

Finest 156

Chapter 156 Annual Meeting

Big sis? Lin Wanrong was momentarily dazed before abruptly realizing who she meant Xiao Yuruo.

Turning back, he saw Eldest Miss Xiao clenching her delicate fists, her eyebrows furrowed in anger, her face pale. Looking at Liu Yue'e, she voiced her anger: "Sister Liu, what nonsense are you spouting?"

Liu Yue'e naturally had a loud voice. Even though she had lowered it, Eldest Miss Xiao, who sat very close to her, heard every word clearly and her face immediately changed color.

'What the hell does she see in me?' Lin Wanrong thought as he watched Eldest Miss Xiao's angry expression. 'Has she not noticed this Eldest Miss' fierce demeanor? I have charmed countless girls, all of whom have been gentle and docile towards me. I have never met such a domineering young lady before. Even if she fancies me, I wouldn't give her the time of day.'

Liu Yue'e was straightforward by nature. Seeing that Miss Xiao was truly angry, she felt that her words were indeed inappropriate and hurriedly said, "Please forgive me, big sis. It was a joke; I didn't mean to speak carelessly. You know me, I often speak without thinking. And you, brother Lin, don't take it to heart."

Laughing, Lin Wanrong replied, "Our Eldest Miss is beautiful, magnanimous, and extraordinarily talented. The gentleman she deserves should, of course, be unparalleled in the world. Common folk like us can't even begin to compare. Sister Liu, stop joking around."

Eldest Miss Xiao gave him a glance and snorted, "You're deliberately saying these things to upset me, aren't you? I won't waste my breath on you."

Seeing that Eldest Miss Xiao was still upset, Liu Yue'e quickly apologized and spoke some comforting words. Eldest Miss Xiao knew that Liu Yue'e was straightforward, and they had formed a friendship from their past encounters. Such harmless jokes were naturally not taken seriously by Eldest Miss Xiao. After a while, she was chatting and laughing with Liu Yue'e again. However, when she looked at Lin Wanrong, there was something strange in her eyes.

Lin Wanrong, who was getting bored, suddenly heard the Chairman exclaim, "Young Master Tao, you've finally arrived."

Looking over, he saw Tao Dongcheng walking in with a smile on his face, and a petite and exquisite woman was following him, wearing a fiery red dress, like a ripe chili in the autumn field.

'This little lady, always skipping work to play around. Damn, taxpayers' money all goes to feeding the worms.' Lin Wanrong scornfully thought as he looked at the woman. It was Miss Tao Wanying, whom he had once disciplined. Only today, she had changed her outfit, looking alluring in her fiery attire.

However, Eldest Miss Xiao seemed to pay no attention to the Tao siblings and continued chatting with Liu Yue'e.

Tao Wanying carefully scanned the room, finally finding Xiao Yuruo and instantly lighting up with joy. She was about to rush over after loudly shouting "Sister Yuruo", but noticed that Lin Wanrong, the servant standing by her side, was looking at her with a cryptic smile.

A shiver ran down Tao Wanying's spine and she stopped in her tracks. The memory of being humiliated by him in front of everyone that day rushed back to her.

Mixed feelings of embarrassment and anger filled her, yet a part of her was afraid of him. She hesitated for a long time before finally walking over and cautiously called out to Eldest Miss Xiao, "Sister Yuruo, have you been here long?"

As she spoke, she cast a defiant glare at Lin San, seemingly mustering her own courage.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, his eyes tracing up and down her figure. As if remembering something, Tao Wanying quickly covered her backside with both hands, her cheeks blushing furiously.

Eldest Xiao Miss, noticing her demeanor and remembering the mischief Lin San had caused, felt a mix of amusement and irritation. She shot Lin San a glare, then turned to Wanying with a smile. "Miss Wanying, what brings you here?"

Tao Wanying, noting Xiao Yuruo didn't seem to blame her, quickly said, "Sister Yuruo, I came especially to apologize to you today. I was wrong that morning. I am sorry. Please, don't hold it against me."

Xiao Yuruo replied calmly, "Miss Wanying, I made myself clear that day. As long as you don't make things difficult for the Xiao family, we can still be friends."

Tao Wanying nodded, saying, "You're right. As long as this Lin San from your family stops bullying people, I won't cause trouble for him."

How the hell do I look like a bully? Lin Wanrong thought, irritated by her warning. Even Eldest Miss Xiao frowned at Tao Wanying's words. "Miss Tao, I know Lin San's temperament. Although he's not exactly good-natured, he wouldn't bully anyone without reason. The incident that day, Young Master Hou was the one at fault. You were there; you should be clear about that. Moreover, if he really did bully someone, it's for the courts to judge. We don't need others to meddle."

Lin Wanrong grinned. He liked Eldest Miss Xiao's firm stance. People like Wanying needed to be dealt with sternly; if she wasn't put in her place, she would overstep her boundaries.

Feeling guilty and not daring to offend Eldest Miss Xiao, Tao Wanying remained silent. Just then, her brother Tao Dongcheng finished talking with Chairman Yu. She eagerly waved him over. "Big Brother, Big Brother, Sister Yuruo is over here."

Tao Dongcheng saw Xiao Yuruo and approached with a smile, "My dear sister, I visited your mansion a few days ago intending to invite you to join me, but unfortunately, I didn't find you. Later, Wanying told me she ran into you. I then realized you had already arrived in Hangzhou. Have you been well these past few days?"

Xiao Yuruo responded coolly, "Thanks to you, Young Master Tao, things have been going well."

Tao Wanying hurriedly grabbed Tao Dongcheng's arm. "Big Brother, let's sit here, at the same table as Sister Yuruo."

At this merchants' annual meeting, the rules weren't too strict; men and women could sit together, hence Wanying's suggestion.

Seeing Tao Dongcheng intending to sit next to her, Eldest Miss Xiao's brow creased slightly. However, she couldn't think of a good excuse to reject him and involuntarily looked at Lin San.

Understanding Eldest Miss Xiao's call for help, Lin San stepped in just as Wanying was about to seat Tao Dongcheng next to Miss Xiao. "I'm sorry, Young Master Tao, but you can't sit here."

Having had a conversation with Lin San before, Tao Dongcheng still hadn't figured him out. At this point, hearing Lin San's statement, he shot him a glance and asked, "Why?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "My Eldest Miss has been devoutly turning to Buddha recently. Just yesterday, she prayed before five hundred Bodhisattvas at the Lingyin Temple and made a wish upon receiving the top fortune stick. The head monk warned that this fortune is not trivial. To ensure its potency, apart from members of the Xiao family and women, she should not be close to strangers for a few days. Hence, Young Master Tao, I'm afraid you can't sit here. We wouldn't want to anger Buddha."

Upon hearing his glib fabrication, the Eldest Miss stifled a laugh, finding the blending of truth and fiction intriguing. Indeed, she had been to Lingyin Temple and sought a fortune, but the latter part of the story was certainly a fabrication. Such a speech, however, appeared convincing with its finely detailed lies.

Tao Dongcheng cast him an annoyed glance, unsure of how to respond. Even if it were a false fortune, it had to be respected. Tao Wanying, however, bluntly retorted, "You're speaking nonsense!"

Lin Wanrong shot her a fierce glance, "Who's speaking nonsense?"

His words triggered a general uproar. Everyone holds respect for Buddha, especially these merchants. All the people at the table glared angrily at Tao Wanying. Blaspheming Buddha was indeed unforgivable.

Tao Dongcheng hastily pulled at her sleeve and bowed towards everyone, "Colleagues, my younger sister is still naive and doesn't understand things. I beg your pardon."

Tao Wanying, realizing her words were inappropriate, looked at Lin Wanrong, who was standing on the side, smiling indifferently, she knew she had fallen into the trap of this villain again.

Knowing she was no match for Lin Wanrong, whether verbally or physically, she quickly turned to Xiao Yuruo and said, "Sister Yuruo, after I stopped you that day on the road, my brother gave me a good scolding when I got home and dragged me here to apologize to you. He thinks of you and

cares about you, I don't think anyone could match that. The mistakes I made before were because of my own willfulness, please don't misunderstand my brother."

Lin Wanrong sighed, amazed that this girl could utter such cheesy words without her teeth souring. Despite her terrible temper, she had doggedly pursued them from Jinling to Hangzhou, all to match her brother with the Eldest Miss. Her tenacity was indeed undeniable.

Tao Wanying had been explicit, and with so many people watching, Xiao Yuruo blushed. She was a bit annoyed at the girl and realized she needed to set things straight today.

The Eldest Miss smiled and said, "Thank you, Young Master Tao and Miss Wanying, for your concern. But I am of humble blessings, and my relationship with Young Master Tao is merely one of colleagues. I have never thought about anything else. Please don't misunderstand."

Everyone present knew that Tao Dongcheng was courting Eldest Miss Xiao. However, they never thought that the young lady of the Tao family would propose marriage on her brother's behalf in front of everyone, even before the annual meeting had begun. What was even more surprising was Eldest Miss Xiao's straightforward refusal. It was truly unexpected.

Lin Wanrong gave the young lady an approving look. She handled the situation decisively and efficiently. However, at today's annual meeting, countless people were coveting the most profitable businesses of the Xiao family. And now, having offended the Chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, the annual meeting might not be easy to navigate.

The Eldest Miss was no stranger to the precarious situation, but being obstinate by nature, she was unwilling to dwell on this matter. After declining, she remained silent. But upon seeing Lin San's indifferent smile, she couldn't help but huff in annoyance and deliberately looked away from him, saying to the Tao siblings, "The annual meeting is about to begin, it would be best if you both returned."

Tao Wanying, with an anxious expression, wanted to say more, but Liu Yue'e, who was sitting next to the Eldest Miss, stood up and said, "Isn't this our Miss Wanying? It's been a long time since you visited our shop for jewelry. How have you been lately?"

Wanying, interrupted, had no choice but to respond, "Ah, Sister Liu, I've been busy these days. When I have time, I will come over..." But before she could finish her sentence, Tao Dongcheng had abruptly pulled her away.

Tao Dongcheng, the Chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, had been directly refused by Xiao Yuruo today. It was a severe blow to his pride, his face ashen, he held Wanying's hand tightly, and promptly headed towards the Chairman's table.

Liu Yue'e looked at the Eldest Miss and said, "Big sis, you've offended Young Master Tao, what should we do?"

The Eldest Miss thought to herself that she had already offended plenty of people, one more today wouldn't make a difference. With that thought, she glanced at Lin San once more.

After a deafening round of firecrackers, the plump Chairman, Yu Zhenqian, stood on the stage, bowed to the audience and said, "Fellow colleagues from Jiangsu and Zhejiang, old man Yu Zhenqian greets you."

Applause broke out, and the annual meeting of Jiangsu and Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce officially began. The Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce certainly put on a grand event, inviting the Prefect of Hangzhou to give a speech, adding much prestige to Chairman Yu.

Next came the speeches from the Chairman of the second provincial chambers of commerce. When Tao Dongcheng took the stage, he seemed to imply that the development of the Jiangsu merchants was all due to his great contribution, which greatly displeased Lin Wanrong.

Tao Wanying, seeing her brother's grandstanding, was extremely delighted. She kept glancing over at the young lady, the meaning was clear.

When Chairman Yu took the stage again, he lavishly praised Tao Dongcheng, lauding him as handsome, young, and a model for all merchants. Lin Wanrong snorted, 'Model my foot! If it weren't for his father's privileges, this kid would be worth less than nothing.'

The next part was a summary of the year. Chairman Yu listed the substantial progress of the two provincial chambers of commerce's operations over the past year, including the total revenue, the number of new industries, etc. Lin Wanrong wondered how Chairman Yu got these figures and whether he had inflated them to create an illusion of prosperity.

The next part of the meeting was dedicated to speeches by representatives from the two locations. These were all businesspeople, and were skilled in the art of eloquence, delivering a few sentences with ease. After a representative from the Zhejiang merchant group had spoken, Liu Yue'e, who had been selected by the Jiangsu Chamber of Commerce, took the floor. This Sister Liu was quite

straightforward in appearance, but her speech was orderly and well-reasoned. This past year, her jade and jadeite business had expanded significantly, inspiring admiration. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but nod in approval. Sister Liu indeed had a knack for meticulousness beneath her coarse exterior.

Once the two representatives had finished speaking, Chairman Yu nodded at the crowd, saying, "In addition to the two colleagues who just spoke, you are all aware that the Jinling business world has been blessed with several pieces of good news this year. I'm sure anyone with daughters, wives, or concubines at home has already heard that two precious items are currently spreading throughout Jinling and Hangzhou. These items are like nothing I've ever seen or heard of before, even their names are quite poetic: perfume and soap. These two items are causing quite a stir in Hangzhou and Jinling, and I fear it won't be long before they make waves in the capital as well. Now, I'd like to invite Miss Xiao Yuruo from Jinling to share some insights on perfume and soap with us."

Chapter 157 Confrontation

Eldest Miss Xiao slowly stood up, her slender form gracefully moving forward. She bowed to the assembly and with a smile, she said, "Yuruo is grateful for the kindness of the Chairman and the affectionate concern from all my colleagues. All present are my predecessors and peers who have supported the development of the Xiao family. Yuruo here expresses deep gratitude for your ongoing support."

With these words, she bowed deeply. The Eldest Miss was as beautiful as a flower, her demeanor warm and natural. Her talents and elegance surpassed others, easily winning the goodwill of everyone present.

"This perfume and soap are two new ventures initiated by my Xiao family and I believe everyone here has heard of them. The perfume, derived from flower essence, is made through a secret method, and its production cost is very high, hence it is precious. Its scent is long-lasting, subtle, and elegant, more convenient than the usual powder used by ladies, and the fragrance is more enduring, thus it is deeply loved by all the ladies and misses." Eldest Miss Xiao introduced the perfume in great detail. Although everyone present was a merchant, they were also potential buyers, so naturally, Miss Xiao would not miss such an opportunity to advertise.

"As for the soap, it carries the same fragrance as the perfume, fresh and natural, pleasant and comforting. Many ladies and misses have already tried it in the initial stage, and I believe have found it to be quite agreeable. Both products were carefully crafted by my Xiao family for the benefit of the common people. I hope all my elders will continue to support the Xiao family as always. Yuruo is immensely grateful."

After briefly introducing the perfume and soap, a female merchant from Zhejiang Province stood up and said, "Miss Xiao, I have heard and had the good fortune to use both the perfume and soap, and I find them extremely refreshing. However, I see that there is no supply available in various places in Hangzhou, which makes us sisters very anxious."

Her words elicited agreement from other female merchants surrounding her. As merchants, they were always interested in new products. Many of them had tried the perfume and soap at a high price and found them to be entirely different from the usual, common rouge and powder. Therefore, they were eager to ask Miss Xiao about the supply.

Miss Xiao smiled lightly and said, "Don't worry, sisters. The perfume and soap will be supplied soon. If you need any, you can directly register with our branch. Once the goods arrive, we will surely deliver them to you."

Tao Wanying took out a small transparent glass bottle from her bosom, inside which was a light pink liquid. She proudly introduced to the surrounding female merchants, "This is rose perfume, personally given to me by Sister Yuruo."

This immediately aroused exclamations from the women nearby. Each one held it in their hands, reluctant to put it down. A few of them even wanted to pay more to buy it from Wanying, but she quickly snatched it back.

Lin Wanrong watched with amusement. This was the perfume Miss Xiao had given to Tao Wanying when she was promoting at the poetry society. Unexpectedly, this little girl took it out to show off here today. In her hands, the perfume was certainly wasted.

Tao Dongcheng was seething inside, and he held Tao Wanying back while signaling to the corpulent Chairman Yu. The Chairman nonchalantly waved his hand, and another merchant stood up from the crowd and said, "Miss Xiao, your perfume and soap are indeed good, but your Xiao family seem to be acting a bit dishonestly."

Lin Wanrong saw Chairman Yu's gesture and chuckled to himself. Sure enough, this old man had no good ideas up his sleeve.

Eldest Miss Xiao slightly furrowed her delicate brows, "Master Li, what do you mean by that?"

It seemed like this Master Li was an acquaintance, and he hummed, "Miss Xiao, one should show some restraint and not push others too hard. Your Xiao family was originally engaged in textile

business, but now you are moving into cosmetics. You've overstepped several industries. Isn't that reaching a bit too far?"

Lin Wanrong asked the woman next to him, "Sister Liu, what does this Master Li do?"

Liu Yue'er replied, "This guy is a well-known miser who deals in cosmetics in Hangzhou."

"Oh," Lin Wanrong acknowledged, understanding. Damn it, this guy must be jealous. With the introduction of perfume and soap, who would still use those outdated cosmetics? Trying to limit the Xiao family with industry regulations, he thought, did this youngster think he was the Ministry of Household, enforcing some kind of industry access system?

Eldest Miss Xiao sternly retorted, "Master Li, my Xiao family has been in business for generations, never abandoning our textile business. But are we not allowed to venture into other fields? Whose rule is this? In the past two generations, my family's business has been managed by women, and venturing into the cosmetics industry is only natural."

Master Li huffed, "This cross-industry leap of yours breaks the norms. If everyone were to act like your Xiao family, hopping from one industry to another, what rules and regulations would be left for the Chamber of Commerce?"

Eldest Miss Xiao, seeing that this man was just picking a fight, coldly snorted, "The world's business is open to everyone. Why can Master Li engage in an industry that the Xiao family cannot? Master Li's ancestors were blacksmiths, and now you are in the cosmetics business. Isn't this breaking the norms as well?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled. Eldest Miss Xiao had quite a knack for argument. He hadn't seen this side of her before and had underestimated her.

Master Li was fuming, "You're just twisting words to justify yourself."

Eldest Miss Xiao snorted, "Master Li, although you despise the Xiao family's involvement in the cosmetics industry, we would not mind your participation in the textile business. I wonder if Master Li is interested?"

Liu Yue'er gave a thumbs up, "This little sister of mine, she's impressive, outshining even the men."

Another cosmetics dealer also stood up and said, "Miss Xiao, no one can stop your Xiao family from entering the cosmetics business, but you can't just disregard the rules and leave us, who are engaged in cosmetics, without a way to make a living."

Liu Yue'er couldn't stand it anymore and stood up, "Are you people even reasonable? What business Miss Xiao decides to do is none of your business. Lacking your own competence, you blame others. This is indeed a wonder in this world."

Although there were many people from the Jinling Chamber of Commerce present, only Liu Yue'er stood up to speak for the Xiao family. The rest merely looked to Tao Dongcheng for cues.

Lin Wanrong gave a small smile and a thumbs up to Eldest Miss Xiao. Her face flushed slightly, and she gave him a chiding look.

"Master Li," she said coldly, "where there is competition, there will be conflict. It is a law of nature, the right path. As the saying goes, adversity leads to contemplation and then to change. My Xiao family has been engaged in the textile business for many years, but later several competitors entered the market, making it difficult for us to continue. So we branched out into new areas of business. If I were to grumble and blame others like you, I'd be swearing in the streets every day."

The few merchants who ran the cosmetics business exchanged looks, unsure of how to respond, and quickly turned to look at Chairman Yu.

Tao Dongcheng signalled Chairman Yu, who had been silent for a while. The Chairman suddenly stood up and laughed, "Let's not get heated, there is still room for discussion here. I see both sides have valid points, so why not let this old man suggest a compromise."

Master Li hastily laughed obsequiously, "Please do, Chairman."

Chairman Yu turned to Miss Xiao, "Miss Xiao, those in the cosmetics business have a hard time too. I think it would be better if you transferred the rights to distribute your Xiao family's perfumes and soaps in the province of Zhejiang to Master Li and his colleagues. This way, both parties can profit from the collaboration."

Damn it, their true colors finally showed. If they obtained the distribution rights, it would be a significant profit. Lin Wanrong snickered inwardly. He had planted the tree and harvested the fruits,

and now they wanted to pick up the ready-made benefits. They dreamed of squeezing the Xiao family out of Hangzhou. What a pipe dream.

Miss Xiao's face changed, "Chairman Yu, my Xiao family has many shops in Zhejiang, and we have our own channels for distribution. We currently don't need anyone's help."

Chairman Yu smirked, "Miss Xiao, this puts me in a very difficult position. My colleagues in the province of Zhejiang also need to make a living. What do you think, Master Tao?"

Tao Dongcheng stood up, giving Miss Xiao a seemingly troubled look. "Younger sister, our Chamber of Commerce in Jiangsu and Zhejiang are like one family. If we take a step back, there will be a boundless vista."

These two scoundrels were clearly in cahoots. Eldest Miss Xiao thought about the humiliations the Xiao family had endured over the years. Her eyes began to brim with unshed tears, but she was a strong woman. She held back her tears and managed a sad smile. "When my Xiao family introduced perfumes and soaps, everyone saw only our success. But did anyone ever consider what would happen if these businesses failed? The several hundred members of the Xiao family would face ruin. Over the years, as our textile business faced hardships, we never thought to suppress our competitors by unfair means. The Xiao family relies on our own hard work, earning money in a straightforward and honorable way. Why should we face such accusations today? Although the Xiao family is made up of women, we can face the heavens without shame. I, Xiao Yuruo, am not as easily bullied as you imagine."

Chairman Yu and Tao Dongcheng only responded with cold, silent smiles, as though they already held the winning hand.

Damn it, I've been trying to reason with you, but you two think yourselves so important, don't you? Watching the two of them smirk, Lin Wanrong silently picked up a sturdy bench and walked over. He stood by Eldest Miss Xiao's side and gently smiled at her, "Don't cry, don't cry. You won't look as beautiful if you cry."

"Lin San..." Eldest Miss Xiao, seemingly finding comfort in his presence, reached out and grabbed his arm, as if he was her own kin. The tears she had been holding back finally came pouring down.

Chapter 158 I'm a Civilized Man

"Haven't I already said it? Crying won't do you any good." Lin Wanrong, with a smile, handed a silk handkerchief to the young miss. But as he turned around, a flash of icy cold light swept through his eyes.

"What was your name again? Yu Pudgy, isn't it?" Lin Wanrong teased the chairman.

"I'm not fat" Chairman Yu almost responded, caught off guard. Fortunately, he came to his senses in time, quickly rebuked, "Who are you? How dare you speak to me like this?"

"Chairman Tao, tell him who I am!" Lin Wanrong mocked, turning to Tao Dongcheng next to him.

Tao Dongcheng, an old acquaintance, was also unclear about Lin Wanrong's background. He hesitantly warned, "Lin San, what are you trying to do? This is the Jiangsu Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce. It's not your place to talk."

"Congratulations, Chairman Yu, you're about to become fatter." Lin Wanrong seemingly ignored Tao Dongcheng's words. His eyes shimmered with a gloomy light as he smiled and looked at Chairman Yu.

Feeling something was off, Chairman Yu hurriedly asked, "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm a civilized man." With these words, Lin Wanrong slammed the wooden stool he was carrying onto the table in front of him. The table completely collapsed amidst the loud sound and terrified screams.

Aiming at Chairman Yu's pudgy, pale face, Lin Wanrong swiftly delivered two heavy hooks with his left and right fists. With two thuds, they landed squarely on Chairman Yu's face.

With a miserable scream, Chairman Yu tumbled to the ground, rolling several times, moaning weakly. He had lost the strength to get up, his face swelling like a bun, squeezing his already small eyes into slits.

"You, you're outrageous. Guards, guards, arrest this rascal!" Chairman Yu lay on the ground, continuously groaning, and weakly commanded.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, stepped forward, and slowly pressed his foot onto Chairman Yu's face. Yu Pudgy tried to dodge, but it seemed impossible to avoid that foot.

"You, you're too bullying" Chairman Yu's face was flattened under the foot, he managed to gasp, and then loudly protested.

"Bullying?" Lin Wanrong sneered, "Did you consider these words when you were tormenting Miss Xiao just now?"

"Lin San, do you really think the Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce has no one to stand up to you? Colleagues, our Chairman is being bullied like this, what are we waiting for?" Master Li, who had been the first to trouble the Eldest Miss, seeing the chairman being stepped on, immediately stood up and shouted.

"Chamber of Commerce? What a grand title." Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, "Such bullying and tyranny, forcing people into a corner, a chamber of your mother's commerce."

He stomped his right foot onto the chairman's face. Yu Pudgy let out a howl of misery and screamed loudly.

Lin Wanrong turned to face the merchants of the Jiangsu Chamber of Commerce, a fierce light flashed in his eyes as he angrily said, "The Xiao family is a member of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce. Today, she was bullied to this extent, and no one dared to speak up. What is the point of this Jinling Chamber of Commerce?"

Seeing Lin San's rage, the Eldest Miss was greatly frightened. When Lin San got angry, he was capable of anything. She quickly tugged at Lin San's sleeve, "Lin San, don't act rashly and hurt someone."

Lin Wanrong turned his gaze back to Xiao Yuruo and said, "Miss Xiao, when one can no longer endure, they should cease enduring. If the Xiao family continues to allow others to trample over us, it will only encourage them to push further."

Understanding the truth in Lin Wanrong's words, Eldest Miss Xiao clenched her teeth in silent agreement.

Chairman Yu, screaming like a slaughtered pig, bellowed, "Lin San, let me go! Do you dare act so boldly in my Hangzhou territory? Is there no justice, no law?"

"Ha! Now you talk about law and justice?" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "When you all bullied a defenseless young woman earlier, where was your talk of law and justice then? There's only one rule in this world: whoever holds the most power, they are justice."

Seeing Lin Wanrong behaving so barbarically and flouting the rules, Tao Dongcheng couldn't help but feel intimidated. Hastily, he warned, "Lin San, this is Zhejiang territory. You should not act so presumptuously."

Impulsive actions could lead to disaster, but there are times when one's blood is stirred, and they must act. Lin Wanrong, with his devil-may-care attitude, cared not for borders or jurisdictions. To continue to endure humiliation was worse than death itself.

He gave a smirk, stepping off Chairman Yu's body and slowly approached Tao Dongcheng. "Young Master Tao, Chairman Tao, this is Zhejiang territory, isn't it? But what about when we return to Jinling? Will the Xiao family still have to endure your bullying?"

"When did I ever bully the Xiao family? You should not spout nonsense," Tao Dongcheng defended himself. He knew that his shady deeds were concealed from Lin Wanrong's knowledge.

To such a hypocrite, reasoning was futile. Lin Wanrong, smirking, retorted, "You never bullied the Xiao family? That's strange. Just now, when Chairman Yu was harassing us relentlessly, who was aiding him in his wicked deeds? You dare call yourself the chairman of Jinling Chamber of Commerce. Even if you didn't bully the Xiao family, I will bully you today. You won't object, will you?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong defending her so fervently, Eldest Miss Xiao was both moved and worried. She stood by Lin Wanrong's side, tugging at his sleeve and softly said, "Don't harm yourself in your reckless fights."

Hearing her concern, Lin Wanrong was delighted. The Eldest Miss was only advising him not to get hurt, but didn't ask him not to fight. She was certainly improving.

Seeing Eldest Miss Xiao and Lin Wanrong's close interaction, Tao Dongcheng felt a surge of jealousy and fear. He could not ascertain Lin Wanrong's background, and Lin Wanrong's unpredictable actions were unsettling.

He called out anxiously, "Lin San, you're very aggressive. Do you really think the Jinling Chamber of Commerce is afraid of you? The Xiao family still needs to establish themselves in Jinling, don't sabotage them!"

"Well said, Jinling Chamber of Commerce," Lin Wanrong scanned the room coldly. "The Xiao family is a member of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce. When we were being oppressed just now, apart from Sister Liu, who else stood up for us? It's natural for everyone to have their own interests, and I can't criticize that or expect anything from you. But today, this Chairman Tao has exploited the name of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce to oppress the Xiao family. It's time we got a good look at the true face of the Chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, isn't it?"

Liu Yue'er suddenly stood up and announced, "Lin Wanrong, I, Liu Yue'er, support you." She glared at the members of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce and angrily shouted, "Have all you men lost your spine? They're bullying Miss Xiao and all of us from Jinling like this, and you're all just hiding your heads like turtles. I can't believe your wives put up with you. If it were me, I would have given you the boot."

With Liu Yue'er's explosive temperament and sharp tongue, her words were as effective as a machine gun. The Jinling merchants present knew of her temperament. They also felt guilty and, therefore, no one dared to retort.

Eldest Miss Xiao tightly held Liu Yue'er's hand, gratefully saying, "Thank you, Sister Liu, for speaking up for me."

Seeing Lin Wanrong pushing him relentlessly, Tao Dongcheng hurriedly said, "Lin San, what are you trying to do?"

Lin Wanrong smiled darkly, "Young Master Tao, have you forgotten what I told you last time? Do not provoke me lightly. You didn't heed my warning, so now you must pay the price."

Seeing Lin Wanrong's aggressive approach, Tao Dongcheng tried to evade him. Just as Lin Wanrong's right fist was about to hit Tao Dongcheng's face, a pair of small hands blocked it. It was Tao Wanying. Miss Wanying, with her eyebrows furrowed, said, "Lin Wanrong, you mustn't bully my brother."

"I'm a civilized man, I specialize in beating dogs, not people," Lin Wanrong laughed wickedly. However, his left fist quickly swung up and hit Tao Dongcheng's face before anyone could react.

Although Tao Dongcheng had a strong body, he was no match for Lin Wanrong in a fight. Lin Wanrong's punch left him dazed, with one side of his face swollen like a bun and a black eye.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's surprise attack, Wanying was both surprised and angry. She rushed up at once. Lin Wanrong sidestepped her, but not without landing a kick in Tao Dongcheng's abdomen. Tao Dongcheng let out a painful cry and started rolling on the ground, clutching his stomach.

"Brother" Wanying cried out in shock, quickly running over to help Tao Dongcheng. His face was pale, his forehead covered in sweat, and his eyes were filled with a venomous glare, all directed at Lin Wanrong.

After a round of punches and kicks, Lin Wanrong felt extremely satisfied, having vented his frustrations. He had fought all over Zhejiang and Jiangsu, leaving no Chairman unscathed. He realized that the power of a fist was the ultimate truth and this taught these bullies a good lesson.

He scanned the crowd and grunted, "Everyone does business in this world. Don't accuse anyone of bullying. The Xiao family has always been kind to others, but that doesn't mean we are weak. If anyone thinks the Xiao family is easy to bully, they are blinding their own dog eyes."

There was an eerie silence in the hall. The people present were all merchants who were all after profits. They all had their tricks and cunning ploys, but none of them had ever seen such brute force. None dared to look down on the Xiao family after this.

Seeing her brother's pale face, Wanying was both scared and angry. She said, "Lin San, I'll report you to Prefect Hou. You will pay for your crimes."

Lin Wanrong sneered dismissively, "Miss Tao, if you have the guts, then go ahead. It's not the first time we've crossed paths."

Eldest Miss Xiao stood by Lin Wanrong's side, her face serious and resolute. "Miss Wanying," she said, "everything that has happened to Lin Wanrong is because of me. If you want to report to the authorities, you can target me."

"It's him, it's him." Shopkeeper Li rushed forward with a group of soldiers, pointing at Lin Wanrong and saying, "It's him. He dared to assault our Chamber of Commerce's Chairman and Young Master Tao. Everyone here can bear witness."

The soldiers wanted to seize Lin Wanrong without further ado, but Eldest Miss Xiao held onto Lin Wanrong's sleeve tightly. "Lin Wanrong, I'm the one to blame for this," she confessed.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Miss Xiao, fighting is what I do best. This has nothing to do with you."

Eldest Miss Xiao shook her head, her voice steady. "Don't be afraid. If they want to arrest you and bring you to court, if they want to put you in jail, I'll go with you."

Lin Wanrong was touched. This girl really moved me for once, he thought. But before he could say anything, a loud announcement was heard from outside the door: "The chief Senior Scholar of the Hall of Literary Brilliance and the Minister of Revenue, Minister Xu Wei has arrived"

Chapter 159 Calming the Situation

The merchants from Jiangsu and Zhejiang who were present instantly erupted into excitement. In those days, the status of merchants was considered low, and their interactions with the officialdom were extremely limited. Now, the arrival of the man himself, the chief Senior Scholar of the Hall of Literary Brilliance, the nation's leading scholar and Minister of Revenue, Xu Wei, was indeed a great honor for these merchants.

Chairman Yu hastily scrambled up from the ground, and with the assistance of Tao Wanying, and Tao Dongcheng hurried to the entrance to greet him.

"What perfect timing for Xu Wenchang's arrival," Lin Wanrong smirked, glancing at his Eldest Miss.

Upon hearing of Xu Wei's arrival, Xiao Yuruo was initially thrilled, but soon became anxious again. What difference would Xu Wei's arrival make? Even though he admired Lin San's talent, he was still an imperial officer. Would he be able to be biased amidst the unanimous accusations against Lin San?

Xu Wei, dressed in his bright red official robe, entered with a slight smile on his thin, austere face, which concealed a sense of authority. Behind him followed the prefect of Hangzhou, whom they had met earlier, and dozens of other officials from Zhejiang.

"Greetings to Minister Xu and all the distinguished officials," Chairman Yu hastily said, bowing deeply in respect.

"As a student, I, Tao Dongcheng, greet Minister Xu and all the distinguished officials," Tao Dongcheng also saluted.

Everyone knew that Xu Wei had once been the emperor's chief strategist and was now the pillar of the Great Hua Dynasty, managing the country's financial affairs. He was the most trusted person of the Great Hua Emperor. Winning his favor was surely a guarantee of quick success.

"Gentlemen, fellow colleagues, please rise," Xu Wei nodded and smiled, helping them to their feet.

As everyone got up, Xu Wei, seeing the bruised faces of Chairman Yu and Tao Dongcheng, exclaimed, "What happened to you two?"

Chairman Yu fell to his knees with a thud, crying out, "Minister Xu, you must stand up for me, for the Chambers of Commerce of Jiangsu and Zhejiang."

Grinding his teeth, Tao Dongcheng also knelt down with Chairman Yu, saying, "Please, Minister, you must stand up for me."

Xu Wei asked in surprise, "What's going on here? Please get up and speak. The two of you head the Chambers of Commerce in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, you are the leaders among the merchants. What has happened?"

Wiping his tears and snot, Chairman Yu complained, "Minister, it's all because of Lin San, that servant of the Xiao family." He pointed his fat and stubby finger at Lin Wanrong, saying, "He not only insulted our Chambers of Commerce but also publicly beat me, Young Master Tao, and several of my subordinates. It's an absolute disgrace to all merchants in the world. Please, Minister, you must take a stand for us."

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong inwardly cursed, What a shameless Chairman Yu. I clearly only hit the two of you, but you've made it sound as if I hit a whole bunch of people. Your audacity is even greater than mine.

Xu Wei merely hummed, glanced at Lin Wanrong, and turned back to Chairman Yu and Tao Dongcheng, exclaiming, "So, Chairman Yu, are you saying that this young man, Lin San, single-handedly beat you, Young Master Tao, and a number of your men?"

Chairman Yu gritted his teeth, "Exactly, please stand up for us, Minister."

Xu Wei replied, "Don't worry. I will thoroughly investigate the matter and make a fair judgment. Chairman Yu, are you saying that this servant, Lin San, beat you, Young Master Tao, and so many people, so he single-handedly fought against all of you? Is that correct?"

"Yes, yes, yes" Chairman Yu hastily exclaimed, "The brothers present can all testify to this."

"One person beating up multiple people?" Xu Wei questioned, taking two steps to approach Lin Wanrong, and smiled, "Little brother Lin, are these gentlemen speaking the truth?"

Before Lin Wanrong could reply, the Eldest Miss had already spoken up, "Minister Xu, the events of today have been incited by my Xiao family. Lin San has nothing to do with this. We, the Xiao family, will bear all the blame."

Xu Wei looked at Xiao Yuruo and asked, "Are you the Eldest Miss of the Xiao family?"

The Eldest Miss curtsied and responded, "Indeed, I am."

Xu Wei sighed while gazing at her, "You resemble her... you resemble her so much."

The Eldest Miss looked at Xu Wei in puzzlement, not understanding the meaning behind his words.

Xu Wei sighed once again, "Miss Xiao, how is your mother, Miss Guo, faring these years?"

Xiao Yuruo was taken aback. This Minister Xu referred to her mother as Miss Guo, which seemed to indicate that he knew her mother. But where could this come from?

Lin Wanrong had a slight understanding, seeing the Eldest Miss bewildered, he gently nudged her sleeve. Startled, she quickly curtsied and respectfully replied, "My mother is well. Thank you for your concern, Minister."

Xu Wei sighed deeply, "Miss Xiao, don't be surprised. I had some interactions with Miss Guo in the past. I have always admired Miss Guo's intelligence and talent. It's been more than twenty years since I last saw Miss Guo in the capital. Now, seeing her daughter, it feels like meeting an old friend yet not recognizing her, which evokes a sense of nostalgia."

On hearing that Minister Xu had a relationship with her mother, the Eldest Miss felt a bit relieved. She didn't expect Xu Wei to be biased, she only hoped he would be fair.

Xu Wei smiled, "Miss Xiao, even though you are the daughter of an old friend, in today's matter, as someone has accused the Xiao family, I cannot show favoritism. I can only administer justice impartially. I hope you won't blame me."

Xiao Yuruo promptly replied, "I have no other wish but for your fairness and impartiality, which would fulfill my desire."

Chairman Yu and Tao Dongcheng, initially shocked to hear that the Xiao family had a relationship with Minister Xu, breathed a sigh of relief when they realized that he didn't intend to favor them.

Xu Wei nodded and turned to Lin Wanrong, "Little brother Lin, are these gentlemen telling the truth? Did you beat up all these people?"

"A beating? No," Lin Wanrong responded, perplexed, "Minister Xu, how could one person beat up a crowd? Even if I had six arms, I couldn't do it."

Xu Wei nodded, turned to Chairman Yu and asked, "Chairman Yu, even if Lin San had four limbs working together, he wouldn't be able to beat up so many people. Could you be mistaken?"

Chairman Yu was sweating profusely. He had been too ambitious, using the term 'beat up.' Hastily correcting himself, he said, "Minister, it was this San Lin who first hit me and then Young Master Tao. Everyone present can testify to this."

Tao Dongcheng also chimed in, "Everything Chairman Yu said is true. I stake my life and reputation on it."

Xu Wei hummed in response, "So, it was not a group beating, but mutual beating, wasn't it?"

This time Chairman Yu had learned his lesson, and hurriedly explained, "Minister, it was this Lin San who struck first. Before we could retaliate, we were already beaten by him."

"So that's it. Lin San, did you assault Chairman Yu and the others?" Xu Wei turned to ask Lin Wanrong.

"Not exactly an assault, just a simple spar. Those who know me understand that I always adhere to the principle of 'winning people over with virtue.'" Lin Wanrong shamelessly replied.

At that, Shopkeeper Li immediately jumped in, "Nonsense! We saw you assaulting Chairman Yu and Young Master Tao with our own eyes. Are you still trying to argue?"

Xu Wei nodded, his voice rose considerably, "Lin San, are you aware of your crime? Why did you assault Chairman Yu and Young Master Tao?"

Before Lin Wanrong could answer, Chairman Yu preempted him, "Minister Xu, we were merely discussing business matters with the Xiao family. An argument ensued, and this Lin San wanted to resort to violence. We ask for your discernment, Minister."

"Oh," Xu Wei put on an understanding expression, "Chairman Yu, this is the territory of Zhejiang. Lin San, a mere servant, dared to assault you without power or influence? This is indeed too presumptuous. He must not be spared."

At this point, Liu Yue'e couldn't stand it any longer and jumped in, "Minister Xu, don't listen to their nonsense. It was Chairman Yu and his associates who bullied the market and went too far, prompting Lin San to fight back."

Liu Yue'e rattled off like a machine gun, recounting how the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce pressured the Xiao family, how Tao Dongcheng cruelly aided in their tyranny, and how the Jinling Chamber of Commerce reluctantly acquiesced. She appeared simple, but she was quite savvy. When it came to describing how the Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce bullied and coerced, she detailed it extensively. As for Lin Wanrong's assault, she justified it as an act of indignation. After all, how could a mere servant dare to beat these influential figures publicly?

Xu Wei listened with narrowed eyes, his reaction unreadable. Lin Wanrong, however, was a clever man. The old Xu's few questions were full of wisdom and mystery.

After hearing Liu Yue'e's description, Xu Wei frowned, looking at Chairman Yu, "Chairman Yu, is there truth to this?"

Chairman Yu hurriedly responded, "Minister, please don't misunderstand. Our Hangzhou Chamber of Commerce has no intention of monopolizing the market. We merely wanted to discuss business matters amicably with the Eldest Miss."

"Discuss?" Lin Wanrong sneered, "How did Chairman Yu 'discuss'? By demanding that the Xiao family hand over the rights of operation in this province to Shopkeeper Li, and banning the Xiao family from operating in Hangzhou if they didn't comply. Is this what Chairman Yu calls a 'discussion'?"

Chairman Yu stuttered for a moment, but didn't dare to deny it.

Lin Wanrong saluted Xu Wei with a fist and palm, "Minister Xu, as the Minister of Revenue, you certainly understand the principles of business operation. It is a matter of great concern for the livelihood of the people. Those with talent and skills should manage it. Furthermore, sufficient competition is needed to promote rapid development in commerce, thus enriching our Great Hua's trade. However, like Chairman Yu here, for the sake of his personal gain, he shortsightedly employs various means to hinder others' normal operations. In the long run, not only will the people of Hangzhou and Zhejiang be unable to enjoy the latest products, but the atmosphere of free trade will also be utterly suppressed. Commercial affairs, like a boat against the current, must progress or retreat. Under such oppression, how can business in the province of Zhejiang progress? Young Master Tao of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, despite being the Chamber of Commerce Chairman, does not consider for the merchants in the association. He colludes with Chairman Yu to suppress the Xiao family. Who gave him such audacity to allow him to bully others? Encouraging trade and competition is the right way. Bullying the market destroys the foundation of Great Hua's business and must not be indulged."

His long-winded speech elevated the issue of market bullying to the height of Great Hua's operations. People listened, bewildered, half understanding yet not fully comprehending.

Xu Wei, with a stern face, asked Chairman Yu, "Did this Lin San speak falsely?"

Chairman Yu dared not to speak. Xu Wei turned to Tao Dongcheng, "What does Young Master Tao think?"

Tao Dongcheng remained silent, but Tao Wanying spoke up to defend her brother, "Minister Xu, this Lin San spouts nonsense, framing my brother. We ask for your judgement"

Xu Wei humphed heavily, "If you refuse to speak up, then not only is it true that Lin San assaulted someone, but it's also true that you've bullied the market?"

Everyone dared not speak. Xu Wei sighed, "Jiangsu and Zhejiang are the economic foundations of our Great Hua, the granary for development. Today's annual meeting of Jiangsu and Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce is highly valued by the Emperor. He has specifically appointed me to meet all of you to understand any difficulties in your business operations. I did not expect such a situation to arise, which greatly disappoints me."

Xu Wei's reputation preceded him, and his imposing aura silenced everyone in the hall.

Xu Wei snorted towards the Prefect of Hangzhou, "Prefect Gu, according to our Great Hua law, what punishment should be meted out for assault?"

Although Chairman Yu and Tao Dongcheng were Chairmen of the Chamber of Commerce of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, they were only civil organizations. When Lin Wanrong beat these two, it wasn't equivalent to assaulting an imperial official. At most, it was considered assaulting a gentleman.

"According to Great Hua law, public assault should be punished with a light cane or heavy imprisonment. Looking at Lin San's assault on the two Chairmen, he should be caned two hundred times at least," Lord Gu said.

"And how should one who bullies the market and disrupts business be punished?" Xu Wei asked again.

"According to Great Hua law, those who bully the market are punished with a light fine or heavy banishment," replied the Prefect of Hangzhou.

Chairman Yu's face turned pale, Tao Dongcheng also clenched his teeth and remained silent. The charge of disrupting business was no small matter. Both of them had been rampant in Jinling and Hangzhou, and no one had ever dared to trouble them. But now, Xu Wei showed no mercy, striking hard and catching both of them off guard.

The Eldest Miss had been silent for a while, but after hearing Xu Wei's words, she couldn't help but feel overjoyed. She couldn't resist glancing at Lin San, and found him smiling faintly as if he had expected this outcome all along.

Xu Wei sighed, "Lin San's case is relatively straightforward, but Chairman Yu and Master Tao, they are the pillars of our great Hua. As for the accusation of market bullying, it has not yet been proven as fact. Prefect Gu, in your opinion, what should be done about this?"

The Prefect of Hangzhou said, "Sir, in my humble opinion, Chairmen Yu and Tao acted improperly first, and then Lin San fought back. All three parties are at fault. Perhaps it would be best to let them clarify the right and wrong, reflect deeply, and take this as a lesson."

It was clear that the Prefect of Hangzhou had grasped Xu Wei's intentions, proposing the most pacifying solution. In truth, if the matter were to be discussed seriously, Lin Wanrong's punishment was inevitable, but the two Chairmen were not blameless either.

Xu Wei smiled slightly, "Is that so? What do the two Chairmen think?"

Chairman Yu dared not to speak, but Tao Dongcheng gritted his teeth, "Minister, your magnanimity leaves us with little room to argue. Lin San's assault on myself and Chairman Yu can be overlooked, but what position does this put our Chambers of Commerce of Jiangsu and Zhejiang? Today, Minister, you are generous enough not to dwell on our mistakes, for which we are deeply grateful. However, I, as the Chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, cannot ignore the Xiao family's contempt for the Chambers of the two regions. Today, with you present, Minister, I wish to have a fair competition with the Xiao family."

"Oh?" Xu Wei said with interest, "And what will you be competing in?"

"Literary and martial challenges!" Tao Dongcheng declared through gritted teeth.

Chapter 160 The Battle of Literature and Martial Arts (Part 1)

"A battle of literature and martial arts?" Xu Wei asked in surprise, "What do you mean by that?"

"The battle of literature and martial arts is actually quite simple," Tao Dongcheng began. "The Xiao family and I each choose a challenge, either literary or martial. If the other party cannot answer or is

defeated, they lose. If there is no clear winner after one literary and one martial round, then we ask Minister Xu to pose an additional challenge to decide the victor."

Lin Wanrong understood, wasn't this just a best-of-three series? The idea of using one literary and one martial challenge was quite inventive. Miss Xiao, despite being a businesswoman, was lauded for her literary prowess, even by the most well-versed poetess in Jinling, Luo Ning. There was nothing to fear on the literary side. And the martial? That was just a fight, wasn't it? Who was he ever afraid of in a fight?

"This is interesting," Xu Wei chuckled. "But Young Master Tao, why do you wish to compete in these areas with the Xiao family?"

"If I lose," Tao Dongcheng responded, "I will resign from my position as Chairman of the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, and the brothers within the Chamber can elect a suitable successor. Additionally, my family's textile business, without taking a single penny, will be entirely handed over to the Xiao family."

The news shocked Miss Xiao. The scale of the Tao family's textile business was not inferior to that of the Xiao family. Tao Dongcheng's offer was a bet of the utmost stakes.

Tao Wanying, who seemed not to have expected her brother's drastic action, exclaimed, "Brother, no!"

"I never regret the decisions I make," Tao Dongcheng stated, his eyes radiating a chilly light.

Xu Wei nodded, his eyes twinkling mysteriously, "And if the Xiao family loses, what do you want them to do?"

Tao Dongcheng answered, "Lin San attacked two of us today. If they lose, I want the Xiao family to apologize to me and Chairman Yu. In addition..." He glanced at Xiao Yuruo, his eyes filled with fanaticism, "I want Miss Xiao to become my wife."

His declaration startled everyone present. To have Miss Xiao meant gaining the Xiao family. Gaining the Xiao family meant owning the business of perfumes and soaps. Tao Dongcheng's move was utterly cunning.

"Shameless!" Eldest Miss Xiao blushed with anger. Tao Dongcheng, who had always been refined, had revealed his brutal nature today. He was even worse than Lin San, who was consistently 'bad.'

With those words, Tao Dongcheng had decisively broken ties with the Xiao family. Today's fight was a desperate struggle either the fish would die, or the net would break.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Who would have thought, the great Young Master Tao has fallen so low as to resort to such tactics, your skin is even thicker than mine!" This was not the first time this cheeky fellow had made such a move; the last time he had even slipped in an aphrodisiac. Lin Wanrong completely despised him.

Xu Wei looked seriously at Eldest Miss Xiao, "Miss Xiao, this matter involves your lifelong happiness. Please consider it carefully and avoid acting impulsively."

Indeed, old Xu had already made a peacekeeping judgement, each party receiving fifty corporal punishments, and the matter had been let go. Would he be foolish enough to go through another bloody battle with him? Lin Wanrong pondered in his heart, and said to Xiao Yuruo, "Miss Xiao, today's matter has already been judged by the officials, it has nothing to do with our Xiao family anymore. There's no need for a bloody fight."

Tao Dongcheng noticed the contemplation in Eldest Miss Xiao's eyes and laughed loudly, "Miss Xiao, today's contest is fair and open in front of Minister Xu. There's no room for bias or favoritism. If the Xiao family is afraid to accept the challenge, they will have no place in the Jinling Chamber of Commerce henceforth."

Damn it, this Tao is arrogant, Lin Wanrong thought furiously. Though Xu Wei was a high-ranking official of the court, he couldn't resolve the issues within the Chamber. Without the Jinling Chamber of Commerce, the Xiao family would be paralyzed in Jinling. The situation couldn't end well without dealing with Tao Dongcheng.

Eldest Miss Xiao understood the stakes clearly. She clenched her fists tightly, biting her lip uncertainly. Her lifelong happiness and the livelihood of hundreds of people in the Xiao family were at stake, and she was backed into a corner with no way out.

The matter concerned both Eldest Miss Xiao and the Xiao family, and for the first time, Lin Wanrong felt a sense of powerlessness. Based on his understanding of Xiao Yuruo, he knew what she would choose.

Xiao Yuruo sighed lightly, looking at him, "Lin San, I "

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Miss, you don't need to say it. I know what you would choose. Don't worry, I, this talent, rank second in the world, just a little behind Mr. Wenchang. I'm proficient in both literature and martial arts, there's nothing to be afraid of."

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded, a tear escaping down her cheek. Lin Wanrong tilted his head, whispering in her ear, "Don't worry, even if we lose, I'll just gather some men, kidnap you before you can marry that Tao guy, then we'll retreat to the mountains, and you can be the bandit queen."

Xiao Yuruo blushed at his words and retorted, "You can't be serious at this time, talking about being a bandit queen, is it that unbearable?"

She didn't quite understand her feelings, but his distraction had calmed her down considerably. In a contest of literature and martial arts, she and Lin San could handle the literature. Even if they lost the martial arts, there was still the third round with Xu Wei overseeing it. She believed Minister Xu wouldn't deliberately put her in a difficult position.

With these thoughts, she felt much brighter and smiled at Lin San, "At this crucial time, don't be disrespectful. If we lose, I'll deduct a year's salary from you."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "And if we win, you'll have to do my laundry for a year. That seems fair, right?"

Eldest Miss Xiao blushed but uttered a soft hum of agreement.

Xiao Yuruo turned to Xu Wei, "Minister Xu, I accept Young Master Tao's challenge."

Xu Wei was taken aback, "Miss Xiao, you should think this through, this concerns your lifelong happiness."

Xiao Yuruo gave a soft laugh, "Thank you for your concern, Minister Xu. I have confidence. Besides, I have Lin San."

Seeing Eldest Miss Xiao's determination, Xu Wei sighed lightly, hoping that Lin San's scholarly talent would shine as it always had.

The audience was astonished to see the situation evolve in such a way. This was far more exciting than any annual Chamber of Commerce meeting. The entire room was buzzing. Liu Yue'e, one of the spectators, hastily grabbed Xiao Yuruo's hand, "Sister, I'm with you."

A flash of ruthlessness glinted in Tao Dongcheng's eyes as he addressed Xu Wei with a bow, "Minister Xu, since Miss Xiao has accepted, for the sake of fairness, let us draw lots to decide the order of the challenge."

"Of course," Xu Wei responded seriously.

In the draw, Miss Xiao drew "A", while Tao Dongcheng drew "B".

This gave Miss Xiao the right to choose the topic first and Young Master Tao the right to challenge first. The right to choose meant the Xiao family would select one of the two topics—literature or martial arts—with the remaining topic automatically going to the Young Master Tao. Young Master Tao, with the right to challenge, could pose the first challenge on the topic they picked.

Eldest Miss Xiao asked Lin San in a low voice, "Should we choose literature or martial arts?"

After a moment of thought, Lin Wanrong replied, "Let's choose martial arts. With us handling literature, they probably won't be able to outdo us. We are not so familiar with martial arts; it is better for us to select the topic."

Eldest Miss Xiao shared his sentiments, so she decided to select martial arts. Tao Dongcheng gave a cold laugh, "With the right to challenge first in my hands, it is now my family's turn to pose a challenge."

As the mediator, Xu Wei glanced at Xiao Yuruo and, upon seeing her nod, gave Tao Dongcheng the go-ahead, "Young Master Tao, give out your challenge."

A fierce light flashed in Tao Dongcheng's eyes, "We all are business people here. Thus, having a keen eye is a fundamental skill. My challenge will be a test of observation and insight."

Miss Xiao was surprised; she had assumed Tao Dongcheng's literary test would involve discussing poetry or prose. She hadn't expected it to be about observation. With the myriad things in the world, how could they have seen everything? This literary test seemed more perilous than promising.

Reading her thoughts, Lin Wanrong smiled, "Don't worry, I'm here." Eldest Miss Xiao rewarded him with a sweet smile. This Lin San, always able to set hearts at ease.

Seeing their expressions, Tao Dongcheng took out a small box from his pocket, a look of smug satisfaction on his face. He slowly opened the box to reveal a tiny object, about the size of a fingernail, looking somewhat like a stone. It seemed to be composed of countless tiny specks that glowed brilliantly under the sunlight, a dazzling kaleidoscope of colors. It was mesmerizing.

Everyone was astonished, including Miss Xiao and even Xu Wei, who was known for his wide breadth of knowledge. What was this object? A stone? It was so beautiful and radiant, yet they had never seen anything like it.

Taking in everyone's reactions, Tao Dongcheng looked triumphant. "Miss Xiao, can you tell me what this is? And where it comes from? If you answer correctly, I'll concede this round."

Xiao Yuruo clenched her teeth. Even Xu Wei, the most learned man in the world, didn't recognize the object. How could she? Was she going to lose this literary contest? She felt a pang of sorrow and turned to look at Lin San, only to find him deep in thought.

Eldest Miss Xiao believed that Lin San didn't recognize it either and was about to concede when Lin Wanrong suddenly cut her off, "We recognize this stone," he said with a smile.

"Lin San, you" Both shocked and delighted, Eldest Miss Xiao felt a sense of resurrection upon hearing Lin San's words.

"You recognize this object?" Tao Dongcheng said with an incredulous look on his face, his tone filled with disdain.

Xu Wei, however, was deeply impressed by Lin San's broad knowledge. As a man of erudition himself, he had a natural affinity for the curious and unfamiliar, so he urged Lin Wanrong, "Little brother Lin, please tell us, what is this object?"

With a smug grin, Lin Wanrong looked at Tao Dongcheng and said, "If I'm not mistaken, this object isn't native to our Great Hua. I suspect it's an imported good, isn't it?"