 152 Unmasking

Xu Wei said, "I can't explain these bewitching tactics. It's just what I heard, a month ago, some people from this White Lotus cult claimed that the White Lotus Virgin was a boundless Buddha, growing an inch from the ground each day, spreading the grand law to the people. Thus, devotees kept a vigil before this Buddha statue day and night. It's strange to say that no one touched the statue, and there were no anomalies observed, yet it was originally buried underground, but it indeed grew an inch daily. Young Brother, as you know, the bodhisattvas in the famous temples and monasteries are immovable. Yet this White Lotus Virgin is different. It's sprouting from the ground and growing an inch daily, if this isn't bewitching tactics, what is it? Word of this phenomenon spread, and soon, all the nearby villagers knew about it. After witnessing it with their own eyes, the number of worshippers grew. Once people's minds are bewitched, it's hard to pull them back. I fear that before long, they will become devotees of this White Lotus cult."

So that's what it was. Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly. Playing this trick in front of your grandfather, you're just out of luck.

Xu Wei sighed, "Although I pride myself on my learning, I too have no idea how this Bodhisattva can grow an inch each day. The world is indeed full of wonders."

"That's because you've never been a commoner like me," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "So, Mr. Xu, what do you plan to do with these deceived commoners?"

Xu Wei gave him a glance and said, "Younger Brother Lin, since you've asked, I won't keep it from you. This White Lotus chaos undermines the foundation of our Great Hua Empire and must be eradicated."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, "But these common people"

A chilling light flashed in Xu Wei's eyes, "If they don't repent, they will be eliminated. I won't hide it from you, Younger Brother Lin, the military forces in Zhejiang have already been mobilized, and I fear it won't be long before they surround this place. Every believer present will be caught. To remove the weed, one must pull out its roots. For the stability of Great Hua, the death of a few more people doesn't matter."

At this moment, Xu Wei was completely different from the affable old man who painted the Misty Rain over West Lake on the Su Causeway the day before. The cold light in his eyes struck fear into one's heart.

Xu Wei, once the Emperor's primary strategist, had exhausted every means to assist the current Emperor's ascension. The maneuvers he executed and the things he had experienced were far beyond Lin Wanrong's imagination. He was accustomed to all these.

Lin Wanrong drew a sharp breath. According to Xu Wei, if these people don't repent, they would all be killed. Damn it, were human lives just so insignificant?

Seeing his reluctance, Xu Wei sighed, "Younger Brother Lin, do you think I am wrong in doing this?"

Despite Lin Wanrong's eloquence, he didn't know how to respond.

Was Xu Wei wrong? From his perspective, his actions were necessary to maintain the stability of the Great Hua Empire. What were a few sacrifices in that cause?

But was Xu Wei right? Lin Wanrong himself was a commoner. If Xu Wei could treat these commoners in this way today, when might it be his turn?

Xu Wei said, "If killing a hundred people can prevent a disaster and save thousands, then I, Xu Wei, will be the villain."

Lin Wanrong took a deep breath and said, "Mr. Xu, today you will kill these hundred people, but the root of the problem remains unsolved. If the White Lotus Cult continues to bewitch the masses with these bewitching tactics in the future, will you continue to kill?"

Xu Wei sighed, "I've racked my brains. I've lingered around that statue, yet I couldn't find a single flaw, still unaware of how to break this bewitching tactic. The longer this drags on, the more people will be harmed. The issue at hand is not about whether to kill or not, but about how many to kill."

Lin Wanrong suddenly laughed, "Mr. Xu, if I have a method to break this bewitching tactic, will you spare these commoners?"

Xu Wei exclaimed in surprise and joy, "Younger Brother Lin, are you serious about what you just said?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "It should be correct."

Xu Wei said, "In that case, I would like to express my gratitude on behalf of these commoners."

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile, "Why thank me? I am just one of these commoners. Killing them is like killing me, saving them is like saving myself."

Xu Wei looked puzzled. Lin Wanrong sighed, "In this matter, they may be somewhat ignorant, but I have no right to despise them. In the face of this vast and unknown world, my ignorance is no less than theirs. We don't know how vast the sky is, why apples fall from trees, why father and son share the same blood. The more we know, the more ignorant we become. The difference between me and them is merely the pot calling the kettle black."

"The more we know, the more ignorant we become..." Xu Wei sighed with emotion, "Younger Brother Lin, your words resonate with me. You truly understand my thoughts."

Xu Wei, regarded as the most learned man in the world, dabbling in astronomy, geography, medicine, and rhythm. The deeper his studies, the more he realized his own shallowness and ignorance. Only those who truly delve into the subject could understand the meaning behind these words.

Living by the principle of enjoying life and being happy, Lin Wanrong chose not to dwell on these things. He laughed, "Mr. Xu, let's not go off topic. Have you observed whether they water around this Buddha statue daily?"

Xu Wei was surprised, "Younger Brother Lin, how did you know that? According to my sources, they water it twice daily, morning and evening, without fail. But, what does this have to do with the Buddha statue growing an inch daily?"

There you go. Lin Wanrong smirked, "Mr. Xu, let me tell you a children's story."

"A children's story?" Xu Wei questioned.

But Lin Wanrong had already begun with a laugh, "In spring, a seed was buried in the ground. A large stone was placed on top of the seed. The stone said, 'Little seed, I will keep you under me forever.' But the seed remained silent. It accepted the nourishment of the spring rain, grew silently, and sprouted silently. Eventually, one day, it pushed the stone aside."

This story was extremely childish, just a nursery rhyme from primary school days, "Spring rain has arrived, I want to bloom, I want to sprout." The innocent child's voice seemed to still echo in his ears. Today, he had to recount it to the world's top scholar, an old man already in his sixties. Lin Wanrong suddenly found the world to be quite marvelous.

Xu Wei, being an extraordinarily intelligent man, quickly stood up upon hearing this. Excitedly, he said, "A seed? Younger Brother Lin, are you saying that seeds are buried underneath?"

Lin Wanrong nodded with a smile, "If my guess is not wrong, a large number of seeds must be buried under there. At this time of the year, it should be soybean seeds. Soybeans expand significantly when watered, and their strength is immense. With the right temperature, they will germinate. Their force should be enough to push up this Buddha statue."

"Someone" Xu Wei called out loudly. His eyes flashed with a brilliant light. A general in full armor quickly ran up from below, saying, "General of Hangzhou pays his respects to Master Xu."

Lin Wanrong looked down and saw that several thousand bright and shiny soldiers had surrounded the followers. There was an unusual disturbance among the crowd. He sighed, 'If I hadn't come here today, many heads would have fallen. I accidentally became a savior, how ironic.'

"You, immediately go to the vegetable market in Hangzhou city, find ten people who plant and raise vegetables," Xu Wei ordered loudly.

After the General of Hangzhou left, Xu Wei turned to Lin Wanrong and gave him a fist salute, "Younger Brother Lin, in terms of wisdom, I, Xu Wei, have admired only two people in my life, and you are one of them. I will definitely report today's achievement to the Emperor."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "That won't be necessary, I am only interested in gold and silver treasures. If there is some silver reward, I would indeed be very pleased."

Xu Wei laughed heartily, "Younger Brother Lin is truly genuine, I am endlessly impressed."

Lin Wanrong, recalling Xu Wei's previous words, curiously asked, "Mr. Xu, you just mentioned that you admire only two people in terms of wisdom. Who is the other one?"

Xu Wei chuckled, "Apart from you, it's my daughter who impresses me the most."

"Your daughter?" Lin Wanrong was genuinely surprised. This old Xu was already so talented, from his words, his daughter was even more so? Given old Xu's age, his daughter must already be in her thirties. This was truly bizarre.

"Younger Brother Lin, when you reach the capital in the future, I will introduce you to her. I believe Zi'er would be delighted to meet a young scholar like you. You two could have a good competition." Xu Wei said with a bright smile.

Xu Wei's daughter? More talented than Xu Wei himself? This could be interesting. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Absolutely, when I arrive in the capital, I will surely pay a visit."

The General of Hangzhou moved with impressive speed. In no time at all, he had indeed brought several vegetable growers, some of them with mud still on their hands.

Xu Wei called out, "Younger Brother Lin, please wait here for a moment. I'll be back soon. I must admit, your guidance has genuinely excited me. It reminds me of the days when I first passed the imperial examination."

First passed the imperial examination? Damn, this old man was truly excited.

Xu Wei quickly hurried off, moving so fast that he nearly tripped while descending the stairs. Lin Wanrong watched him, amused. This Xu Wei, he was indeed quite the character.

The soldiers in armor tightly surrounded the crowd. Among them were several White Lotus cultists, with the lead man immobilized by a steel blade at his throat. With a wave of his hand, Xu Wei led these few people away.

He walked around the statue of the White Lotus Virgin, observing carefully. He then instructed a few soldiers to forcefully move the Buddha statue. As he looked down, he was immediately overjoyed. A thick layer of soybean seeds was buried in the soil, most of them already swollen and germinating. It was indeed the force of these seeds that had pushed the Buddha statue upwards.

Xu Wei excitedly waved at Lin Wanrong, who was standing far away on the upper floor. His silvery hair fluttered in the wind. Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed. This old man Xu, he was rather adorable.

The task of revealing this trick to the public was left to Xu Wei and the vegetable growers. It no longer concerned Lin Wanrong, who quietly left. By the time he returned to the shop, it was already evening. Apart from the Eldest Miss, everyone was sitting in the shop.

Seeing him return, Madam Zhang quickly grabbed his hand, anxiously asking, "Lin San, have you seen the Eldest Miss?"

Chapter 153 Wise Words Unravel a Marriage Knot

"Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong was startled. "What happened to the Eldest Miss? Didn't she go to pay a visit to the madams and ladies in Hangzhou City? How could she have disappeared?"

Madam Zhang anxiously said, "She returned at noon and had lunch but then left again alone, without saying where she was going. She didn't even bring a servant with her. The Eldest Miss has always been extremely disciplined and never comes home late. I don't know what happened today, it's already this late and she hasn't come back yet."

The Eldest Miss was the one Madam Zhang had nursed since infancy, and she was very filial towards her, even going so far as to send her back to Hangzhou for retirement. The bond between them was deep. With the Eldest Miss suddenly gone without a trace, Madam Zhang was so anxious she could cry.

Lin Wanrong quickly said, "Madam Zhang, don't panic. The Eldest Miss is smart and quick-witted, she wouldn't get into any trouble."

He thought for a moment, from Madam Zhang's meaning, the Eldest Miss went out on her own, so there shouldn't be any danger.

Lin Wanrong then looked at Xiao Cui and asked, "Xiao Cui, weren't you following the Eldest Miss?"

Xiao Cui blushed and said, "The Eldest Miss told me yesterday she didn't need me to serve her today, so I went out to have fun."

Looking at Xiao Feng's flushed face, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered, these two must have had a date. Seeing Xiao Feng's playboy appearance, he thought, this kid wouldn't have taken advantage of Xiao Cui, would he?

Lin Wanrong chuckled. At such a crucial moment, he still had such thoughts, he truly was incorrigible.

He shook his head and said, "Madam Zhang, the Eldest Miss has visited Hangzhou many times in the past. Think, where does she like to go the most? Or who does she like to meet?"

Madam Zhang pondered and then said, "When the Eldest Miss came to Hangzhou in the past, she was always rushing around, never taking the time to go sightseeing or meet anyone specific. But yesterday, it seemed her mood was good and she wanted to go sightseeing for the first time. It was quite a rare occasion."

A workaholic indeed, Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly. If he hadn't advised her on the way, he feared she would've visited Hangzhou a hundred times without ever taking a leisurely stroll. With the annual meeting of the Jiangsu-Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce scheduled for tomorrow, why did she have to disappear now?

In the absence of the Eldest Miss, Lin Wanrong had the highest rank. He was now at the core. Everyone looked at him expectantly.

From Madam Zhang's words, Lin Wanrong deduced that the Eldest Miss left of her own volition and was likely not in any danger. But she had always been so careful and meticulous, it was unlike her to just disappear. What happened today?

Hangzhou City, not too big nor too small, it would indeed be difficult to find someone. Lin Wanrong made a quick decision, "Xiao Feng, you go to the north of the city. Si De, you go to the south. Xiao Cui and Madam Zhang will stay here. I'll go to Su Causeway. In two hours, whether you find her or not, come back to this inn."

The three men scattered to search, Lin Wanrong headed straight for Su Causeway. According to Madam Zhang, the only time the Eldest Miss had gone sightseeing in Hangzhou was yesterday, at this Su Causeway. If she had willingly gone out, it was certainly along this route.

By the time Lin Wanrong stepped outside, it was already dusk. The lively bustle that had once filled Su Causeway was long gone, replaced by sparsity and silence. The chill winds blowing across the lake gave him a bone-deep shiver, a stark contrast to his cheerful mood the previous morning.

A melodious and resonant peal of bells echoed from the distant shore. Given the time, it was most likely the famous Evening Bell from Nanping Hill, one of West Lake's ten scenic spots.

Nanping Hill was known for its numerous rocky caves and grottos. Around dusk, the many temples, led by Jingci Temple, would ring the evening bell. The sound would resonate in the caves, rising into the sky over West Lake, and reverberating off the igneous rock of the Gegling on the opposite shore. This created the renowned echoes of the Nanping Evening Bell.

But Lin Wanrong was in no state to appreciate the beauty of the bell tolls. His heart was on fire with anxiety and his gaze darted around as he paced quickly.

Despite the length of Su Causeway, it was easy to see if anyone had passed by. As Lin Wanrong walked, he saw no sign of the Eldest Miss.

Cursing silently, he thought about the irony of the situation. The Eldest Miss was supposed to be leading them, yet at this crucial juncture, she was the one who had vanished.

He crossed the six bridges of Su Causeway, his heart growing colder with each step. Not even a shadow was in sight, let alone a living person.

"Eldest Miss! Eldest Miss!" Since it was late, Lin Wanrong wasn't afraid of being overheard. He called out, using his loudest voice, "Eldest Miss, Xiao Yuruo, Xiao Yuruo!"

As he reached the Lingyin Temple and still found no trace of her, he succumbed to despair.

The evening had fully set in, and only a few worshippers remained in the temple. Clinging to a sliver of hope, Lin Wanrong approached a monk sweeping the floor, "Excuse me, young monk, are there any female visitors in your temple?"

"Ah, Amitabha." The monk hastily recited a Buddha's name. "Kind sir, do not speak such frivolous words. This temple is a sacred and pure place. We do not allow such defilement here."

Infuriated by the monk's words, Lin Wanrong was about to turn away when the monk added, "In the Hall of the Medicine King, there is a devout woman offering incense. Could she be the one you are looking for?"

There was still someone here? Lin Wanrong's spirits lifted instantly. He asked for the direction to the Hall of the Medicine King and rushed there. As he reached the temple's threshold, he saw a woman devoutly kneeling in front of the Five Hundred Arhats, offering incense with such piety it was hard to look directly at her.

"Oh God, oh Buddha, thank you," Lin Wanrong thought as he dropped onto the threshold, gazing at the Eldest Miss, at a loss for words.

Hearing a noise behind her, Xiao Yuruo turned to see a figure in the dim light. Startled, she let out a scream.

Partly angry and partly amused, Lin Wanrong retorted, "Stop screaming. Go on, continue your prayer."

Hearing his voice, the Eldest Miss replied joyously, "Lin San, how did you get here?"

Exhaling, Lin Wanrong said, "Eldest Miss, I think it's I who should be asking that. How did you end up here? Do you have any idea how hard we've been searching for you after you disappeared without notice?"

Looking at the evening sky, the Eldest Miss exclaimed, "Oh dear, how is it so late already?"

A wave of dizziness washed over Lin Wanrong. Did she have to pray so fervently that she lost track of time?

The Eldest Miss had never made such a mistake before, and when she saw Lin San arriving, she knew that the entire staff must have been searching for her. She couldn't help but blush, saying, "I didn't realize it was so late. I'm sorry for worrying you."

Seeing that Lin Wanrong remained silent, she understood that it was indeed her fault. She whispered, "Lin San, don't be angry, I won't do this again."

Lin Wanrong said, "Eldest Miss, it doesn't matter if you're a little late, but you should at least let us know beforehand. If you wanted to pay respects, we could've accompanied you."

The Eldest Miss lowered her head and said, "At noon, I couldn't find you. I had no choice but to come here on my own. I didn't expect it to take this long."

Seeing that the Eldest Miss seemed genuinely apologetic, Lin Wanrong didn't say anything further. He walked to her side and said, "Eldest Miss, what brought you such fervor to pray to the Buddha again today?"

Her face flushed red, and she admitted, "It was the old monk from yesterday who told me to come."

"Old monk? Which old monk?" Lin Wanrong asked.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, she confessed, "The one who interpreted my fortune stick yesterday."

"What did he ask you to do?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"The old monk said my fortune stick was a riddle that no one could solve. Whether it was good or bad, it was up to me to decide. He told me to pray to all the Buddhas in Lingyin Temple for a good outcome," the Eldest Miss softly shared, her face glowing like a blooming peach flower.

Damn it, superstitious beliefs can be so harmful, Lin Wanrong cried out inwardly. "What kind of old monk is this? More like an old swindler." The Eldest Miss was indeed quite gullible. "He's just tricking you into donating more incense money. How could you believe him?"

Normally, the shrewd and competent Eldest Xiao Miss was clear-headed, but in this matter, she was a bit foolish. It seemed that any woman involved in matters of marriage could become a little irrational.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "The fortune stick you picked yesterday... was it about your marriage?"

Her face turned even redder. She initially didn't want to answer, but seeing his serious expression, she quietly acknowledged it with a nod, appearing even more bashful.

Not knowing what to say, Lin Wanrong just asked, "Are you going to continue praying?"

The Eldest Miss answered firmly, "Of course. I've only just finished paying respects in the Daxiong Hall and the Heavenly King Hall. I just entered the Hall of the Medicine King. I have to pray to each Buddha here."

Lin Wanrong was once again hit with a wave of dizziness. There were five hundred Arhats in this temple, how was this possible?

But the Eldest Miss was devout, she knelt on the cushion and started praying to each one. Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth and said, "Fine, fine. I'll help you pray to a few of them. It might save some time."

Having said this, he knelt on the cushion next to her and began to pray with her.

The Eldest Miss jerked up, her heart pounding. She blurted out, flustered and shy, "What are you doing? Who asked you to pray with me, you... you miscreant!"

Lin Wanrong looked at the two adjacent cushions and had a sudden realization. Ah, so this was how it was. Damn it, he had inadvertently taken advantage. He chuckled awkwardly and said, "It's alright, it's alright. Three bows for each prayer, we haven't even completed one yet."

The Eldest Miss couldn't bear his words any longer, she quickly covered her cheeks with both hands, calling out in embarrassment, "You're going to be the death of me, get out, just get out."

Lin Wanrong, with no other choice, exited the temple, shaking his head. This woman was too sensitive. What's the big deal in praying together? It's not like it was going to cost her a piece of flesh.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the Eldest Miss finally emerged, her cheeks still slightly flushed. She held tightly to the marriage fortune stick she had gotten the day before. It was as if by praying to all the Buddhas in the temple, her marriage would finally be settled.

"Lin San, let's go," the Eldest Miss lightly brushed a lock of hair from her forehead and said.

By the end of this ordeal, the moon was already hanging over the willow trees. The Eldest Miss walked along the Su Causeway, her expression distant, lost in her thoughts.

Seeing her spirit still not very high, Lin Wanrong said, "Eldest Miss, you've prayed to every single Buddha, big and small. That fortune stick will surely yield a good result now. You should be happy."

The Eldest Miss responded with a soft "hm", saying, "That's what the old monk said, but I still can't find peace in my heart."

A single marriage fortune stick had managed to transform the usually astute and competent miss into this state. It truly was a wonder. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Eldest Miss, if you trust me, let me interpret it for you."

The Eldest Miss gave him a glance and snorted, "What could you possibly know?"

However, Lin Wanrong, without asking for permission, took the fortune stick from the Eldest Miss's hand. Xiao Yurao gave him a fierce look and called him a "scoundrel" but did not snatch it back. Apparently, she also wanted to hear his interpretation.

Lin Wanrong pretended to carefully read the fortune stick and exclaimed, "This fortune stick of yours is extremely good."

The Eldest Miss asked curiously, "In what way is it good?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Happiness and joy, groping in the dark. Mirage of the moon on the water, a castle in the sky. This implies that your husband-to-be has already appeared, only that it's temporarily unclear. Filling the sea with pebbles, tossing pearls to sparrows, seeing but not noticing, resulting in a delay. This means you should not be too ambitious and cherish the person in front of you. Meeting without a meeting, encountering without an encounter, the moon sinks into the sea, the person is in a dream. This last line is the most important. You and this man, it's not about encountering, it's not about meeting. If you don't pay careful attention, you won't realize the fate you already have. This fortune stick, though obscure, boils down to four sentences: The mirror of marriage is not empty, it will meet at the moon under the Yao Tower. Do not say Feng Tang is old, he is still the general who pulls the strong bow."

Upon hearing this, the Eldest Miss was both shy and pleased, she said, "You just spout whatever comes to your mind, how can I believe you? But where did you copy these last four sentences?" Though she spoke in this way, the joy on her face was impossible to hide.

Seeing her expression, Lin Wanrong knew he had interpreted the fortune stick correctly. He laughed heartily, "The riddle of this stick is how you think, it can be interpreted as such, just one sentence, success depends on the person, only effort yields results."

The Eldest Miss's mood lightened considerably, she couldn't help but cover her lips and laugh softly. Looking at him, she said quietly, "You have such a slick tongue, I think in the future you should stay in this Lingyin Temple and become a fortune stick interpreter. You speak so fluently and know all the tricks to fool people."

Seeing the Eldest Miss return to her usual self, Lin Wanrong breathed a long sigh of relief. Being a psychological doctor is truly exhausting.

Both of them were in a pleasant mood. A full moon hung in the sky, casting a faint silvery glow on the lake surface. It resembled a glittering Milky Way. The lake was calm, with no ripple in sight, and the reflection of the full moon in the water seemed like a bright silver plate, inviting endless contemplation.

Gazing at the beautiful lake, the Eldest Miss softly recited, "Autumn boat, a person steps on, wrinkles the absolute waves, fairy mountains and pavilions in the mirror are dusty. Is this the 'Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake'? It is indeed extremely beautiful."

Among the Ten Scenes of West Lake, Lin Wanrong had only heard of 'Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake' but had never seen it. He shook his head and replied, "I don't know either."

The Eldest Miss looked at him and smiled charmingly, "The 'Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake' is just a metaphor, there is no fixed place. Wherever the moonlit night is beautiful, that place can be called 'Autumn Moon over the Calm Lake'."

So that was how it was. Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "That's good as well, beauty exists wherever the heart is."

Chapter 154 "Worse than a Beast"

Lin Wanrong stared at the Eldest Miss for a while, transfixed. He thought to himself, this lass only gets more appealing with each passing moment. Who knows which fortunate lad would be able to pluck this blooming flower in the future?

Today, the Eldest Miss had uncharacteristically broken away from her habitual, monotonous life. She had indulged a little unintentionally, but there was a strange thrill within her heart. She felt like a caged bird that had finally spread its wings to soar into the sky; the sense of freedom was undeniably enticing.

Looking at her demeanor, Lin Wanrong had some understanding of her feelings. He nodded and said, "Eldest Miss, if you want to wander a bit more, feel free. It's already late, so a little while longer won't make a difference."

Xiao Yuruo grunted in acknowledgment, carefully tucking the fortune stick Lin Wanrong handed back into her bosom. She lifted her long skirt and surprisingly, she chose to sit on a large protruding stone by the embankment.

Despite the deep chill of the night, the Eldest Miss seemed oblivious as she gazed blankly at the lake. Lin Wanrong, unsure of her thoughts, found a stone to sit beside her.

"The beauty of West Lake lies in its landscape; the beauty of life lies in understanding hearts," the Eldest Miss sighed lightly, "but where should I go to find the one who understands my heart?" She seemed to be speaking to herself, yet she also appeared to be asking Lin Wanrong. There was a slight crease between her brows, revealing a subtle hint of sadness.

Hearing her words, Lin Wanrong realized that she was pondering about her marriage destiny.

Lin Wanrong gave a helpless laugh, saying, "Eldest Miss, the divination is clear. Your soulmate is someone you need to find by understanding with your heart. Don't miss him when you meet him. Instead of sighing here, why don't you take a good look at the young scholars and lords around you? Perhaps the one you're looking for is among them."

The Eldest Miss gave him a frustrated look, saying, "What's the matter with you? Just a moment ago, you were interpreting the divination in such a serious, knowledgeable manner. Now why are you talking about these irrelevant young lords?"

Sweating, he thought to himself, if she didn't choose a young lord, was she expecting to choose him? In theory, once he married Yushuang, the Eldest Miss would be his sister-in-law. This would technically put him in an ambiguous position with her. But her personality was a bit problematic; she was overly domineering and possessive, which made him lose some interest.

Lost in his thoughts, he was startled when the Eldest Miss suddenly asked, "Lin San, the night before we came to Hangzhou, were you hiding in Yushuang's room?"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. "No, how could that be possible? I'm a decent man, and the Second Miss is even more so. How could I sneak into her boudoir and hide there at night?"

His face was one of innocence, as if he was being wronged. Inside, however, he was panicking. How did she find out about this? He had been so careful that day.

Seeing his dishonesty, the Eldest Miss snorted, "Stop making excuses. I saw with my own eyes how you snuck out of Yushuang's room. What were you doing in there? Speak truthfully now."

Seen with her own eyes? This lass had actually witnessed him. He thought he had been as stealthy as a ghost, yet he had been caught pilfering his love by his soon-to-be sister-in-law. It was a grave injustice. He hadn't done anything apart from stealing a kiss from Yushuang's lips.

He pondered, knowing he couldn't confess to this. Revealing his relationship with Yushuang wasn't what he was afraid of. However, the fact that Madame Xiao also resided in that courtyard made the events of that night overly bizarre and sensual; he absolutely couldn't confess.

"Eldest Miss, did your eyes deceive you?" Lin Wanrong joked, "How could I appear in the Second Miss' room so late at night? Not only do women cherish their reputations, but I also value mine. I have been in the Xiao family for some time and have always been strict with myself, maintaining my purity. In the courtyard, I am known to be well-praised, how could I ever do such a thing?"

Seeing him dodge her question and claiming strict discipline and purity, she felt both annoyed and amused. Could this man truly speak these words? Not to mention Xiao Qingxuan and Qiaoqiao, even the maids in the courtyard, dreaming about him. If not a hundred, then at least eighty of them, and yet he had the audacity to claim purity?

Both wanting to lash out and laugh, the Eldest Miss held back her amusement, saying, "You must have been born without a shred of shame to be able to speak such words so freely. I am truly at a loss of how to converse with you. Whether you admit it or not, I just want to tell you not to take advantage of Yushuang's youth. The women of the Xiao family might seem weak, but they are not to be trifled with."

"How could I take advantage?" Lin Wanrong said innocently, "I barely have time to 'cherish' her. Eldest Miss, don't see me as some rogue. Apart from being generous with my love, I honestly can't find any other flaws in myself."

The Eldest Miss had a deep understanding of his audacity, and she chose to ignore his words. She found that the more she spoke with him, the more directionless the conversation became. She would hit him with forceful blows, but he would dissolve them effortlessly, like a floating cotton, leaving her frustrated.

Her pleasant mood from the divination faded in Lin Wanrong's presence. Xiao Yuruo, feeling annoyed, decided to ignore him and stared blankly at the horizon where the lake met the sky.

The night sky was deep and profound, countless bright little stars scattered across it, their reflections dancing on the water, making it seem as though the starry sky had flipped into the lake.

The Eldest Miss had never admired the night sky by the lake like this before. Under the allure of the beautiful scenery, she couldn't help but look up at the starlit sky. She stretched out her slender fingers and asked, "Lin San, what are those two stars?"

Lin Wanrong had hurriedly left in the afternoon, and his clothes were thin. The cold wind by the lake made him shiver. All he could think of was getting back home as soon as possible. He had no interest in identifying stars. Yawning, without raising his head, he replied, "They are the Wenqu and Taibai stars."

[TL: Wenquxing and Taibai Jinxing refer to two stars or celestial bodies in Chinese mythology and astronomy. Wenqu is the god of literature in Chinese culture. In the traditional Chinese celestial

system, it corresponds to the planet Mercury. Taibai Jinxing corresponds to the planet Venus. In Chinese folklore, it's often associated with Taibai Jinxing, the god of the same name. Taibai Jinxing serves as a counselor or adviser in the heavenly court according to some myths.]

Seeing his lack of enthusiasm, she huffed and said, "When I talk to you, I am sincere, but you are dismissive, it's truly disappointing."

"Eldest Miss, clad as you are in a thick winter coat, you wouldn't fear the cold. However, I only have on a single long gown, so naturally, I'm the one freezing." Lin Wanrong sighed deeply, following her pointed finger to look in the direction of two bright stars, each surrounded by a host of smaller ones.

Lin Wanrong squinted for a while. Damn it, what stars were these? He didn't recognize them. Given his mediocre astronomical knowledge, he couldn't identify them. Without further thought, he blurted out a familiar guess, "Those are the Cowherd Star (Altair, part of the Aquila constellation) and the Weaver Girl Star (Vega)."

"Cowherd and Weaver Girl?" the Eldest Miss asked curiously, "What stars are those? I've never heard of them."

"Once upon a time, there was a young boy named Cowherd. He was handsome and kind-hearted, much like myself. The daughter of the Queen Mother of Heaven, known as the Weaver Girl, happened to see him while looking in a mirror. She fell for him, eloped to the mortal realm, and they got married. They had seven sons and eight daughters. When the celestial officials discovered them... later, the Queen Mother showed mercy. Every year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, she allowed magpies to form a bridge, letting the couple meet above the Milky Way. They could share a sweet, intimate moment, and no one was allowed to peek..."

As Lin Wanrong told the story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, it was quite an engaging tale, almost turning into a risqu joke as he yawned through the telling.

The Eldest Miss listened to his haphazard rendition, feeling both entertained and frustrated. The story was beautiful and enchanting, but the way Lin San told it ruined the mood.

Choosing the most relevant part, she sighed, "Cowherd and Weaver Girl, though separated by the Milky Way, found their soulmates. It's truly admirable." She paused, then asked, "Lin San, do you and Miss Qingxuan share such a bond?"

Here it came again, Lin Wanrong thought to himself. This girl was showing some signs of spring fever. If his charms had ensnared her and he couldn't break free, that would be dangerous.

He chuckled without answering her question, instead saying, "Eldest Miss, the story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl is rather ordinary. Let me tell you a more exciting story. This one is called 'Worse Than Beasts.'"

"Worse Than Beasts?" The Eldest Miss blinked in surprise. The title was quite shocking, "Is it more exciting than the story of Cowherd and Weaver Girl?"

"Exciting by a hundredfold," Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Once upon a time, there was a scholar and an Eldest Miss who were in love. One day, they agreed to go on an outing. They were caught in a heavy rain and took refuge in a vacant house for the night. The house had only one bed. Although they were in love, they did not act rashly. Out of consideration, the Eldest Miss shyly invited the scholar to share the bed but placed a pillow in between and wrote a note saying 'those who cross the boundary are beasts.' The scholar, being a gentleman, endured the whole night without crossing the boundary."

Used to his nonsense, the Eldest Miss's reaction had gradually dulled. Her cheeks flushed, she huffed, "Your stories are always improper. Isn't it good that the scholar respected the rules?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "The following morning, the Eldest Miss woke up, left without a trace, leaving another note behind."

"What did the note say?" the Eldest Miss asked.

With a mysterious smile, Lin Wanrong said, "It read, 'You're even worse than beasts.'"

The Eldest Miss's cheeks turned scarlet with a mix of embarrassment and anger. She quickly rose to her feet, saying, "Shameless! Despicable! The one who made up this story must be shameless, a person worse than beasts." As soon as she finished speaking, she turned and quickly walked away, heading in the direction of the shops.

"Eldest Miss, wait for me." Lin Wanrong chuckled, finally relieved from the cold wind. He quickly followed after her.

The Eldest Miss turned to look at him, her face flushed with embarrassment. Angrily she huffed, "Under the pretense of telling a story, you uttered such vulgar words, you, you..." She huffed a few more times, struggling to find the words, then said, "You're worse than a beast."

Chapter 155 Taking a Liking to You

Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter, but the Eldest Miss suddenly realized that she had just proven his vulgar words true. Immediately, her face flushed with urgency. Teardrops welled in her eyes as she retorted, Are you saying I was born just for you to bully?

The Eldest Miss was genuinely angry and ignored Lin San the whole way back. When she returned to the inn, she noticed everyone anxiously waiting. Despite their anxious expressions, she flung herself into Madam Zhang's arms and cried, Madam Zhang She could no longer form words, her loud sobs filled the room.

The Eldest Miss's safe return brought relief and happiness to everyone, yet Lin San's expression was quite strange. He looked as if he wanted to laugh but dared not. The Eldest Miss's countenance was even more peculiar, carrying a mixture of all the complex flavors of life. No one could understand her feelings.

The result of Lin San's boorish behavior was very clear. Until the next day, before leaving for the annual meeting, the Eldest Miss hadn't spoken another word to Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong didn't particularly mind; teasing girls was not a new pastime for him. He simply continued as usual.

When they left the inn, the Eldest Miss quickly scrambled into the carriage, seemingly reluctant to see the uncouth Lin Wanrong, who was pleased with the peace and quiet.

The venue for the annual meeting was Sunshine and Rain Restaurant, a famous restaurant next to Su Causeway in Hangzhou. Lin Wanrong accompanied the Eldest Miss into the building and surveyed the surroundings with a cold snort.

He realized that the layout of Sunshine and Rain was strikingly similar to that of his own restaurant, Food for Immortals. What irked him the most was that the various promotional tactics hanging on the walls of Food for Immortals were replicated and displayed prominently here at Sunshine and Rain Restaurant. It was clear that they must have sent someone to investigate Food for Immortals in Jinling.

Lin Wanrong didn't know whether he should be happy or upset. The fact that these promotional methods had reached Hangzhou indicated that the reputation of Food for Immortals had spread far and wide, even inspiring out-of-town restaurants to emulate it. What was frustrating, however, was the complete lack of any patent protection at this time. His unique promotional tactics could not be kept confidential, and he was powerless to prevent others from copying them.

No matter what, seeing this did not bring any joy to Lin Wanrong. He let out a heavy huff of annoyance.

The Eldest Miss, who had not spoken to Lin Wanrong for quite some time, was walking ahead. Hearing his grunt, she couldn't help but turn around, looking back at him, she said, The people you'll be meeting later are all top figures in the business world of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. You should be careful.

Lin Wanrong laughed, Don't worry, Eldest Miss. I always behave myself in front of strangers.

The Eldest Miss snorted lightly, If you're calling yourself decent, the sun must be rising from the west. Never utter words like those you said yesterday, or I'll definitely stop talking to you.

Understood, understood, Lin Wanrong chuckled, I won't say such things to you in the future.

However, the Eldest Miss detected the insinuation in his words and grunted, Have you spoken those vulgar words to Miss Qingxuan as well?

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Why did this girl keep bringing up Qingxuan? He responded, "Such matters are private, it's not appropriate to disclose them to the Eldest Miss."

Xiao Yuruo bit her lip and stopped talking to him. As the two ascended the stairs, they saw a short, chubby old man approaching. He gave a fist-and-palm salute to the Eldest Miss and greeted her with a grin, Miss Xiao, we're honored by your presence. My apologies for not welcoming you earlier.

The Eldest Miss responded with a smile, Chairman Yu, your words are too kind. It's a privilege for the younger generation like me to attend this annual meeting of the Jiangsu and Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce. Your personal welcome is too much honor, it humbles Yuruo.

The chubby old man, presumably in his forties or fifties, had a ruddy complexion. He wore a superficial smile. Lin Wanrong cast a glance at him. He must be the Chairman of the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce. Judging by his plump belly, he probably wasn't up to any good.

Chairman Yu squinted his eyes and laughed, Miss Xiao, please, don't be too humble. Your business acumen is the talk of the town in both Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Everyone is envious. Many colleagues would love to have a chat with you later.

Reading between the lines of his words, the Eldest Miss pretended not to understand and nodded with a smile, Chairman Yu, you're too kind. I look forward to learning from all of you.

Chairman Yu glanced behind the Eldest Miss and wondered, Did you come alone, Miss Xiao?

In the eyes of this chubby president, a minor servant like Lin Wanrong surely didn't count as a person. Lin Wanrong wished he could kick the fat man's backside but, to spare the Eldest Miss any discomfort, he merely grunted without saying a word.

The Eldest Miss said, I just brought one person with me. The others are irrelevant and would be useless here.

Chairman Yu laughed, Why isn't Young Master Tao with you?

The pursuit of Miss Xiao by Tao Dongcheng was well known within the Chamber of Commerce of both Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Chairman Yu was teasing the Eldest Miss with his comment.

Xiao Yuruo shook her head with a smile, Young Master Tao might be late due to some affairs. We share a professional relationship, so I don't know much about these matters.

Chairman Yu chuckled and invited the Eldest Miss inside.

There were quite a number of people present, all of whom were renowned merchants from Jiangsu and Zhejiang. The Eldest Miss politely exchanged greetings with them. From her demeanor, it was apparent that this wasn't her first meeting with them.

Lin Wanrong stayed close to the Eldest Miss, carefully observing the expressions of these people. He saw both envy and jealousy in their eyes. Combining this observation with the insinuations in Chairman Yu's words, he guessed that they were all coveting the Xiao family's business.

The Eldest Miss found a table and took a seat. The others present were merchants from Jinling, all well-acquainted with each other. Next to the Eldest Miss was a woman in her thirties. She was tall with broad eyebrows and big eyes, exuding a strong and assertive aura.

On seeing the Eldest Miss, she grabbed her hand and laughed, Big sis, come sit next to me.

Her words carried a heavy Shandong accent. The term big sis made Lin Wanrong want to laugh, yet he also felt a sense of warmth.

The Eldest Miss sat down beside her and laughed, "Sister Liu, you arrived early?"

"I've just arrived," Sister Liu said casually, "Traveled all day yesterday, those animals didn't live up to it. They kicked their legs halfway and defecated, delaying the trip. Didn't get here till late into the night."

Upon hearing this, all the merchants at the table snickered. A blush spread across the Eldest Miss's face as she laughed, "Sister Liu, you still speak your mind so freely."

However, Lin Wanrong found it utterly refreshing. What a genuine language of the working people! Although Sister Liu was sturdy and spoke a bit coarsely, her straightforward temperament was something he admired greatly.

As the Eldest Miss and Sister Liu chatted, it turned out that Sister Liu was named Liu Yue'e, originally from Pei County in Shandong (note: Pei County is now part of Jiangsu). She married into an ordinary family in Jinling. Born robust, she found her husband to be quite the simpleton. However, Liu Yue'e was gifted in crafting jade and jadeite, a skill passed down from her ancestors. Gradually, she became known as the best in Jinling. As her business grew, she opened an antique shop specializing in jade and jadeite, expanding to Anhui and Zhejiang and accumulating considerable wealth. Liu Yue'e managed both the shop and her husband impeccably, making her a well-known, powerful woman.

Both the Eldest Miss and her were women who frequently traveled between provinces. They often kept each other company, and their relationship was quite good.

Liu Yue'e said, "Big sis, I heard you were kidnapped by those damned White Lotus cultists a while back. I was terribly worried about you. Thank goodness you returned safe and sound. Truly, a great relief."

The Eldest Miss pointed at Lin Wanrong and laughed, "Thanks to my loyal servant here, I was able to escape danger."

Liu Yue'e glanced at Lin Wanrong, "This young man is capable of such a feat?"

The Eldest Miss replied, "Indeed, he is quite resourceful. I'm afraid my household is too shallow to accommodate such a big fish."

What big fish? Clearly a dragon. What's with her eyes? Lin Wanrong thought indignantly.

Liu Yue'e immediately said, "If a remarkable person like you, big sis, praises him, this young man must indeed be capable. Young man, what's your name? How old are you?"

"My name is Lin San, and I am twenty years old," Lin Wanrong laughed. Among all these important people, only Sister Liu didn't treat him like a servant. How could he not appreciate her, even though she was a bit rough around the edges?

"Only twenty?" Liu Yue'e laughed heartily, "That's even more remarkable. Lin San, do you have a sweetheart?"

Her question was rather crude, but Lin Wanrong responded shyly, "Not yet."

Liu Yue'e laughed heartily, "Young man, if you have any girl in mind, just tell me. You saved my little sister's life. As a token of my gratitude, I'll introduce you to some good girls. Whether they're from the Yichun Courtyard or the Miaoyu Pavilion, I can find them for you."

The Eldest Miss covered her mouth and laughed, "Sister Liu, don't listen to Lin San's nonsense. He already has someone he admires, a woman as beautiful as a celestial being. There isn't a single woman in Jinling who can compare to her."

Liu Yue'e curiously asked, "Big sis, even you can't compare? I haven't seen a more beautiful woman than you in Jinling. Young man, is your sweetheart really more beautiful than my big sis here?"

That was a difficult question to answer. The Eldest Miss glanced at him and lowered her head in silence. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Fragrant peach and plum, each has its strengths."

The Eldest Miss humphed but it was unclear whether she was satisfied or not. She lowered her head and said, "Always knowing how to flatter people with sweet words."

Liu Yue'e glanced at the Eldest Miss, whose face was tinged with a bashful red, and let out an 'oh'. Then, she leaned toward Lin Wanrong and whispered, "Lin San, you might want to give up on your sweetheart."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, but before he could respond, Liu Yue'e continued, "I think my big sis here has taken a liking to you."