

## Finest 191

### Chapter 191 The Talented Woman

Young Prince Ning sauntered, presenting his fist in salutation and bowing respectfully as he walked. His smile charmed the room, his demeanor exceptionally courteous and gracious. It didn't take long for him to win over the crowd with his congeniality.

Lin Wanrong remembered what Luo Yuan had once shared about Young Prince Ning's father, Prince Cheng, a well-known and virtuous ruler, adept at forging alliances with talented and unusual individuals. It seemed the prince had indeed learned from his father.

Luo Min invited Young Prince Ning to take a seat. With a humble smile, the prince replied, "How could I presume to sit before my elders? I've come today specifically to wish the Old Lady a happy birthday."

As a royal prince and grandson of the emperor, it was inappropriate for Young Prince Ning to kneel, so he stepped forward and bent deeply at the waist, "Prince Cheng's son, Young Prince Zhao Kangning pays respects to the Old Lady. May her longevity rival the heavens and her blessings and prosperity be endless!"

The Old Lady chuckled, "How could I accept such a grand gesture, Young Prince? Please, take a seat."

"Thank you, Old Lady," said Zhao Kangning modestly. With a wave of his hand, one of his attendants brought forth a brocaded box. Zhao Kangning held it with both hands, reverently presenting it to the Old Lady. "I had to rush my visit to Jiangsu, and had not made proper preparations for the Old Lady's birthday. Last year, when I was on a mission to Goryeo, the King gifted me a thousand-year-old ginseng. I present it to you as a humble birthday gift, wishing you eternal youth and vitality."

Everyone in the hall had heard of Goryeo ginseng and its reputed miraculous effects, including the ability to resurrect the dead. Such a generous gift was being described as modest, making Young Prince Ning appear extremely humble.

A thousand-year-old Goryeo ginseng? Quite a claim. As a modern man, Lin Wanrong knew exactly what ginseng was. Bluff all you want, he thought to himself.

Zhao Kangning's extravagant gift was not lost on the people in the room. They were well aware that he was trying to curry favor with Luo Min. Zhao Kangning's father, Prince Cheng, once served as Minister of Personnel, with protgs throughout the realm. A third of the high-ranking officials across the numerous provinces owed their positions to him. Luo Min, however, was an exception. Given that Jiangsu was the granary of the empire, it made sense that Zhao Kangning was investing heavily to win him over.

Zhao Kangning's eyes brightened when he saw Luo Ning standing beside the Old Lady. He smiled and asked, "Might this be Miss Luo Ning, the renowned genius of Jinling?"

Luo Ning blushed and shook her head, "I am but a simple, unlearned girl. I dare not claim such a title."

Zhao Kangning laughed heartily, "Miss Luo is too modest! Your talent and renown have been the talk of the capital for a long time. Meeting you today is like basking in the warmth of spring or a long-awaited rain, bringing much joy."

Well, this young prince surely knows how to charm, Lin Wanrong thought. His sweet talk wasn't too shabby, and it was pretty clear he was somewhat smitten with Luo Ning. But he couldn't help but wonder, would Luo Ning be moved?

With a soft smile, Luo Ning replied, "Young Prince, please do not jest at my expense."

Shaking his head, Zhao Kangning signaled his servant to bring forth a scroll of painting. He smiled, "You may not believe what I've said, Miss Luo. But once you see this scroll, you will understand."

He slowly unfurled the scroll. The figure in the painting was that of a delicate woman, with eyebrows as delicate as willows, almond-shaped eyes, and a slender figure. She stood under a peach tree, holding a book, observing it closely. The woman seemed warm and natural, her eyes gentle, exuding a quiet grace, even though she was silent. The resemblance between her and Luo Ning was striking; they could have been mistaken for each other.

Luo Ning wondered aloud, "Young Prince, could this woman in the painting be me?"

Zhao Kangning nodded, "Indeed, Miss Luo, it is you. This scroll was inked by me personally three years ago, always hoping that one day I could present it to you myself. Today, finally, my wish has come true."

"Three years ago? Are you saying you've seen me three years ago?" Luo Ning frowned, "But I don't remember ever meeting you."

Zhao Kangning gave a charismatic smile, "Three years ago, I had a chance encounter with Miss Luo at the Imperial Academy. We were a distance apart and before I could greet you, you had already left. When I returned home that day, I couldn't sleep, so I spent the night creating this painting."

Luo Min, who had been silent for a while, looked at the prince with a faint frown. He understood why Zhao Kangning was trying to win them over, and seeing his daughter being charmed continuously, his worry deepened.

He painted this picture three years ago, and brought it personally on the occasion of the birthday celebration. What a clever move! Lin Wanrong thought to himself, this prince was no fool. His courtship strategy was first-rate, starting with a story of unrequited love to elicit sympathy, then presenting the painting as a token of his affection, expressing his longing in front of everyone. He left an unforgettable impression. If it had been an ordinary woman, she would have been moved. This man was not to be underestimated, Lin Wanrong reminded himself.

Zhao Kangning handed the scroll over with both hands, speaking softly, "I have no other intentions, other than to fulfill my long-cherished wish with this scroll. I hope Miss Luo will accept it."

Clever, very clever. He insisted he had no ulterior motives, but his actions spoke otherwise. If I were a woman, I'd be moved, He thought. Seeing Lin Wanrong shaking his head and smiling, Eldest Miss couldn't help but speak up, "Seems like you're thinking again. This is the young prince's chosen one."

Oh please, the young prince is nothing. You really think that with just a painting and a few words of affection, you can win over Luo Ning? You're too naive. Lin Wanrong had spent some time with Luo Ning, and he knew that she was a woman of principles and not easily swayed by wealth or nobility. She had high standards for her future husband; a man of letters and a warrior. A painting and a few sweet words were not enough to fool her.

Luo Ning sneaked a glance at Lin Wanrong and slowly said, "Thank you, Young Prince, for your kind treatment of me. But this painting, which you have put so much effort into, should be a keepsake for you."

Her words were highly significant, and everyone in the room understood. Zhao Kangning's face remained unchanged, and he sighed in disappointment, "It's truly regrettable that my long-cherished wish could not be fulfilled today."

Lin Wanrong studied the prince's demeanor and compared it to the mysterious master he encountered in the White Lotus cult. He was now seventy percent certain that the master was indeed this Young Prince Zhao Kangning. No wonder Cheng De and the others were so pleased to see him.

He pondered for a while when he felt a gentle tug on his clothing. He turned around and saw it was Luo Yuan. Luo Yuan spoke softly, "Big brother, come with me. My sister has something to say to you."

Luo Ning wanted to speak with him? What could they possibly have to discuss? He looked around and sure enough, Luo Ning was nowhere to be seen. He had no idea where she had slipped off to. He must have been deep in thought for quite a while.

Luo Yuan led him to the backyard of Luo's residence. It was a private area for the Luo family, off-limits to outsiders. Luo Yuan ushered Lin Wanrong in and said, "Big brother, my sister is waiting for you inside. Go in quickly."

Sweat trickled down his brow. This little Luo was acting mysterious. If anyone didn't know any better, they might think he was trying to court his sister. Lin Wanrong entered the garden. It was early winter, the garden was bare and the flowers gradually withered. In a corner of the garden stood a solitary figure. Upon closer inspection, it was none other than Miss Luo Ning who had just recited three linked couplets.

Luo Ning stood serene, gazing blankly at the remaining flowers in the garden, a stark contrast to her usual open and cheerful demeanor. Lin Wanrong walked over and softly called out, "Miss Luo--"

At his voice, Luo Ning turned around. Seeing him, she said joyfully, "Brother Lin, you're here?"

Lin Wanrong nodded. "Miss Luo, you called me here. Is there something you wish to discuss?"

Luo Ning stared pensively at the wilting flowers in the garden and said slowly, "Brother Lin, which do you think is more vibrant and enduring: women or flowers?"

Where did that come from? She had been so lively while reciting poetry earlier, why the sudden melancholy? Lin Wanrong was puzzled about the change in her.

"Brother Lin, do you think I'm strange?" Seeing Lin Wanrong's furrowed brow as he tried to decipher her intentions, Luo Ning couldn't help but laugh.

Lin Wanrong nodded solemnly, "Very strange. I find it hard to reconcile you with the eloquent Luo Ning from earlier."

Luo Ning said shyly, "Brother Lin, people are multifaceted. My confidence in front of others doesn't mean I can't be shy, because, at the end of the day, I am a woman."

"Women and flowers are actually the same. Their blooming period is the most beautiful and vibrant moment of their lives. But once spring is over, they wilt and fall like fallen leaves, ground into dust, forgotten and no longer fragrant." Luo Ning's words were so quiet and profound that it felt like they were drifting in from afar. Lin Wanrong couldn't grasp her thoughts at all.

This time, things were getting serious. He might be the one getting courted, Lin Wanrong lamented internally. Luo Ning giggled and said, "Brother Lin, don't be surprised. These are just some thoughts I had a while ago."

"Miss Luo, a tiny thought can change your life," Lin Wanrong stated gravely.

Luo Ning spoke softly, "Brother Lin, you're right, a small thought may indeed change my life, but it might already be too late. I don't even know when the change began."

Luo Ning looked at him and smiled faintly, "Brother Lin, do you know, when the Young Prince showed me his favor earlier, I suddenly felt very scared."

"Scared? Of what?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

Luo Ning blushed as she giggled, "If I may be frank with you, Brother Lin, when I was young, I made a vow that my future husband should be an outstanding man. He should not only have

scholarly talent but also be a brave warrior capable of killing enemies on the battlefield. I've aimed for this goal all these years."

Lin Wanrong grunted in acknowledgment, thinking, I knew about your lofty ambition. Your younger brother warned me about it early on. When it comes to wisdom and bravery, I can't even compare.

"Young Prince Zhao Kangning, I've heard of him before. He's not only known for his literary talent but also his martial arts. And he seems to have a liking for me. In theory, he should be my ideal match," Luo Ning said shyly, "But even though he's had feelings for me for three years, I haven't felt anything. Not just for him. I realized that even if the man of my dreams appeared before me, a man who excelled in both literature and martial arts, I still wouldn't accept him. I'm really scared. I suddenly discovered that the goal I've been aiming for isn't what I want at all."

Perspiration dripped down his forehead. Lin Wanrong understood her meaning. In professional terms, it was called a collapse of faith, quite cruel. Lin Wanrong silently mourned for her. Little girl, the gap between dreams and reality is enormous.

"Just like you told me before, Brother Lin, I might want to travel the world, but that doesn't mean I can. The wish to travel is beautiful, but the actual process of traveling might not be."

Luo Ning's words made Lin Wanrong's head spin. The minds of women were indeed hard to decipher. First, it was the Eldest Miss, now Miss Luo. Women who read too much are troublesome. My Qiaoqiao is the best behaved.

"Um, Miss Luo, are you saying that your beliefs have subtly changed, is that right?" Lin Wanrong carefully chose his words, even more carefully saying them. He actually wanted to say that her choice of spouse had gradually changed, but when the words reached his lips, they turned into the vague term 'belief'. If he accidentally misled a young lady, that would be a serious offense.

Luo Ning let out a small sigh, "Yes, Brother Lin, that's right. It changed even when I hadn't noticed it myself."

Crap, this meant the little girl didn't even know who she liked now. This was indeed a serious problem. Lin Wanrong cautiously said, "Miss Luo, you don't really not know who you like, do you?"

Luo Ning's face flushed, and she scolded, "Brother Lin, what nonsense are you spouting? Of course, I know who I like."

"Oh" Lin Wanrong drew out the word, then said, "I see, Miss Luo, you've fallen for someone who is entirely different from the ideal person you once yearned for. That's why your old beliefs have crumbled, isn't it?"

Luo Ning's face turned scarlet, she didn't confirm, but she didn't deny it either.

Lin Wanrong's heart was enlightened. It was indeed astonishing that someone could make this young lady abandon her original beliefs. He chuckled and said, "Falling for someone often happens without realization. All those stories about love at first sight, they are all deceptive lies."

Luo Ning's face reddened in embarrassment and she quickly said, "Brother Lin, it's not that I like him, it's just that I enjoy talking with him."

Lin Wanrong laughed out loud, "It's the same thing. Miss Luo, I'll repeat my earlier words, life is short, do what you like, change as you wish. Don't force anything, contentment lies where the heart finds peace."

After their conversation, Luo Ning felt as if she had let go of a significant burden. She giggled and said, "Brother Lin, talking with you is always relaxing, and I learn a lot. I enjoy talking to you the most."

## Chapter 192 The King of Couplet

Luo Ning's smile bloomed like a flower, a stark contrast from the melancholy air she had carried just moments ago.

Upon seeing her return to her lively self, Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly. Why did all these girls like to share their worries with him? Miss Luo was no different. If he ever left the Xiao family, he mused, he should start a psychology clinic, specializing in women's hearts. He chuckled at the thought.

Suddenly, Luo Ning stretched out her small hand, placing it on his. "Brother Lin," she asked, "do you feel like I've changed?" Her hand was warm and soft, slightly trembling.

A ripple went through Lin Wanrong's heart. This little girl was no simple creature, learning so quickly to take advantage of him.

Luo Ning was pure-minded. Despite the slight trembling of her hand, there was not a trace of impurity. Lin Wanrong brushed her hand unintentionally, it felt smooth as jade. Her hand was really soft, he wondered who would benefit from it in the future. He sighed inwardly, gently pulled her hand, and pretended to be chaste. "Miss Luo, under my brilliant guidance, you have gained a new life. Bless you. Now, let us share a pure hug."

Luo Ning giggled, her feet moving like she was flying. After a few steps, she turned her head and smiled, "Brother Lin, even though you're a bit naughty, I really enjoy talking with you." With that, she ran off laughing, leaving Lin Wanrong standing alone.

This was frustrating for him. He had spent so much time advising a girl, and gained nothing in return. Today's business was a big loss.

In the garden, the flowers were already wilting. Lin Wanrong picked up a small petal, gently pinched it, thinking about Luo Ning's words, his mind in a foggy state. He didn't quite understand what this young girl was up to, and felt like he was being played.

Feeling irritated, Lin Wanrong wandered back to the main hall, only to find Luo Ning standing next to the old lady, smiling at him.

The Eldest Miss saw him return and whispered, "Where have you been? I've been looking for you and couldn't find you."

Caught off guard by Luo Ning's antics and feeling down, Lin Wanrong glanced at her and snickered, "I went to relieve myself. I guess you didn't look in the right direction for the restroom."

The Eldest Miss blushed, spat lightly, glared at him, and didn't say anything more.

By now, Luo Min had invited Zhao Kangning to sit in the main seat, smiling, "The arrival of Young Prince Zhao has indeed graced our humble abode. We, the Luo family, are truly grateful."



Zhao Kangning laughed, "Oh, not at all. Governor Luo is too modest. My father always speaks highly of you in front of me. He says that you govern Jiangsu province diligently and love your people, everyone sings your praises. He even instructed me to learn from you."

Governor Luo responded humbly, "Young Prince, you're too kind. I am unworthy of such praise."

Zhao Kangning glanced around and suddenly laughed, "By the way, Governor Luo, when I was outside your residence, I heard cheers from within. I am curious about what you were all doing."

Luo Min laughed, "Just now? My mother had prepared a few celebratory couplets. All the young talents were matching couplets and having quite a good time."

"Matching couplets?" Zhao Kangning seemed intrigued. He laughed, "I am quite fond of this too. I even have an expert in couplets with me. Why don't I take the opportunity to contribute today, allowing my teacher to exchange views with the talents present? What do you all think?"

Seeing that the Young Prince also enjoyed matching couplets, the crowd instantly burst into cheers. Luo Min hesitated, but seeing the high spirits all around, he found it difficult to object.

Zhao Kangning laughed, "If we are to match couplets, there must be a wager. How about this? If I lose, I will offer a painting 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow' by Master Xu Wenchang. If Governor Luo's side happens to lose, I would like a prize as well"

Zhao Kangning glanced at Luo Ning, who had just returned to the living room, and laughed, "I will ask Miss Luo to accept a 'Portrait of a Court Lady' that I painted three years ago. What does Governor Luo think?"

On the surface, it seemed as if the prince would lose either way and have to present a painting. However, the truth was far from this. Luo Ning had openly rejected the prince, and now Zhao Kangning was using this opportunity to try to present his painting again, essentially forcing her to accept it. Luo Ning huffed quietly and didn't speak.

The paintings of Xu Wei were extremely valuable. Seeing that Prince Ning was offering Xu Wei's 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow', the people in the hall were suddenly interested, and their cheers grew louder. Lin Wanrong remembered that he also had a painting by Master Xu, 'Misty Rain over West Lake'. It was a new work and bore Xu Wei's signature, which was rare. It was probably more valuable than 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow'.

Luo Min was somewhat torn. While Zhao Kangning proposed to match couplets in a playful spirit, it was in fact a contest. If they lost this match, they would lose face for his daughter.

Zhao Kangning waved his hand, and a middle-aged man dressed like a scholar in white robes emerged from his entourage. The man bowed and said, "I am Shen Banshan, the leader of the Seven Northern Provinces Literary Alliance."

Leader of the Seven Northern Provinces Literary Alliance? Lin thought, What sort of organization is this? Are they some sort of bandit group?

Seeing Lin Wanrong's confusion, the Eldest Miss quietly explained, "The Seven Northern Provinces Literary Alliance is a spontaneous organization formed by scholars from the North before they pass the imperial examination. It's very large-scale. Every time there's an examination, if the champion is from the North, he must be from this alliance. That's why it's also known as the 'Champion Alliance'. This Shen Banshan is a leading figure in the alliance. Although he is just a scholar and hasn't passed the examination for many years, he is known as the 'King of Couplets', famous throughout the North and the South. His skills in couplets are unmatched."

A 'Champion Alliance', 'Leader of the Seven Northern Provinces Literary Alliance', aren't they just a student council? More like a high school student council. The names sound like they're from a bandit group, Lin thought to himself.

Shen Banshan bowed to the crowd and proudly declared, "I, Shen Banshan, represent the talents of the Seven Northern Provinces, extend my greetings to my southern colleagues. Today, during our match, there's no limit to the number of people. As long as you can match the couplets, anyone from the south can respond."

Shen Banshan was an arrogant man, and his words quickly provoked the scholars from the South. The previously humiliated Hou Yuebai was instantly infuriated. He clenched his fists and announced, "I am Hou Yuebai from Jinling. I am pleased to meet Mr. Shen. I am ready to learn from you."

Shen Banshan gave a slight nod, "Nice to meet you, Young Master Hou. I wonder if you've passed the Imperial Examination?"

"I am waiting to make my mark on the gold list this coming autumn," Hou Yuebai replied.

"And what position do you aspire to hold if you enter the court?" Shen Banshan asked with a smirk.

After a moment of contemplation, Hou Yuebai responded, "Cabinet Elder."

Shen Banshan chuckled and delivered a couplet, "Before you're old, you're dreaming of being an elder." It was a spur-of-the-moment satirical couplet. Shen Banshan truly was the king of couplets with his quick wit and clever mind, unmatched by ordinary people. The couplet was extremely difficult to respond to; the matching structure was secondary, the real challenge was to come up with a response that would also satirize Shen Banshan. The Southern scholars were instantly at a loss, and Hou Yuebai's face turned as red as a pig's liver. He didn't know whether to stand or sit.

Luo Ning pondered for a while, but couldn't find an answer. She couldn't help but feel anxious. Were they about to lose the first round? She involuntarily stole a glance at Lin Wanrong, only to find him with his eyes closed, apparently deep in thought. Her heart sank in disappointment.

Seeing that no one was able to respond, Luo Min was about to admit defeat. Suddenly, a voice rang out, "May I ask if Mr. Shen is a scholar (TL: Scholar here refers to Xiucai, those who have passed the county-level imperial examination)?"

Shen Banshan turned to see a servant in a green robe with a jolly smile. His dark skin indicated good health. Shen Banshan had been known as the best in couplets, but he had failed to pass the imperial examinations for many years, which was his biggest humiliation. Lin Wanrong's question had hit him right where it hurt. Through gritted teeth, he replied, "Indeed."

Lin Wanrong walked over to Hou Yuebai, gently pressed him down into his seat, and smiled at Shen Banshan, "Excellent. Since Mr. Shen is the leader of the Seven Northern Provinces Literary Alliance, I will represent the Eight Southern Provinces Literary Society Xiao Family Gardener Division, and respond to your couplet, 'A novice acting as a scholar.'"

"Bravo!" Guo Wuchang was the first to stand up and applaud. The rest of the hall soon erupted in applause. "Before you're old, you're dreaming of being an elder. A novice acting as a scholar." It was truly a marvelous retort. Even Hou Yuebai's face showed excitement. This time, Lin Wanrong had clearly redeemed his honor.

Eldest Miss was surprised and delighted at the mention of the Eight Southern Provinces Literary Society and Xiao Family Gardener Division, even if it was a fabrication. She joined the others in applause.

Shen Banshan had suffered a great loss in his carelessness. Seeing Lin Wanrong's playful smile, he snorted and said, "Even a mere servant wants to engage in couplets. I have a word of advice for you, 'The idle is free to enter; the wise should refrain.'"

Lin Wanrong, the scoundrel, chuckled twice at Shen Banshan's insult and said, "Mr. Shen, your distinguished presence here at the old lady's birthday celebration is indeed noteworthy. It's just as the saying goes, 'The righteous have yet to come; the thief is already here.'"

"Hold on, you misunderstood my couplet," Shen Banshan protested. He took up his brush and wrote on the paper, "The wise should refrain; the idle is free to enter." Although he had reversed the order of the wise and the idle, he was still subtly insulting Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "And you, Mr. Shen, misunderstood my couplet." He took a pencil from his pocket and swiftly wrote, "The thief is already here; the righteous have yet to come"

The two couplets, with their words reversed, became authentic insult stickers. They were seamlessly fitting, and laughter broke out in the hall, accompanied by thunderous applause. Luo Yuan and Guo Wuchang cried out together, "Brother Lin, well done!"

Seeing the so-called king of couplets turn livid, Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Brother Shen, it's just a game of couplets. It's just for fun. Why so serious? How about tonight, I'll treat you to some fun at Qinhuai River. We can visit some courtesans, sing some risqu songs. That's way more fun than this."

Under the public gaze, he spoke lewdly, clearly insulting the scholar. Shen Banshan angrily retorted, "Ignorant boy, unfamiliar with the three dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou."

Lin Wanrong, laughing, replied, "Handsome scholar, only reads the four categories of classical poetry."

Shen Banshan saw that Lin Wanrong did have some skills. Gradually calming down, he pointed at a withered tree in the courtyard and said, "Inside the Governor's mansion, this ancient tree is quite beautiful. Here's my couplet: A thousand-year-old tree used as a coat rack." By alluding to using the Governor's ancient tree as a coat rack, he was subtly belittling Luo Min.

Damn it, Old Luo may be a bit crafty, a bit cunning, but he has done a lot for the people. He is a good official, much better than your dog-fart young prince, Lin Wanrong snorted and replied, "A thousand-year-old tree used as a coat rack, Mr. Shen, you truly are talented. The south is filled with

rivers and lakes, all along the Yangtze River. Here is my reply to your couplet: The vast Yangtze River used as a bathtub."

This couplet helped regain face for Luo Min. The old fox laughed without commenting.

Shen Banshan looked around, seeing red walls and green tiles of the Luo mansion, and the scholars of the south seated in the courtyard. He said, "A pomegranate split open, many sour seeds inside the red gate."

"Biting into a ginkgo, a big heart inside the white robe," Lin Wanrong chuckled, which subtly agreed with Shen Banshan's white robe and trousers.

The crowd burst into wild applause again. This time, even Luo Min couldn't help but turn his back to hide his laughter. Luo Ning was smiling as she watched Lin Wanrong, a faint blush on her face.

Shen Banshan realized Lin Wanrong was indeed shrewd and intelligent. He couldn't afford to underestimate him anymore. As he paced back and forth, a pond outside the door caught his eye, with little ducks swimming. He said, "Seven ducks on a pond, count three pairs and one."

Lin Wanrong pondered a moment, noticing one duck holding a small fish in its beak. Suddenly inspired, he replied, "A foot-long fish jumps out of the water, measure nine inches and ten points."

Shen Banshan sighed, saluting, "Little brother, your literary talent is admirable. I, Shen Banshan, admit defeat. In today's couplet contest, I have lost." This Shen Banshan had talent and some scholarly dignity. He lost, but he lost graciously.

The scholars of the south erupted in cheers. This Lin San was truly miraculous. With his own wit and talent, he had single-handedly defeated Shen Banshan, the king of couplets from the Seven Northern Provinces Literary Society.

The Eldest Miss bit her lower lip, her face full of smiles, as radiant as the blooming flowers in May. Luo Ning, covering her mouth, whispered to Luo Yuan, "Little brother, go and ask Brother Lin where he learned all these couplets. I can't believe he was able to match them all." She couldn't finish her sentence before she burst into sweet laughter.

Shen Banshan's brows darkened, and he nodded, "Little brother, your talent is heaven-sent. I, Shen Banshan, am wholly convinced by my defeat. I ask for your name, so that I may remember it in my heart."

Lin Wanrong was soaked in cold sweat. Damn it, this is too miraculous, he thought, Did the spirits of Li Bai and Du Fu possess me at this moment? Or did I take some sort of performance enhancer? How did I defeat this 'King of Couplets'? Damn, I'm too talented.

With a casual toss of his head, he straightened his servant's cap, and chuckled, "I dare not. I'm just a humble servant of the Xiao family in Jinling, known as Lin San. Brother Shen, my earlier words still stand. Tonight, we will enjoy ourselves by the Qinhuai River; eating, drinking, and entertaining ourselves to our hearts' content, and it's all on me."

Shen Banshan shook his head with a wry smile and returned to Zhao Kangning's side. The Young Prince stood up, clapping and laughing, "Splendid! Truly splendid! An outstanding entrance, and even more outstanding couplets. I didn't expect such a talent from the Xiao family of Jinling. Lin San, I must re-evaluate my impression of you."

#### Chapter 193 Immortal Master Lin San (Part 1)

Damn it, I'm well aware of your antics, don't play your tricks in front of me. So, you want to show off, huh? I can play the game better than you. Lin Wanrong muttered under his breath, though his face feigned confusion. He looked at Zhao Kangning, feigning puzzlement, and said, "Oh, is the Young Prince speaking to me? Could it be that the Young Prince recognized me from before? This, this is indeed an honor."

Zhao Kangning chuckled, "Even if we were strangers before, I'm afraid no one is ignorant of you today. Lin San, your column couplet skills are indeed extraordinary. If you have leisure time in the future, I'd like to have a good chat with you."

"Thank you for your kindness, Young Prince," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "But you are a Young Prince, the Emperor's grandson, the essence of our nation, dealing with a myriad of affairs every day, truly tireless. I, Lin San, am merely a commoner. How dare I strike up a conversation with you?"

Zhao Kangning naturally didn't catch the sarcasm in his words. He simply nodded, waved his hand, and his attendant promptly brought forth a painting. Zhao Kangning received it and said with a smile, "Governor Luo, I admit defeat in today's couplet competition. This is 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow,' a painting I obtained from Mr. Wenchang years ago. Let's take this as a prize and give it to you."

Luo Min quickly declined, "I can't accept it. The couplet contest was between Lin San and Mr. Shen, unrelated to me. How could I accept such a reward without contributing?"

Zhao Kangning nodded and chuckled, "I gave my word, and I must honor it. Lin San, I'll give 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow' to you instead."

Lin Wanrong, eager for the opportunity to profit, accepted the painting, saying jovially, "Thank you, Young Prince, for this excellent painting. However, being a crude man, I can hardly appreciate such fine art. It would be impolite to hoard your generous gift. So, how about this: today is the old lady's birthday. I'll 'borrow flowers to present to Buddha,' giving 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow' as a birthday gift to the birthday lady."

A gasp echoed from the crowd. Lin San's maneuver was impressive; how could a mere servant receive a gift from the young prince? But by quickly giving it to the old lady, he pleased both parties, satisfying everyone involved.

The old lady, being a connoisseur herself, chuckled and said, "Oh, Brother Lin, you are too courteous. How could I accept this?"

Lin San replied seriously, "Honorable birthday lady, this is your due. Today, my match with Brother Shen was not only for entertainment but also to celebrate your birthday. Your blessings are as immense as the sky. Offering a beautiful painting to you, the birthday star, is the right thing to do."

Luo Ning smiled sweetly and added, "Grandma, this is Brother Lin's heartfelt gift. Please accept it."

The old lady was overjoyed, unable to contain her smile. "Well, since you insist, I won't stand on ceremony."

She had someone take the painting. The hall immediately buzzed with excitement. Today, Young Prince Ning brought his entourage to celebrate her birthday, and Lin San defeated the couplet king Shen Banshan. The talented men from the South were genuinely pleased.

As the guests had a few cups of water wine, and seeing their high spirits, Zhao Kangning said, "With such lively festivities today, I'd like to join the fun. I've brought a few entertainers with me. Why not let them perform some tricks to liven up the atmosphere? What do you think, Governor Luo?"

Seeing that Zhao Kangning wasn't proposing a challenge, Luo Min felt relieved and smiled, saying, "Your Highness is very polite. I'm much obliged."

With a wave of Zhao Kangning's hand, several street performers appeared, setting up their acts in the courtyard. There were rope jumpers and tightrope walkers. Cheers and applause filled the air, and the place was instantly abuzz with activity. The old lady was naturally delighted by the spectacle, and even Luo Ning found it fascinating.

From the sidelines, Lin Wanrong nodded to himself. It was clear that Zhao Kangning had come prepared. Not only had he brought the couplet king Shen Banshan, but he also arranged for quite a few street performers. His intentions to curry favor with Luo Min were plainly apparent. Lin Wanrong wondered what Luo Min thought of all this.

Seeing that everyone was engrossed in the spectacle, Zhao Kangning felt satisfied. He waved his hand again, and the performers retreated. In their place, a Daoist priest, an image of immortal refinement with white beard fluttering, entered the courtyard. He greeted the old lady, saying, "I am Xuan Xuanzi from Songyun Temple, here to wish you a happy and long life."

The old lady quickly smiled and said, "Please, honorable Daoist priest, you mustn't bow."

Zhao Kangning stood and introduced him, "Old Madam, this is Daoist Xuan Xuanzi, renowned for his spiritual power. I invited him to perform a ritual blessing for your birthday."

Xuan Xuanzi, his hair and beard all white, had the air of a true Daoist immortal. Lin Wanrong thought to himself, Damn, just by dyeing your hair and beard white, you can pass as a Daoist priest? Damn, this incense money is really easy to earn.

The old lady, being a devout believer, was thrilled to see such a dignified priest blessing her longevity. She quickly offered him some ritual cakes and blessings. Xuan Xuanzi said, "On the grand occasion of your birthday, I have nothing to offer. So, I will perform a ritual, and thereby establish a good relationship with everyone here."

He asked for a bowl of clear water and three wooden chopsticks of equal length. He dabbed some water on the chopstick tips and between the chopsticks. He then stood the chopsticks together and smiled, saying, "Please, everyone, watch closely."

In the attentive gaze of the crowd, he slowly inserted the chopsticks into the water-filled bowl.



The chopsticks were somewhat skewed. Xuan Xuanzi walked around the bowl several times quickly, muttering incantations, "Supreme Elder, Three Pure Ones, swift like the wish-granting command, stand-"

Strangely enough, the three chopsticks stood upright together in the bowl.

The sight of chopsticks standing upright in water was considered an auspicious omen. A murmur rippled through the hall. This Xuan Xuanzi was truly a magical priest with extraordinary powers.

The old lady excitedly said, "Honorable priest, please have a seat. Someone, quickly bring incense for the priest."

With a stroke of his long beard and a smile on his face, Xuan Xuanzi looked like an enlightened immortal.

Lin Wanrong chuckled. Damn, this 'priest' is even better at pretending than me. What kind of bullshit mystical abilities and divine skills are these? Could you please show us something more advanced? I stopped playing this 'chopsticks standing in water' trick when I was ten.

The Eldest Miss noticed his lack of respect for the priest and whispered to him, "What are you laughing at? Be careful, or the priest might punish you."

Ah, this is how feudal superstition was bred immortal master, what a laughable title! If he could claim such a title, then I might as well declare myself as the Supreme Venerable Lord Lao. Lin Wanrong chuckled until his belly hurt, yet out of his respect for the codes of the jianghu, he didn't expose the charade.

Zhao Kangning was smiling when he suddenly noticed the disdainful look on Lin Wanrong's face. He couldn't help but snort softly, and then smiled, Lin San, do you have any objections to the immortal master's methods?

To be frank, Lin Wanrong's tricks were just as cunning as placing a chopstick upright in a bowl of water both were tricks of the trade. He and the so-called Xuan Xuanzi were both making a living out of these arts; traveling the jianghu, not revealing others' flaws that was a matter of principle.

"Well, very good, very good," Lin Wanrong said with a laugh, yet his face betrayed no respect. All were in the same line of work, as long as no one was exposed, no one could fool another.

Seeing Lin San in his green clothes and small hat, Xuan Xuanzi realized he was merely a servant. He slightly shook his duster and said, Ignorant boy, how dare you disrespect the Three Purities, my Daoist deities.

Luo Ning, noticing the animosity from the immortal master towards Lin Wanrong, hurriedly approached him and said, Big brother Lin, this immortal master might possess some magical powers. Don't offend him carelessly, be careful he might cast a spell on you.

Hmm, this girl isn't too bad, she's worth the care I've given her, Lin thought. He chuckled, "No worries, he is Immortal Master Xuan Xuanzi, and I am Immortal Master Lin San the two of us worship in the same temple, we won't be in each other's way."

Luo Ning covered her lips and giggled, "Brother Lin, I can't tell which of your words are true, and which are false."

The Eldest Miss overheard their conversation and gave a small cough, "Lin San, the Young Prince is watching you."

Luo Ning was startled and looked up, indeed the Young Prince, Zhao Kangning, was watching them with a smile.

Zhao Kangning signalled Xuan Xuanzi with his eyes. Xuan Xuanzi stared at Lin Wanrong and said, Young benefactor, could it be that you harbor some doubts about the Three Purities? I would advise you, with your current cultivation level, it is better to doubt yourself than doubt the Daoist deities.

Lin Wanrong raised his eyebrows, Damn, I was being considerate of you, and your master instigated you to provoke me? He snorted, then whispered something to Luo Ning.

Luo Ning asked with confusion, "Brother Lin, what do you need brine for?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Nothing much, I just want to play the part of an immortal. Ask Luo Yuan to find a tofu shop and prepare some brine. As for the rest, you'll know soon."

Luo Ning left with lingering doubts, while Lin Wanrong glanced at Xuan Xuanzi and chuckled, "Is the immortal master addressing me?"

Xuan Xuanzi gave his duster a slight shake and said, "Indeed."

Lin Wanrong shook his head. Why bother? He originally intended to avoid Xuan Xuanzi, but this fake immortal master, encouraged by the young prince, deliberately sought him out to provoke trouble. Lin Wanrong took a step forward and said, "I am a humble servant who holds the utmost reverence for the Three Purities. And of course, I am also full of admiration for you, Daoist Master."

Immortal Master Xuan Xuanzi's face showed a self-satisfied grin, his right hand habitually stroking his long beard. Then Lin Wanrong continued, Immortal Master, is the trick of the standing chopstick in the water a result of your magical powers?

Xuan Xuanzi nodded and said, "I have been practicing diligently since childhood, over sixty years now. Only through multiple divine instructions from the Supreme Venerable Lord Lao in my dreams, was I able to attain such minimal power. I'm ashamed, truly ashamed."

He's a sham, and I despise him. Lin Wanrong initially wanted to let him off, but the old man directly initiated conflict under Zhao Kangning's instigation. He had no choice but to reveal some of his real skills.

"Having attained such power after more than sixty years of practice, the Immortal Master is indeed formidable!" Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up with a laugh.

The old Daoist smiled complacently, but then heard the servant say, "I've been practicing diligently for the duration of a tea ceremony. Today, I take the liberty of trying this magical trick of standing a chopstick in the water."

Upon hearing Lin Wanrong's words, everyone in the hall was shocked. They had all just witnessed the immortal master's magic firsthand—wasn't this Lin San courting his own doom? The Eldest Miss looked anxious, stamping her foot lightly, thinking, You're so rash.

Xuan Xuanzi's expression changed upon hearing this. Lin Wanrong chuckled and picked up three clean square-headed wooden chopsticks, nodding to the crowd and saying, "Please watch closely."

Chapter 194 Immortal Master Lin San (Part 2)

Lin Wanrong, imitating the style of Xuan Xuanzi, dipped the square ends and bodies of three wooden chopsticks in water. The chopsticks, of equal length, were combined and slowly inserted into a water cup.

As he watched the chopsticks sway gently, a taut sensation gripped Lin Wanrong's heart. "I haven't practiced this for several days," he thought, "and I feel a bit rusty."

Chuckling to himself, he imitated the fake immortal master's behavior, circling the cup while chanting, "The Buddha, the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the great compassion mantra, please show your divine power!" With a slight slant, the chopsticks swiftly stabilized, standing straight up in the water.

The sight left the onlookers dumbstruck. When Xuan Xuanzi, the Immortal Master, performed this miracle, it was a result of sixty years of arduous cultivation. But how could Lin San, at such a young age, possess such a skill? Could he also be an immortal master?

Luo Ning and the Eldest Miss both covered their mouths in disbelief, unable to trust their eyes. Old Lady Luo, in a state of delighted surprise, exclaimed, "Little Brother Lin, where did you learn this magic? It is exactly like the old Immortal's."

Her words were a slap in Xuan Xuanzi's face. His expression oscillated between shades of red and white, and he snorted dismissively, "Just a parrot imitating human speech."

Lin Wanrong was about to take his leave upon achieving his goal, but upon hearing this, he couldn't help but shake his head. "This Western Immortal is stubbornly unconvinced." Smiling coldly, he retorted, "Immortal Master, I haven't learned any magic, I just took a shortcut. I wonder if this small trick can enter your esteemed eyes?"

The room was filled with chatter, strange things happened every year, but this year seemed particularly abundant. It was beyond belief that a mere servant of the Xiao family could perform magic.

Xuan Xuanzi's complexion paled, he remained silent. Lin Wanrong smiled, "Immortal Master, I have learned your magic. But I have a small trick of my own. I wonder if you can learn it?"

Xuan Xuanzi didn't dare to respond. Glancing at Zhao Kangning, the Young Prince's face was emotionless. With an almost imperceptible nod, Xuan Xuanzi had no other option but to grit his teeth and accept, "Go ahead and use it then."

Lin Wanrong saw their gestures and sneered inwardly, Damn it, they're trying to gang up on me. This damn little prince is truly a cunning man.

Just then, Luo Yuan rushed in from outside, nodding at Lin Wanrong. Feeling reassured, Lin Wanrong smiled at the old Daoist, "The trick I'm going to perform today is called 'Burning Cotton Thread.'"

As he was speaking, Luo Yuan handed him a piece of cotton thread. Lin Wanrong touched it, it seemed freshly dried. Nodding at Luo Yuan, he waved the cotton thread around, announcing, "Everyone, what I have in my hand is a regular cotton thread. May the Young Prince and the Daoist check it."

Zhao Kangning and Xuan Xuanzi both felt the cotton thread, it was slightly warm and damp, but nothing else seemed unusual. Both nodded. Lin Wanrong took back the cotton thread and grinned, addressing Old Lady Luo, "Old Birthday Star, could you please give me a copper coin?"

The old lady handed him a copper coin. Lin Wanrong threaded the cotton through the hole in the coin, tying it to a metal frame. The coin slid to the middle of the thread.

Lin Wanrong nodded, handing a candleholder to old Lady Luo, saying, "Today is the birthday of the Old Birthday Star, please grant us some fire."

The old lady laughed, "Little Brother Lin, are you asking for fire to burn this cotton thread?"

"Exactly," Lin Wanrong replied.

Luo Ning smiled as she glanced at Lin Wanrong, then assisted her grandmother over to the metal frame, holding up the candleholder, she lit both ends of the cotton thread.

Something peculiar happened. Even though both ends of the cotton thread were lit and were burning until they were charred black, they refused to break. The copper coin remained steady in the middle of the cotton thread, unmoving.

The people in the hall were greatly astonished. If the trick with the chopsticks in the water could be understood by some clever minds, this burning cotton thread was inexplicable. The old lady expressed her surprise, "Little Brother Lin, could you really be an immortal master?"

Immortal Master Lin San? Heh, you flatter me, old lady. My goal is to become a con artist. Lin Wanrong grinned without a word, cryptically saying, "I'll explain it to everyone later. Immortal Master Xuan Xuanzi, would you like to give this a try?"

Before he could finish speaking, Luo Yuan and Guo Wuchang, holding two bundles of cotton thread, walked up to Xuan Xuanzi, smiling. Damn, these two kids, they love to stir up trouble, Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself.

Xuan Xuanzi knew that Lin San had played a trick, but he couldn't guess what it was. He looked at the cotton thread before him, moved his fingers a few times, wanted to take the thread, but finally refrained, saying, "I've never learned this immortality."

"Immortality? Where did this come from?" Lin Wanrong laughed out loud, "Look at me, do I look like someone who has learned immortality?"

Seeing his green outfit and little hat, everyone saw him as nothing more than a lowly servant, definitely not resembling someone who could perform immortality, and they all burst into laughter.

By this point, everyone in the hall understood. If even Lin San could do it, it was certainly not immortality, but a sleight of hand trick from a street performer. However, everyone was still clueless about how the trick with the burning cotton thread was done.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "There's no such thing as immortality in this world, it's all just simple principles. Take this burning cotton thread, for instance, the principle is worth less than a penny. Everyone knows brine, right? The kind used for making tofu. This brine contains certain special substances. Soak the cotton thread in it for a while, then dry it over a fire, and the special substances from the brine will adhere to the thread. When you tie a coin with this thread and set it on fire, it seems like it's burning, but in fact, only the surface of the thread is burning. The interior is protected by these special substances, cutting off the air, so it doesn't burn off. If you don't believe me, you can try it for yourself when you get home."

Most of the people in the hall were sons of officials from various places, very few of whom had ever made tofu, and some didn't even know what brine was. They only understood after this explanation.

Luo Ning let out a long "oh," so it turned out that when Brother Lin sent Luo Yuan to the neighboring tofu shop to find brine, it was for this purpose. Luckily, Luo Yuan had dried the cotton thread, or else it wouldn't have lit up, and he wouldn't have been able to fool the Young Prince and the fake Daoist. Luo Ning saw him blowing his own trumpet, couldn't help but giggle.

"As for standing a chopstick upright in water, it's even simpler, using only the viscosity and buoyancy of the water. It's all a matter of practice," Lin Wanrong explained the principles behind the two tricks to the crowd. It was then that they finally understood. Had it not been for this contemptible so-called immortal master's repeated provocations, Lin Wanrong wouldn't have chosen to be the vanguard in debunking feudal superstitions. After all, street performers depended on such tricks for their livelihood.

Even though Prince Zhao Kangning was known for his self-restraint, he was visibly embarrassed at having mistaken a street performer for an immortal master. His face fell as he turned to Xuan Xuanzi and demanded, "How do you explain this?"

Xuan Xuanzi, who no longer held the air of an immortal master, fell to his knees in fear, pleading, "Forgive me, Your Highness, I beg for mercy..."

Zhao Kangning's face turned pale as he ordered, "Ignorant rat! You dared deceive me! Take him away..."

"Hold on, hold on..." Lin Wanrong hastily intervened, bowing respectfully and saying with a smile, "Your Highness, today is the old lady's birthday, and this Daoist priest came to bring her good luck and cheer. Just like the earlier horse and tightrope performances, it was all for entertainment. Please do not take offense."

I wouldn't have bothered with this if it weren't for the old lady's birthday and the rule against bloodshed. I would've dealt with him straight away. Putting on a show in front of me, he must be tired of living.

Luo Ning, not wishing to see the Young Prince embarrassed, quickly followed Lin Wanrong's lead and said, "Lin San is right, the old Daoist came to wish my grandmother a happy birthday. I beseech you, Your Highness, to spare him for my grandmother's sake."

Zhao Kangning took the way out they provided, "So be it, I won't be unreasonable. Xuan Xuanzi, never again use these petty tricks to deceive people, or I won't let you off lightly. Now get out!"

Xuan Xuanzi scurried away as laughter filled the hall. The celebration at the Luo residence was indeed worthwhile, not only had they witnessed an exciting battle of couplets, but also two intriguing performances.

Zhao Kangning forced a smile despite his embarrassment at losing twice in a row. He exchanged a few words, then took his leave. The birthday feast lasted until evening, wrapping up with a lively conclusion.

As Lin Wanrong was about to leave, his mind filled with concerns about Zhao Kangning's connections with the White Lotus cult, a clear voice called out, "Brother Lin..."

He looked up to find Luo Ning approaching. She smiled softly at him and asked, "Brother Lin, are you worried that the Young Prince will hold a grudge against you?"

Lin Wanrong laughed it off. Hold a grudge? He and I have never been on good terms. He was behind my abduction by the White Lotus cult. I've offended him countless times; one more time today won't matter.

"Yeah, I'm really scared. After all, he's royalty," Lin Wanrong said with a laugh.

Luo Ning gritted her teeth, "Brother Lin, don't be scared. Although the Young Prince is tyrannical, there are plenty of people who can keep him in check. Even my father may not necessarily fear him."

Lin Wanrong chuckled but didn't respond. Suddenly, Luo Ning softly said, "Brother Lin, thank you for the gift you sent today, I really like it."

"Gift? What gift? When did I give you a gift?" Lin Wanrong asked, surprised.

"The painting, 'Returning Home in Wind and Snow', has already been gifted to me by my grandmother," Luo Ning declared, then raised an object in her hand, smiling, "And this too..."

The brilliant object she held was the diamond that Lin Wanrong had given to the birthday celebrant. Oh no, I gave that to the old lady, not to you, he thought. Luo Ning seemed to read his mind and



cheekily smiled, "You gifted it to my grandmother, and she passed it on to me. I consider it as a gift from you."

This line of reasoning is a bit far-fetched, Lin Wanrong thought, shaking his head with a wry smile. Well, let's say it's my gift to you then. I just hope it won't attract any thieves.

"Brother Lin, can you tell me where you learned these tricks?" Luo Ning asked, her curiosity piqued by the strange events that had transpired.

"Well, when I was young, I read an odd book called 'A Hundred Thousand Whys', filled with interesting stories," Lin Wanrong made up on the spot.

"'A Hundred Thousand Whys'?" Luo Ning frowned, "Who wrote this? How come I've never heard of it? Brother Lin, you've read so much."

Seeing Luo Ning's thirst for knowledge, Lin Wanrong felt a bit overwhelmed and was just about to make his escape when Guo Wuchang hurried over, calling out, "Lin San, come outside quickly. My cousin wants to consult you on a matter."

## Chapter 195 Tears

"Consult matters with me?" Lin Wanrong was surprised. "This must be something important. Miss Luo, let's chat another day. Now I must attend to important matters with Miss Xiao."

Luo Ning managed to suppress her laughter. "Brother Lin, you go ahead and attend to your business. But, if you have some free time in the future, could you explain to me that 'A Hundred Thousand Whys'?"

"Of course, I will definitely make time to teach you." Lin Wanrong said carelessly. Luo Ning covered her mouth to laugh, saying no more, simply watching him and Guo Wuchang depart.

"How strange, Miss Luo seems to have changed a bit." Guo Wuchang muttered after taking a few steps, seemingly talking to himself.

"Changed how?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

Guo Wuchang shook his head, "I don't know, just a hunch."

Rubbish, how well do you know her to get such a hunch! Lin Wanrong chuckled and said no more.

The Eldest Miss had already seated herself in the small sedan, waiting for them. Seeing them approach, she said nothing, just quietly ordered, "Lift the sedan." The soft sedan began to sway gently as it moved into the distance.

Lin Wanrong mounted his black horse and followed the sedan, feeling puzzled. Weren't they supposed to discuss important matters? Why had the Eldest Miss walked away without a word? He patted Guo Wuchang and asked, "Young master, didn't the Eldest Miss say she had something important to discuss with me?"

Guo Wuchang seemed stunned for a moment. "Yes, earlier, when she saw you talking with Miss Luo, she sent me to find you, saying there was important business to discuss. She didn't mention what it was about, I thought you would know. Why don't you ask her?"

I don't know shit! The Eldest Miss seemed a bit off today, I wonder if it's that time of the month. Women are unreasonable during this period, I'd better keep my distance. If she really has something important to discuss, she'll tell me.

Thus, the three of them became silent, and they kept moving forward.

After a while, a voice emerged from the sedan, "Cousin..." Guo Wuchang promptly responded.

The Eldest Miss said, "You go ahead, when you return, inform my mother that I'm feeling a bit fatigued today. Regarding the takeover of the Tao family's storefront, just let the stewards handle it. No need to report everything to me."

Oh, it was rare to see the Eldest Miss willingly let go of work. Her mood indeed didn't seem to be the best today.

Guo Wuchang was very obedient. After receiving the order, he sped away on his horse, showing more enthusiasm than he had for the Miaoyu Pavilion.

As Xiao Yuruo gave the orders, the sedan had already stopped by the roadside, right next to Xuanwu Lake. The dusk was growing darker, and the sound of gentle waves lapping against the shoreline echoed in the chilly wind. Several pleasure boats had lit red lanterns in the distance, the lights twinkling like dim stars in the clear night sky. In the dim light of the impending darkness, everything appeared blurred and gloomy. The Eldest Miss stood by the lake, staring at the water, without uttering a word.

Seeing Xiao Yuruo not moving, Lin Wanrong had to dismount from his horse. The atmosphere was a bit tense for a moment. Not knowing what the Eldest Miss was thinking, he said awkwardly, "Eldest Miss, earlier I heard from Young Master Guo that you had something to discuss with me. May I ask what the important matter is?"

The Eldest Miss didn't turn her head, her voice soft and distant. "Is that so? Seeing you and Miss Luo having such a pleasant conversation earlier, I didn't want to disturb your joyous gathering. One thing led to another and I've forgotten what the matter was."

Lin Wanrong felt dizzy, Damn, what an excuse, as if you could forget. The Eldest Miss asked again, "Lin San, how long have you known Miss Luo, and how did you meet?"

Sweat, are you doing a background check? Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Eldest Miss, don't misunderstand. My relationship with Miss Luo is purely platonic, nothing happened between us. As the saying goes, 'the friendship of a gentleman is as light as water', and mine with her is even more so." He spat out internally, When the hell did I become a gentleman? This occupation is too noble, it doesn't suit me.

Xiao Yuruo was accustomed to his bluffing, taking his words with a grain of salt. She glanced at him and said lightly, "I just asked how you met her, I didn't ask you to talk about being a gentleman or not. Besides, if you were a gentleman, then the Tao family would be sages."

That's right, I've never been a gentleman, Lin Wanrong didn't take offense, he laughed, "My acquaintance with Miss Luo was very ordinary. We met at Qiaoqiao's place, nothing special." He picked out some significant events to tell her. He was known for his knack of avoiding sensitive topics. Anything that hinted at ambiguity with Luo Ning was circumvented, only the conflicts were mentioned.

After hearing him, the Eldest Miss sighed, "On the riverbank, in front of so many people, and Miss Luo, known as a talented woman in Jinling, you don't hold back your words." Although she said this, the expression on her face seemed much better.

"Eldest Miss, as you know, I'm always impartial, straightforward, and honest. I speak as I should. If that talented Miss Luo cannot accept my criticism, she can't be considered a true friend." Lin Wanrong said righteously. The words he uttered made even himself believe a little. There was no tax on bragging, so why not?

The Eldest Miss snorted, "You treat Miss Luo so rudely, yet I see that she treats you very well, considering you in everything, even in the matter of offending the Young Prince. What kind of trick did you use?"

Those words were spoken previously by Luo Ning to him, with the Eldest Miss sitting right there, there was no denying it. He didn't even think of denying it, he innocently replied, "That's why I say, someone like Miss Luo is a real friend, sharing weal and woe, never leaving or forsaking..."

A light "plop" interrupted his words, the Eldest Miss had kicked a stone into the river.

Seeing the Eldest Miss looking upset, Lin Wanrong thought that this young lady cared a lot about Yushuang. He laughed and said, "Eldest Miss, rest assured, I'm sincere to Yushuang. As for Miss Luo, she is high and mighty, there has never been a spark between us"

"What do you mean by 'spark'?" the Eldest Miss asked confusedly.

"Oh, a 'spark', to put it simply, is like, for instance, the way you and I look at each other, with deep affection, that's called a 'spark'"

Lin Wanrong was busy explaining the 'spark,' when he heard the Eldest Miss let out a light spit, her face flushed to the ears. She murmured, "What nonsense are you talking about? Who has a 'spark' with you?"

Sweating, Lin Wanrong saw the Eldest Miss blushing uncontrollably, he hurriedly said, "Don't misunderstand, Eldest Miss, it's just an analogy. It's true that there's no 'spark' between Miss Luo and me. Moreover, she has personally told me that she already has someone she likes. Although I am generally affectionate, I haven't developed to the point of promiscuity yet. I would never intrude as a third party, you can be at ease, Eldest Miss."

The Eldest Miss found his words strange, but she could understand his central idea: there was nothing going on between him and Miss Luo. After a moment's thought, Xiao Yuruo said, "Then you must promise that you will not be involved with Miss Luo in any romantic way"

Damn, she wanted more. Even though you are Yushuang's elder sister, you can't just accuse me of this, demanding a promise. Why should I make a promise to you? Lin Wanrong shook his head and said seriously, "Eldest Miss, I think you have misunderstood. The reason I'm telling you about Miss Luo is just to state a fact, not to explain anything, and there's no need for any explanation. To ask me to promise about something that doesn't exist is absurd. You're being too suspicious. Even Yushuang wouldn't talk like this."

The Eldest Miss was both embarrassed and angry, tears spinning in her eyes. "You, you, you bad man" She couldn't continue, her shoulders shaking violently, tears rolling down her beautiful cheeks.

Lin Wanrong was usually slightly put off by her arrogance, but seeing her crying so hard now, her voice choked with sobs, she looked like she had been bullied terribly. She didn't have the strong, proud demeanor of her usual self. The Eldest Miss crying, her tears flowing, was as charming and touching as pear blossoms in the rain or begonias covered in dew.

Damn, even crying, she could be so pitifully beautiful, isn't this trying to steal my soul? Damn it, I'm not a saint, Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat, he quickly turned his head away to avoid looking at her.

Seeing that he didn't even want to glance at her, the Eldest Miss felt even more sorrowful, her crying intensifying. She sobbed, "You're a mean person, you only know how to say harsh words to me. Does talking to you harm you in any way? You heartless, wicked man."

Although the Eldest Miss had a peculiar temperament, she would never harm herself, this much Lin Wanrong was sure of. She was just too stubborn and often insisted on her point of view.

The Eldest Miss continued sobbing, "At today's banquet, who was worried for you when you made the Young Prince look bad? Wasn't it me? My Xiao family cares the most for you, you heartless, thoroughly wicked man."

The title was too long and didn't sound right. Lin Wanrong had never seen the Eldest Miss cry so intensely before. Compared to her usually fierce and strong demeanor, she was infinitely more gentle now. If he could see her crying like this every day, looking so womanly, that might not be a bad thing. This sudden thought startled him. He chastised himself, My apologies, Eldest Miss. I didn't mean to wish you to cry every day.

Seeing him silent, the Eldest Miss felt increasingly wronged and choked up, "The Young Prince merely oppressed you a few times, and you could have simply avoided him. Why did you have to provoke him? You're normally so clever, where did all your smarts go this time? Did you use them all up on deceiving Luo Ning?"

Sweating, Lin Wanrong found the first part of her words touching, but the latter part was amusing. The Eldest Miss didn't know about the relationship between Zhao Kangning and the White Lotus cult, and she thought that if the Xiao family didn't provoke him, he wouldn't trouble the Xiao family.

Poor Eldest Miss, how could you know about the danger we're in? We've long provoked him. He's been deliberately targeting us. Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile. Ever since the White Lotus incident, whether it was the Xiao family or himself, they were all in the same boat and nobody could escape.

Suddenly, Lin Wanrong said solemnly, "Eldest Miss, stop crying. I need to discuss something serious with you."

The Eldest Miss blinked in surprise, softly asking, "What serious matter?" But as soon as she spoke, she realized she'd admitted defeat. Two spots of red appeared on her face as she wiped away her tears and snorted, turning her head away from him.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "Eldest Miss, this matter is crucial. Besides you and me, we cannot mention it to anyone else. Can you do that?"

Seeing his unusually solemn expression, the Eldest Miss knew that this must be very important. After spending so much time with Lin Wanrong, quarreling and laughing, she knew him well. He was always joking around with trivial matters, but when it came to serious matters, he was always meticulous and never careless. If he said it was important, then it indeed was.

"If you want to say it, just say it. Who can stop you from talking?" the Eldest Miss grunted, her face flushing in embarrassment. She couldn't believe that she had just been sobbing so openly in front of him.

"Eldest Miss, you saw it today. It wasn't me who provoked the Young Prince; it was the Young Prince who targeted us," Lin Wanrong said in a deep voice, "Do you know why?"

Seeing the Eldest Miss shake her head, Lin Wanrong continued, "Do you remember what happened during those few days when we were abducted by the White Lotus cult?"

The Eldest Miss glanced at him, "Of course I remember. I'll never forget it in my lifetime. It was Tao Dongcheng colluding with the White Lotus cult, planning to swallow up my family's wealth."

"Eldest Miss, it wasn't that simple," Lin Wanrong said with a bitter smile, "Have you ever wondered why, after they had kidnapped you, they also seized me? And do you know what happened to me while you were held captive?"

Why the White Lotus cult had kidnapped Lin Wanrong had always been a mystery to the Eldest Miss. She always thought that even Lin Wanrong himself didn't know, but it turned out he knew much more than she did.

Lin Wanrong detailed the events he'd encountered during those few days to the Eldest Miss. The more she listened, the more her heart quivered with shock, having long forgotten their previous argument. She exclaimed in astonishment, "Lin San, they took you away that day for the perfume formula you held? Did you suffer a lot then? Did they torture you?"

It seemed the Eldest Miss still retained some conscience as a capitalist. Seeing her tear-streaked face and her persistent and serious expression, which presented a unique charm, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but feel a stir in his heart. He chuckled, "Yes, they beat me mercilessly. Had I not been thinking of the Eldest Miss's unparalleled beauty, I might have confessed."

The Eldest Miss shot him a glance, saying, "You, always speaking such nonsense when others are worried about you." After a moment of silence, she suddenly looked at him and sighed, "Don't do such foolish things in the future. If they want the formula, just give it to them. At most, we won't make money, but as long as we're alive, that's more important than anything else."

Her words warmed his heart. Lin Wanrong nodded and smiled, thinking that giving away the formula would be equivalent to giving away his life, and only a fool would do that.

"You know what happened next. Qingxuan appeared just in time and saved us," Lin Wanrong said, giving all the credit to Xiao Qingxuan, as it was inconvenient to mention Qin Xian'er.

After some thought, the Eldest Miss finally said, "Lin San, are you suspecting the Young Prince..."

"It's not a suspicion, but a certainty. This Young Prince Ning, he's the puppet master hiding behind Tao Dongcheng," Lin Wanrong said with a stern face.