

Finest 206

Chapter 206 Falling from the Horse

The scene fell into absolute silence. According to the agreement, if Mei Yanqiu lost, she would have to plow the fields. Mei Yanqiu represented the literati, a group who considered themselves noble and utterly despised these farmers who toiled on the land. Mei Yanqiu's loss was akin to a resounding slap in the face for these arrogant, poetry-reading scholars.

The long silent Zhao Kangning suddenly snorted, "Lin San, what if you won this round? You indeed have mastery over couplets, but by using your strengths to attack my teacher's weaknesses, don't you feel it's a bit unfair?"

Lin Wanrong replied with a faint smile, "Fair? The Young Prince speaks well. Has there ever been fairness in this world? Just now, you all spoke freely, mocking the hardworking woman. On what basis? It's nothing more than believing you are superior! Have you ever considered 'fairness' at that moment? Now that the situation is unfavorable to you, you seek fairness. You want all the good things in this world."

"Well, what a silver tongue you have," Zhao Kangning huffed, "Since you're skilled at couplets, you dared to criticize my teacher through them. Today, I will stand up for my teacher. Lin San, I challenge you to a duel, don't say I am bullying you."

Damn, when he can't win he brings out his prince status, Lin Wanrong snorted in his mind, but heard the Young Prince continue, "Just now, you dueled with my teacher in a battle of wits, now I shall duel with you in a battle of..."

Before he could finish, Luo Ning exclaimed, "No-"

All eyes fell on her. Luo Ning blushed and said, "The competition between Lin San and our teacher was fair. A physical contest may result in injuries. We came here today for leisure, we should not spoil our mood because of this." She knew Lin Wanrong was knowledgeable, but when it came to physical combat, he certainly wouldn't be a match for the Young Prince, so naturally, she wanted to stop it.

Zhao Kangning laughed heartily, "Miss Luo misunderstood my intentions. The martial contest I mentioned is not a one-on-one fight, but a different kind of competition." Zhao Kangning waved his hand and commanded loudly, "Bring the bow!"

Several followers immediately knelt to present a golden longbow. Zhao Kangning took it, strung the bow, and pointed to the forest ahead, "Everyone, watch carefully. There is a big tree a hundred steps away. Today, Lin San and I will compete in archery. We will ride and shoot arrows at the tree from a hundred steps away. Whoever hits the tree wins, and the one who fails loses."

The crowd suddenly understood that he was challenging Lin Wanrong to a horseback archery contest. Young Prince Ning was known to excel in both literature and martial arts, and many in the field had heard of his fame. As scholars, they had never witnessed such a scene of shooting a tree on horseback, so they began to cheer loudly, eager to witness the legendary archery that could penetrate willows at a hundred steps.

A hundred steps? The steps of the ancients were small, Lin Wanrong estimated the distance to be about fifty meters. Damn, knowing I've never shot an arrow, he came up with this harmful idea, Lin Wanrong thought secretly.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's troubled expression, Zhao Kangning laughed aloud, "Lin San, you used your strengths to slightly surpass my teacher. As his student, I should also use my strengths to defeat you. Do you dare to accept the challenge?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Young Prince, I am but a humble servant. I've hardly ridden a horse, let alone shot an arrow from horseback. This competition of yours is indeed very 'fair'."

Zhao Kangning laughed, "If you haven't shot an arrow before, that's fine. You don't have to use an arrow. Just ride on the horse and from a hundred steps away, regardless of the method, even if you throw a stone and hit that tree, I will admit defeat. What do you think?"

The crowd buzzed at once. The Young Prince was willing to admit defeat even if a stone was thrown and hit the target. The Young Prince's reputation for benevolence was indeed well deserved. These were all weak scholars who didn't understand the trick to this. To throw a stone and hit a tree from a hundred steps away was much more difficult than shooting an arrow at a hundred steps.

"Cunning," Lin Wanrong muttered to himself. The Young Prince was making a show of defending his teacher, not only expressing his filial piety but also suggesting that this method of competition was extremely favorable to Lin San. This once again showed his benevolence. Damn, he is even more hypocritical than me.

"Lin San, can you shoot an arrow?" Young Master Guo asked, tugging Lin Wanrong's sleeve and whispering, "Shall we skip this contest?"

"I can't," Lin Wanrong shook his head. "Young Master, can you shoot arrows?"

Guo Wuchang shook his head, "If it were a contest of peeing, I would have confidence in competing. But an archery competition is not my strong suit."

"Lin San, have you made your decision?" Zhao Kangning asked with a smile, "If you choose to give up, I won't make things difficult for you. The bet you made with my teacher will be erased. We will also admit that your couplet was excellent."

"What if, by some chance, I win?" Lin Wanrong asked, grinning, "What then?"

"You win?" Zhao Kangning chuckled lightly, "I haven't considered that. How about this, if you do win, from then on, whenever I see you, I will make a detour. If I can't avoid you, I will treat you with the respect due to a teacher. Everyone here can bear witness."

Thinking of making me his teacher, damn, he's dreaming. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Since the Young Prince is so sincere, alright then. I will compete in this round, even though I'm certain to lose. But in order to fulfill the Young Prince's filial piety, I have to try."

When the crowd saw Lin San agree, they cheered instantly. Luo Ning walked up to Lin Wanrong, gently tugged his sleeve, and voiced her worry, "Brother Lin, Zhao Kangning has been learning archery since he was a child. Don't overdo it. Be careful not to hurt yourself and worry Qiaoqiao."

Lin Wanrong nodded seriously, "Miss Luo, don't worry about me. Although I'm a bit brutish, I'm not stupid. If I can't beat him, I'll certainly run."

Luo Ning gave him a worried look. Meanwhile, Zhao Kangning had already ordered his men to bring out two horses, one black and one white. He said to Lin Wanrong, "For fairness, Lin San, you can choose a horse first. The one you leave behind will be mine."

The two horses, one black and one white, were both tall, mighty, and handsome. It was hard to choose between them. Lin Wanrong took out a bottle of perfume from his pocket and rubbed it hard

on his right hand. Smiling, he said, "If my hands smell nice, maybe God will help me choose a good horse."

Young Master Guo looked puzzled, "Can perfume help you pick a good horse? Next time I go to Miaoyu Pavilion, I'll wear some perfume too."

Applying some perfume to your own thing might be more like it, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, walking up to the two horses. He had a knack for judging people, but his skills in appraising horses were rudimentary. He touched the black horse with his left hand, and the white horse with his right, feeling their heads and bodies for quite a while, but was still unable to decide. However, the two horses reacted differently under his hands. The black horse on his left was quiet, while the white horse on his right kept neighing, shaking its head as if it found him disagreeable.

A northern scholar impatiently said, "It's not like you're choosing a wife, why are you touching them so much?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Oh? I wonder how many times this gentleman touched his wife when he was choosing? Could it be even longer than me?" The crowd erupted in laughter, the ladies present all blushed, covering their mouths and chuckling. The scholar's face turned red and he didn't dare to say another word. When it came to witty retorts, he was no match for Lin San.

After feeling them again, Lin Wanrong finally pointed at the black horse, "This one has healthier skin and is as handsome as me. I'll take this one."

Zhao Kangning laughed, "Very well, then I'll use the white horse. Lin San, what will you use? An arrow?"

Use cheap tricks? Lin Wanrong chuckled, bending down to pick up a small stone from the ground, "I'll try this."

Everyone looked on in wonder as he truly intended to throw a stone at the tree. But they had long grown accustomed to his unconventional techniques. Zhao Kangning walked up to the white horse and gently stroked it a couple of times. The horse was not very tame, and kept shaking its head. Meanwhile, the black horse next to Lin Wanrong appeared relatively calm.

"Lin San, who will shoot first?" Zhao Kangning asked, taking the longbow handed to him by his attendant.

"Of course, you should go first. I can hold out for a long time," Lin Wanrong said with a grin, leaving the crowd puzzled by his words.

"Alright." Zhao Kangning shouted, grabbed the reins with his left hand, swung onto the horse, and gripped the horse's back with his legs. The white horse neighed instantly. Zhao Kangning, in his silver outfit and on his silver horse, looked more majestic and heroic than ever. The ladies present watched the Young Prince with envy.

Lin Wanrong whispered something in Guo Wuchang's ear, and Young Master Guo nodded slightly. Luo Ning, standing next to him, asked, "Brother Lin, what are you and Young Master Guo discussing?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled, "Ah, our Young Prince is indeed the epitome of grace, just like a prince on his white steed."

As he spoke, Zhao Kangning saluted everyone from atop the white horse. With the longbow in his right hand and the reins shaken with his left, the horse shot off like an arrow. The duo, man and horse, emanated an imposing aura.

Zhao Kangning spurred his horse to gallop parallel to the big tree. The white horse seemed a bit fiery, gently shaking its head, but he paid it little heed. As he dashed towards his target, steadied his body, and released the reins, his bow was held horizontally with a golden-feathered arrow already on the string.

Seeing him mount, draw his bow, and notch his arrow all in one fluid motion, the crowd cheered at his clean and efficient action. Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. The lad indeed had some skill.

Zhao Kangning locked onto his target, pulled back the bowstring, and with a soft shout, the golden-feathered arrow was instantly let loose. Unexpectedly, the white horse suddenly neighed loudly, shaking its head while its front hooves lifted off the ground. The arrow, released in the instant the horse leapt, deviated considerably, grazing the edge of the tree, causing a few pieces of bark to fly off. He had missed the target by a fraction.

At the time of the shot, Zhao Kangning relied solely on his body to maintain balance. The sudden leap of the horse caught him off guard, and he began to fall rapidly. His excellent equestrian skills saved him from a face-first fall as his feet caught the stirrups just in time, preventing him from

landing in a most embarrassing manner. Even so, he ended up half of his face down in the dirt, hair disheveled, looking utterly pitiful.

"The Young Prince has fallen from his horse! Everyone, quickly, go save him!" Lin Wanrong, watching with glee, saw that Guo Wuchang had already started shouting for help.

Chapter 207 Departing in Confidence

Guo Wuchang's perfectly timed, chaotic yell jolted the dumbfounded crowd out of their stupor. The first to charge in were the guards of the Young Prince. They had been with Zhao Kangning for many years, and were well aware of his equestrian skills. They could not have predicted today's occurrence, an incident that could potentially cost them their heads.

The crowd, witnessing the Young Prince's fall from his horse, surged forward in a flurry of different emotions, with renowned scholar Mei being the most frantic of all.

Lin Wanrong wiped his hands on his clothing to remove the heavy scent of perfume, then pulled something from his bosom. After carefully inspecting and confirming it was ready for use, he slowly stepped forward.

The Young Prince had already been pulled up from the ground. His white clothes were tattered and dusty, half his face was smeared with mud, and a few pieces of dead grass were entangled in his hair. His appearance was a far cry from the handsome, dashing prince who had been astride his horse just moments ago.

Zhao Kangning clenched his teeth, his face ashen. He glared furiously at the servants prostrated on the ground. No matter how good his temper, he couldn't bear losing face in front of so many people, especially with the woman he admired present. Unable to contain his rage, he lashed out, ignoring any notion of dignity. He kicked a guard and bellowed, "You insolent dog, how dare you"

"Begging your pardon, Young Prince, begging your pardon. I deserve to die, I deserve to die" the terrified servant pleaded.

Zhao Kangning landed his horsewhip across the man's face and roared, "You insolent cur, I treated you well, fed you fine food, tasked you with caring for two horses, yet you conspire against your master! Take this wretch away"

"Spare me, Young Prince, spare me. I've taken care of these two horses for a long time, they've always been gentle. It must have been because they're in a new place, unaccustomed to the environment, that they stumbled. Please, Young Prince, give me another chance" the servant begged, bowing continuously.

Mei Yanqiu proposed, "These are indeed fine horses, it must be this servant who was instigated by someone to sabotage them, causing the Young Prince to stumble." She glanced deliberately at Lin San, trying to direct suspicion towards him. Seeing his indifferent demeanor, she boldly claimed, "Lin San, was it you who interfered?"

Zhao Kangning regarded Lin San suspiciously. Just earlier, Lin San had been in contact with the horses. Could he have done something?

Lin Wanrong chuckled and responded, "Teacher Mei, you're making quite the assumption. The Young Prince himself hasn't spoken, yet you're accusing me. Which eye of yours saw me tamper with anything? My selection of the horses was done in plain sight, completely above board. When did I ever do anything suspicious?"

His words were righteous and severe. There was no sign of guilt. Everyone present had seen him choosing the horses, and there had been no visible anomalies. They couldn't really blame him.

Playing nice when things were in one's favor was Lin Wanrong's nature. He solemnly said, "Young Prince Ning was kind and generous today, volunteering to test the horse first. I am greatly indebted. From my point of view, someone definitely wants to smear the Young Prince's reputation. Imagine, if I were to ride first and fall immediately, although no one would say it out loud, they would certainly question Young Prince Ning's character. Is this not a smear?"

Zhao Kangning's face was ashen. At a loss for words, Lin Wanrong sighed reluctantly and said, "Young Prince, you are a good man. It would be better not to compete today to prevent villains from taking advantage and tarnishing your lifelong reputation."

Young Prince Ning kicked away the horse-feeder, gritted his teeth, and loudly said, "Lin San, I keep my word. Today, my arrow only grazed the bark. If you can hit that tree, then you win."

Lin Wanrong pretended to be moved and said, "The previous arrow was somewhat unexpected, and you were affected, Young Prince. Why don't you shoot another arrow? This time, please choose a horse first, and shoot first as well."

Zhao Kangning snorted, "Do you think I'm a man who doesn't keep his word? Lin San, it's not that I'm underestimating you, but even if my arrow was slightly off, it's still a hundred times better than yours. Just give it a try."

Lin Wanrong, appearing troubled, said, "Since Young Prince insists, I can only reluctantly give it a try."

He took the reins of the black horse and awkwardly mounted. Seeing his clumsy actions, everyone shook their heads and chuckled. Could he really compete with the Young Prince in this state? Luo Ning approached him and whispered, "Brother Lin, be careful."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "I shouldn't fall off." Among everyone, apart from Young Master Guo, only Miss Luo genuinely cared for him.

On the horse, Lin Wanrong mimicked the Young Prince's salute, but almost lost his balance and fell off, causing an outburst of laughter.

Nonchalant, Lin Wanrong chuckled, whipped the horse, and the black steed trotted forward.

Zhao Kangning, seeing his inexperienced actions, felt relieved. Even if his shot was not good, Lin San hitting that large tree seemed impossible.

Lin Wanrong rode the black horse, making two laps without showing any signs of shooting. Some impatient scholars shouted, "Lin San, hurry, hurry"

Seemingly prodded, Lin Wanrong accelerated, made a few strides. Just as everyone thought he was about to shoot, they heard him exclaim as his body seemed to disappear beneath the horse.

Luo Ning thought he had fallen and shrieked, "Brother Lin" She lifted her skirt and ran towards him. Barely two steps in, they heard two loud "bangs." The large tree and the smaller one beside it shook, their leaves and branches trembling, creating an intimidating scene.

The black horse Lin Wanrong was riding got startled. With a long neigh, it reared its front hooves. Lin Wanrong was originally lying under the horse, invisible to others, but the horse, startled by the loud sound, threw him off. Luckily, he was prepared. He somersaulted off the horse, quickly hid something in his bosom, and watched as the black horse raced away like a mad creature.

"Darn, that was a close call," he muttered, a few beads of cold sweat appeared on his forehead.

Seeing him standing there in a daze, Luo Ning hurriedly ran to his side, grabbing his arm anxiously. "Brother Lin, what's wrong with you? You're scaring me..."

Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh and wiped his forehead with his right hand. "I'm fine. It's just this black horse getting spooked."

Luo Ning noticed a layer of what appeared to be soot on his wrist, and a few black spots on his face. Worriedly, she asked, "Brother Lin, your hand, your face, what happened?"

Looking at the traces on his hand, Lin Wanrong gave a helpless bitter smile. "This Western gadget, the quality really isn't up to scratch. Lucky it didn't ruin my face."

Luo Ning was confused. "Brother Lin, what does this have to do with Westerners?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "I'm just joking around. Miss Luo, who won the contest?"

Before Luo Ning could answer, she heard someone shouting from the side, "He hit it, he hit it, Lin San hit it" Everyone followed his gaze and saw the big tree peppered with holes. Even the smaller tree beside it was riddled with holes.

Everyone was left speechless. Although Lin San's riding posture wasn't particularly graceful, he not only hit the target, he practically shattered it. It was a bit too exaggerated. How did he hit it? What did he use to hit it? And what were those two loud bangs? All these questions were swirling in people's heads.

"Could this be the legendary 'One-Yang Finger'?" Guo Wuchang's terrified voice arose, slightly trembling.

Hearing this, Lin Wanrong burst into laughter. Damn, this Young Master Guo was impressive. He had only taught him a single phrase and yet he managed to perform so vividly. It was a shame he didn't pursue acting.

"Thank you, thank you." Lin Wanrong, his face and hands covered in soot and looking utterly disheveled, walked back into the crowd with a smile.

"Lin San, how did you hit it? Do you really know the 'One-Yang Finger'?" Zhao Kangning could hardly believe his eyes. The holes on the tree did resemble those caused by a cannon, but a cannon's power would have been ten, a hundred times greater. And where could Lin San have possibly gotten a cannon? But he remembered his martial arts teacher mentioning a skill called 'One-Yang Finger' could Lin San be a hidden master?

Lin Wanrong pretended to be mysterious. "Young Prince, you said before that all I needed to do was hit it. As for how I did it, I'm afraid I can't tell. How would you interpret this contest?"

In this competition, although Lin Wanrong also fell off his horse, and looked even more disheveled than the Young Prince, the undeniable fact was that he had hit the target. Lin San always seemed to carry a touch of magic about him. Having already given his word in front of everyone, Zhao Kangning could not deny it now. He bowed to Mei Yanqiu, saying, "I have proven my incompetence. Please forgive me, Teacher."

Wherever Lin San went, Zhao Kangning always seemed to be on the losing side. He climbed back onto his horse and, turning to Luo Ning, said, "Miss Luo, my feelings for you are as clear as day. When I find the time, I will come to visit you again."

Having said his piece, he waved his hand, and in the blink of an eye, he and his men had disappeared from everyone's sight.

Mei Yanqiu's face turned pale, her body shaking uncontrollably. In her heart, the prospect of having to work in the fields that day, and the humiliation she would feel in the face of numerous dignitaries and scholars thereafter, was a burden far worse than death.

Luo Ning softly said, "Brother, I am willing to fulfill my Teacher's bet on her behalf."

Lin Wanrong waved his hand dismissively and gave a cold laugh. "Miss Luo, let us put an end to today's matter. If a person of Mei Yanqiu's standing were to work in the fields, it would be an insult to the countless farmers and common people. I hope you can teach her to remember this."

Having said his piece, he didn't linger. With Young Master Guo in tow, he left in the face of everyone's gaze. Luo Ning watched his retreating figure, a mix of indescribable feelings welled up in her heart. Unconsciously, tears began to brim in her eyes.

Chapter 208 Comfort

The two of them had walked the entire way in silence. Lin Wanrong hadn't spoken a single word. Seeing Lin San's furrowed brow, Guo Wuchang also dared not break the silence.

When they returned to the Xiao mansion and he came to his small room, Lin Wanrong didn't even bother to wash his face. He flung himself onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. He felt as if something were lodged in his chest, an unpleasant sensation that he could not shake. Yes, he had thoroughly enjoyed the shouting and the fighting earlier in the day, but aside from that, he found no comfort. 'Damn it,' he thought, 'have I been seeing myself as more noble than I really am?' He mocked himself with a bitter smile.

He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out the double-barreled pistol that Xiao Qingxuan had given him. The gun barrel, which had recently been fired, still carried the faint scent of burnt gunpowder. Surprisingly, it smelled slightly pleasant. This western-style pistol was exquisitely crafted, and the one Xiao Qingxuan had given him was truly a masterpiece. Such a firearm was rare even in European royal courts. Given the current technology in Great Hua, manufacturing even a large cannon would pose significant challenges, let alone creating this pistol. Judging by the surprised expression on Prince Zhao Kangning's face, he hadn't seen such a gun before. Could Xiao Qingxuan's status be even more noble than Zhao Kangning's?

He pondered this for a while and then toyed with the pistol again. He had used this gun for the first time today and nearly embarrassed himself. He had no confidence in his marksmanship, fearing that he might miss. So, he had fired two shots deliberately. The recoil from the gun was significant. Although the first shot hit the target, the second one was off. This indeed made him feel ashamed. However, seeing the power of the pistol gave him more confidence. No matter what kind of martial arts master he might encounter, in the face of this gun, they were all inferior.

'Qingxuan has been very good to me,' Lin Wanrong finally understood Xiao Qingxuan's good intentions. With this gun in his hand, he feared no one. He sighed softly, reminiscing about the days he spent with Qingxuan. Although their time together was short, it had left a profound impression. He wondered when he would see her again.

He didn't know what was going on today. He felt exceptionally down, and his mind was full of chaotic thoughts. He unknowingly drifted off into sleep while lying on the bed.

He didn't know how much time had passed when he was awakened by a soft knock at the door. When Lin Wanrong opened his eyes, the sky was completely dark. He had slept through the entire day without noticing.

Shaking his head and chuckling bitterly, Lin Wanrong thought, 'How have I become as sleep-prone as a pig?' He opened the door, and a soft female voice from outside asked, "Why aren't you lighting the lamp?"

"Because the night is the best time for thinking," Lin Wanrong replied, chuckling as he stepped aside to let the Eldest Miss into the room.

"You always have a slick tongue," Xiao Yuruo rolled her eyes at him, then she found a match and gently lit the oil lamp in the room. The dim light of the lamp cast a faint glow on her beautiful face and graceful figure, rendering her more charming than ever.

Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned, then smiled and asked, "Eldest Miss, why have you come?"

Xiao Yuruo didn't respond. Seeing the dark marks on his face and hands, she frowned and scolded, "Why don't you wash yourself? You're covered in dust and look absolutely unsightly."

Lin Wanrong shook his head and laughed, "I'm tired, I don't feel like moving at all."

"Always tired when there's work to do, I think you're just finding excuses to be lazy," Eldest Miss Xiao shot him a reproachful glance. Rising from her seat, she walked a few steps gracefully and fetched a warm towel for him from outside the room. "Here, clean yourself," she said softly.

Taking the towel, Lin Wanrong wiped himself in a haphazard manner. Grinning, he said, "Eldest Miss, I am deeply touched by your kind gesture of serving tea and attending to my needs."

Miss Xiao looked at him and scoffed, "You're always causing trouble, whether it's in front of me or others. Today you've offended Teacher Mei Yanqiu. You have no idea how influential she is in the capital. We haven't even made our trip to the capital, and you've already managed to provoke someone of her stature."

Lin Wanrong looked at her and said, "You knew about it?"

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded, "Cousin Guo had told me the entire situation when he came back. As for the Young Prince, I won't speak of him. He's never had good intentions toward the Xiao family, and this isn't the first time you've embarrassed him. But Mei Yanqiu's disciples are influential figures in the capital. You've offended her, and after the New Year, we'll surely face trouble in the capital. All this mess is because of Luo Ning"

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile of resignation, "What has Miss Luo got to do with this?"

Eldest Miss Xiao huffed, "If it weren't for her inviting you, none of this would've happened. I think you're besotted with her. You even deceived me yesterday, saying she wouldn't go."

Sweating, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, 'Did I really deceive you? Or did you just not get the hint?' He shook his head and said, "This has nothing to do with Miss Luo. With my personality, I was bound to clash with Teacher Mei sooner or later."

Knowing his words rang true, Miss Xiao sighed softly, "Us merchants, we're seen as less than peasants in the eyes of those nobles. This isn't about one or two families, it's the attitude of the entire Great Hua Dynasty. It's not something that can be changed with a few words from you. You're usually so clever, why can't you understand this?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "When I see injustice, I cannot just walk away. If I don't stand up to it, I feel uneasy."

Eldest Miss Xiao said pensively, "I've been doing business with my mother since I was thirteen or fourteen. We were two women alone, constantly traveling. We faced numerous humiliations and put-downs, too many to count. If we reacted like you, we wouldn't be alive today."

Tears glistened in her eyes as she remembered their past hardships, "Can't you learn to bear it a little? What good will it do to fight back? Did you really win this battle? You might've felt good yelling, but you also ruined your own mood. You look so dejected now, nothing like the Lin San I knew. I used to worry about the Xiao family's affairs, feeling miserable all the time. You told me, whether we're sad or happy, a day will still be a day. We need to learn to enjoy life. You were the one who advised me, so why are you the one falling into depression now?"

These words warmed Lin Wanrong's heart. He looked at Xiao Yuruo and said, "Eldest Miss, I thought you came to scold me, but instead, you're here to comfort me. I'm so moved, I feel like crying."

Xiao Yuruo's cheeks flushed as she retorted stubbornly, "What are you grateful for? I'm here to reprimand you. I want to see if you dare offend people recklessly in the future."

Eldest Miss Xiao was tough in speech but soft at heart, a trait Lin Wanrong understood well. He felt a touch of warmth in his heart and nodded, "Eldest Miss, rest assured. That Teacher Mei will be punished by heaven for her unkindness. Even if she has many rich and powerful disciples, we aren't pushovers." While saying this, Lin Wanrong's thoughts oddly drifted to the elegantly dressed middle age man he had met outside the Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, and of course, to Xu Wei, the most powerful man in the current court who was likely hiding somewhere in Jinling. With his current relationship with Old Man Xu, anyone who wished to harm Lin San or the Xiao family had to think twice.

"Lin San, the Xiao family has no way out now. You've offended so many people, and they will take it out on us. You can't just wash your hands of it, and you're not allowed to abandon us. If you do, I won't forgive you, even as a ghost," Miss Xiao said softly.

Sweating, Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile, "Eldest Miss, it's not as serious as you think. The contract I signed with you is only for one year, you can't hold me responsible for a lifetime."

"Who wants to depend on you for a lifetime" Eldest Miss Xiao retorted, "All these affairs of my family, good or bad, were caused by you. You are not allowed to go anywhere until you resolve them. If you want that contract, I can sign for ten years, a hundred years for you."

So she wanted to trick him into renewing the contract. This young lady was both domineering and cunning. Lin Wanrong chuckled and changed the subject, "Eldest Miss, how is the consolidation of the Tao family's shops going?"

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded, "I've discussed it with the stewards, and everything is going according to plan. You've been lazy today, but you're not allowed to run off tomorrow, or I'll dock your salary." As she mentioned docking his salary, she couldn't help covering her mouth and laughing.

At the mention of salary, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered something and asked, "Eldest Miss, I should be getting a share of the perfume earnings, right?"

Eldest Miss Xiao laughed, "Don't worry, how could I forget about you? The net profit from our perfume this month is around thirty thousand taels. Your half would be fifteen thousand taels."

"Better than nothing, I guess. Eldest Miss, are you cooking the books?"

"I'm so annoyed with you" Miss Xiao huffed in exasperation, flicking her sleeve in a huff. But she accidentally knocked over the oil lamp on the table. With a soft pop, the wick flickered a few times before going out completely, plunging the room into darkness.

Eldest Miss Xiao cried out in surprise, thrown off by the sudden darkness.

"Don't be afraid," Lin Wanrong gently reassured her, taking her hand, "I'm here."

There was a long silence from Eldest Miss Xiao in the darkness. Lin Wanrong could hear her breathing, which sounded somewhat irregular. He turned towards her and saw her staring at him, her eyes glimmering like droplets of water in the dark.

Lin Wanrong was puzzled and quickly asked softly, "Eldest Miss, are you alright?"

Eldest Miss Xiao shook her head and smiled, "What could possibly be wrong? I'm already used to getting annoyed by you several times a day."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I speak like this because I'm familiar with you. I wouldn't even bother joking with others."

"Lin San, you should rest well. I'll come for you early tomorrow, and you're not allowed to slack off." Eldest Miss Xiao turned her head, pulled open the door, and walked out. As Lin Wanrong was puzzling over this, he saw Eldest Miss Xiao turn back and say, "I almost forgot. This letter was delivered to our residence this afternoon. It's addressed to you."

She took an envelope from her bosom and handed it to Lin Wanrong. Lin Wanrong asked in surprise, "A letter for me? Who wrote it? I don't have many friends in Jinling."

"You'll know when you read it," replied Eldest Miss Xiao.

The room was too dark, and after much fumbling, Lin Wanrong managed to light the oil lamp. When he looked outside, Eldest Miss Xiao was already gone without a trace.

He took out a sheet of paper from the envelope. It was a small piece of white paper, with two lines of small characters written on it: "I appreciate your honesty and integrity, and I shall repay it with a token of my gratitude."

Chapter 209 Fallen Ill

Honest? Someone had actually called him honest; now that was unusual. Lin Wanrong was so amused he wanted to laugh. He glanced at the note several times, front and back. It bore neither a salutation nor a signature, leaving him uncertain of the author. The only thing he was sure about was that it was a woman's handwriting.

He knew only a few women in Jinling City, and even fewer who would send him such a note. After giving it some thought, an idea occurred to him. Could it be her? He chuckled at the thought, finding it all rather interesting.

The next morning, Xiao Yuruo indeed arrived early to call on him. The two discussed with the stewards about how to expand after taking over the Tao family's shop.

The Tao family's cloth shop was only slightly smaller than the Xiao family's, and with this acquisition, the scale of the Xiao family's business had significantly improved. It was now an unrivaled giant in Great Hua. Of course, the profits from the silk and satin business were shrinking, and at this stage, it was no longer the Xiao family's focus. The booming business of perfumes and soaps filled everyone from Madam Xiao and her daughters to the various servants of the Xiao family with confidence about their future.

The perfume and soap business was practically a monopoly. Due to the limitations in supply, it was currently only operated in the nearby provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui. Once production caught up next year, it would rapidly expand to over a dozen provinces nationwide, which would present an even grander spectacle. Under these circumstances, the Eldest Miss was increasingly looking forward to her upcoming trip to the capital. She had mentioned it several times to Lin Wanrong. She planned to set off for the capital on the third day of the Lunar New Year.

Lin Wanrong naturally had no objections. His only concern was his beloved Qiaoqiao.

When Dong Qingshan arrived, Lin Wanrong had just finished discussing business with the Eldest Miss and her associates. Qingshan excitedly grabbed his arm and said, "Big brother, we have acquired the restaurant by the Qinhuai River."

Would this even be a question? You guys are practically underworld figures. Who could possibly outdo you? Lin Wanrong nodded and asked, "Any trouble?"

Qingshan replied, "A bit of a hassle. The owner somehow got connected with Cheng Ruinian. When we arrived, he was still quite arrogant, boasting about how powerful Commander Cheng and the Black Dragon Society are. But after Beidou lost his temper and broke his leg with a stool, the guy was scared out of his wits. He didn't dare make a sound and just packed up and left."

That's just how the underworld operates. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "You guys need to keep a close eye on the Black Dragon Society and Wu Zhenghu these few days. It's the end of the year; times are tough. Everyone's hoping to make a big score for the New Year."

Dong Qingshan hummed, "Who gets to score is still uncertain."

Lin Wanrong asked, "Where is Little Luo? Is his father at home these days? I need to discuss some things with Old Luo."

Dong Qingshan replied, "Little Luo probably won't be able to make it today. Miss Luo seemed to have had some trouble yesterday. She cried for a long time when she got home, and no one could console her. Later, she came down with a high fever and kept talking nonsense. By dawn, she still hadn't regained consciousness. As it happens, Old Luo has been away from home these few days. Little Luo is staying home to look after Miss Luo."

Lin Wanrong was startled, "What happened to Miss Luo? Wasn't she just fine yesterday? How did she fall ill so suddenly?"

Dong Qingshan said, "Little Luo sent someone to deliver the message this morning, but didn't clarify the details. I also don't know what happened. However, judging by the anxious expressions of his family, her illness must be quite serious. By the way, big brother, didn't you go out with Miss Luo yesterday? What exactly happened? Miss Luo is such a cheerful person, how could she become like this?"

Thinking back to Luo Ning's demeanor yesterday, Lin Wanrong knew that her concern for him wasn't faked, and her respect for her teacher was genuine too. Perhaps it was the old woman surnamed Mei who had blamed her. She was caught between him and her teacher, which made it understandable for her to be troubled. Thinking of this, Lin Wanrong sighed, "It might be related to her teacher, I can't really say."

Dong Qingshan said, "Miss Luo is such a good person. If I knew who had bullied her, I would not let the bastard off. I would beat him until he was searching for his teeth."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "I would join you in beating him up. Ah, how come we haven't seen Old Luo for so many days?"

Dong Qingshan hummed in agreement, "Little Luo also hasn't seen Old Luo for several days. But according to him, Old Luo often does this. After all, he is such a high-ranking official, it is natural for him to be busy. Even our Hung Hing gang, with nearly a thousand brothers who need to eat, drink, and have fun every day, keeps me and Little Luo busy. Let alone Old Luo who is the head of the province, with countless subordinates, clerks, and servants under his hand, all living on the government's provisions. He has to manage so many people's daily food, drink, gambling, and opium needs, it's even harder."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, Dong Qingshan was quite insightful despite his rough speech. He thought of Luo Ning's illness, and found it odd. She was such a vibrant beauty yesterday, how could she fall ill so suddenly?

He had a good relationship with Luo Ning, and should have visited her right away, but he was worried about meeting that annoying old lady Mei at the Luo mansion, which would put Luo Ning in an awkward position.

After some hesitation, Lin Wanrong asked Qingshan, "Has Qiaoqiao visited Miss Luo?"

Qingshan shook his head, "When Little Luo sent the message this morning, your wife had already gone to the new restaurant at Confucius Temple to arrange the decoration. However, if she knew about it, she would definitely rush over immediately."

Lin Wanrong smiled, "Qingshan, go to Little Luo's house for me and find out if that teacher named Mei is staying there."

"Alright, I will go immediately. Big brother, do you have a disagreement with that old lady Mei?" Qingshan asked as he nodded.

Lin Wanrong gave a helpless smile, "It's a long story. Just go and find out. Also, tell Little Luo to take good care of his sister. I'll visit Miss Luo later."

Watching Qingshan's retreating figure, Lin Wanrong sighed lightly. Although Luo Ning's ideas were sometimes impractical, she was truly a girl with aspirations. This girl, she wouldn't have fallen ill because of what happened yesterday, would she? If so, it would indeed be his fault.

Old Luo had vanished into thin air and for several days, no one could find him. Lin Wanrong's days in Jinling were numbered, every day spent there shortened the remaining time. If he couldn't resolve the matter concerning Cheng De, it would leave behind a lingering threat to Qiaoqiao and the Dong family. This was a scenario that Lin Wanrong couldn't bear to imagine.

His heart raced with anxiety. The elusive old Xu Wei had also disappeared, and there was no news about the eradication of the White Lotus rebellion. The Jiangsu bureaucracy remained silent as well. What exactly was going on behind the scenes?

Lin Wanrong was so fraught that he kicked a pebble into the lake in the garden, stirring up ripples. A soft chuckle, followed by a delightful voice, reached his ears. "Second Miss, I'm glad to see you finally emerged," Lin Wanrong greeted, a hint of joy spreading across his face upon seeing her youthful, slightly shy countenance. Xiao Yushuang had sequestered herself in the prayer room for several days, insisting on maintaining a pious mindset undisturbed by anyone for the final days of her prayer. Hence, it had been quite a while since he last saw her. Seeing her smiling face suddenly was indeed a delight.

Xiao Yushuang pouted, "I've been standing next to you for quite a while, and you didn't even glance at me. Were you thinking about someone else?"

His heart raced. Indeed, he had been thinking about Luo Ning. It seemed that the tender Yushuang was following her elder sister's footsteps. "Who else would I be thinking about?" Lin Wanrong chuckled without batting an eyelid, "I was worried because I hadn't seen Yushuang in a few days and missed you terribly."

"Really?" Xiao Yushuang's face lit up with joy, her eyes twinkling as she bashfully asked, "Then why didn't you come to see me these past few days?"

Lin Wanrong wiped the sweat off his forehead. Girls her age were the easiest to please. Seeing no one around, he stealthily held her small hand, "I wanted to see you every day, but your sister told me that for the last few days of your prayers, you mustn't be disturbed in order to keep your mind pure. After much contemplation, I finally managed to resist the urge to visit."

Blushing furiously at his words, she responded shyly, "When others visit me, of course it's a distraction, but if you visited, I would be happy. You bad man, you must have found someone else, that's why you forgot about me"

Startled by her directness, Lin Wanrong thought that she must've been reading romance novels in her room again. Xiao Yushuang gave him a profound look, "You naughty man, I don't know what's so charming about you. When I was in the prayer room, I thought about you every day, and it was unbearable. Even if you didn't think about me, I was always thinking about you."

He was amazed at how her words had become so enchanting. Lin Wanrong, slightly taken aback, tentatively asked, "Second Miss, what did you mean when you said I might have found someone else?"

Xiao Yushuang hummed in affirmation, "You're very naughty, tormenting me like that. Who knows if you've done the same to others? If you have, doesn't that mean you have someone else?"

Lin Wanrong was sweating profusely. This child's logic was so simple, yet quite practical. Second Miss leaned her head on his shoulder, saying, "Sister said that you men are always plotting to take advantage of us women and that I should guard against you. But there is no one I would rather guard against less than you. Even if you have someone else, I think of you every day, I pray for you every day. Mother said that a woman's first time is the most precious and that one must remain faithful to her first love. Given what has transpired between us, who else could I follow if not you?"

What exactly transpired between us, Lin Wanrong screamed inwardly. They had just kissed, held hands, and swatted each other's rear ends. They were still far from "that." However, seeing her blushing little face, he couldn't bring himself to utter such brutal words all he could do was to transform them into actions.

He gently pulled Second Miss's slender waist towards him. Xiao Yushuang let out a soft yelp as she nestled her feverish body against his.

Lin Wanrong kissed her little earlobe gently, about to take it further, when suddenly San De came running towards them, shouting from a distance, "Brother San, Brother San, the governor is summoning you"

Chapter 210 Cut Him Down

Was Luo Min looking for him? The old man always seemed to appear and disappear at will. When Lin Wanrong needed to find him, he was nowhere to be found, and when he wanted to see Lin Wanrong, he would show up immediately. It was rather queer indeed.

The Second Miss had just met with him and they were enjoying their conversation. Seeing him about to leave, she hastily gripped the sleeve of his robe, a hint of reluctance in her heart. Dismissing Si De, Lin Wanrong whispered into Yushuang's ear, "Don't worry, we'll continue our conversation once I've finished discussing matters."

"Continue what with you?" the Second Miss replied, her face blushing, "I just wanted to talk with you. You always think of mischief, no wonder my elder sister said you're the worst man, she was absolutely right, hehe."

After exchanging a few words with the lively and adorable Yushuang, Lin Wanrong felt much better. However, upon entering the great hall, he was met with Gao Shou, the elder brother of Gao Qiu.

Lin Wanrong saluted, "Brother Gao, it's been a while. What wind blew you here today?"

Gao Shou returned the salute with a smile, "Young Master Lin is too kind. I'm here by the governor's order to discuss some affairs."

Old Luo wanted to discuss affairs with me? Damn, I was just about to look for him. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "You could have just sent a bailiff to invite me, there was no need to trouble Brother Gao with this." The Gao brothers, Gao Qiu and Gao Shou, used to be the Emperor's personal bodyguards. Compared to the bailiffs, their status was unquestionably of a different caliber.

Gao Shou just smiled and didn't say anything. Leaving with him, Gao Shou had already prepared horses. They mounted up and headed directly for the outskirts of the city.

Lin Wanrong was surprised, "Brother Gao, isn't the governor in the residence? Why are we heading out of the city?"

Gao Shou replied, "The governor has been busy with public affairs and hasn't been in the residence for several days."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Does the governor know that Miss Luo is ill?"

Gao Shou was shocked, "Ill? How could Miss Luo fall ill? Where did you hear this from? The governor doesn't know about it."

Lin Wanrong sighed. Old Luo truly was a workaholic; he didn't even know his own children were ill. It made him wonder whether Luo Yuan and Luo Ning should be laughing or crying to have such a father.

They traveled a considerable distance from the city. If his company hadn't been Old Luo's trusted Gao Shou, Lin Wanrong might have suspected someone was taking him to a remote place to silence him permanently. After about half an hour, they finally arrived at the foot of a mountain. The mountain was steep and difficult to climb, yet teeming with lush, verdant pines and cypresses, and brimming with chattering animals and birds. A small stream gurgled nearby, showing no signs of the impending harsh winter.

Old Luo had chosen a nice place, surrounded by beautiful mountains and rivers, a fitting place to rest one's loyal bones. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Brother Gao, what is the Governor doing here? Could he be emulating the hermit of Taoyuan, perhaps taking up fishing and farming?"

Gao Shou laughed, "Your words are indeed amusing, Young Master Lin. If he truly could live secluded from the world here, it would indeed be a delightful thing. But I'm afraid the Governor lacks the time for such a leisurely pursuit."

A chill went through Lin Wanrong's heart. According to Gao Shou, Old Luo was not living in seclusion here, but rather hiding away from prying eyes. Was he planning something major? Thinking about major plans, he felt a spark of excitement. What else could Luo Min's major plans involve, but the removal of Cheng De and the eradication of the White Lotus?

Gao Shou led Lin Wanrong straight up the steep cliff. Thanks to Lin Wanrong's skilled martial arts, he managed to ascend without much difficulty. Upon reaching the hillside, they were met with numerous strong men, dressed and ready for action, numbering about a hundred or so. Their eyes were sharp, and at a glance, it was clear that their martial arts skills were not to be underestimated.

They were patrolling various critical points. Seeing Gao Shou return, they all nodded slightly to him but said nothing. Looking at these men's demeanor, Lin Wanrong ventured a guess, "Brother Gao, these brothers share the same extraordinary aura and dignified appearance as you. Could they also be skilled masters from the palace?"

This hidden flattery was pleasing to Gao Shou's ears, he laughed, "Young Master Lin has sharp eyes. Since you've noticed, I won't hide it. These are my subordinates from my time in the palace. This time, they've followed a significant figure to Jinling."

A significant figure? Palace guards? Could it be the Emperor? Lin Wanrong was taken aback. However, he quickly dismissed this idea. If it were the Emperor himself, it wouldn't be possible for there to be no stir, and he certainly wouldn't be staying on this weather-exposed hillside. Gao Shou must be referring to Xu Wei. Xu Wei was the first minister of the current court, and the importance of security during this trip to the south was paramount. Luo Min must have been here discussing matters with Xu Wei these past few days.

Lin Wanrong followed Gao Shou down the hillside and saw several neat little houses in front of him. Luo Min, his stomach protruding, walked out of one of the houses, grinning, "Young Master Lin, I apologize for not greeting you further away. This place is humble and you've traveled far, I hope you won't take offense."

Damn, this old man's official rhetoric was full of hypocrisy. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Not at all, Governor Luo, you dwell in a humble abode while worrying about the world, truly an exemplary model for us younger generations."

After exchanging a round of mutual disdain, Luo Min welcomed Lin Wanrong into the house. The interior was simply furnished, only a few tables and chairs. Lin Wanrong asked curiously, "So, Governor, you've been living here these past few days? It's indeed very modest."

Luo Min sighed, "I have no choice. To perform my duties for the court, I must devote myself fully, even unto death. The Emperor has entrusted me with many tasks, and I fear that the slightest oversight could lead to errors, so I've had to find a place with fewer distractions. This location, with its clear mountains and water, is suitable for burying my old bones."

Old Luo had a knack for boasting loyalty. Lin Wanrong laughed, "I wonder why Governor Luo summoned me here. What tasks do you have for me?"

Luo Min replied, "I wouldn't dare to give you tasks. I wanted to discuss some matters with you." He smiled mysteriously, "A few days ago, I was reunited with an old friend. He spoke highly of you, praising your graceful demeanor and extraordinary talents and foresight. He said you're destined to be a dragon among men, and advised me to form a good relationship with you. Do you know who he is?"

"Oh? Truly, such a matter exists? Yet I do not know which esteemed personage holds me in such high regard. I am truly humbled, truly humbled," Lin Wanrong feigned ignorance.

Luo Min gave a slight smile. "Young Master Lin, there is no need for us to talk in riddles. Over the past few days, Master Xu Wei and I have been living reclusively here, discussing matters of great importance. Would you be interested in hearing about it?"

"So it was Master Xu, my sincere apologies." Lin Wanrong laughed. "What matter of great importance does he wish to discuss with me? I am but a minor character, hearing such matters, wouldn't he consider silencing me? Haha, perhaps it would be better not to listen."

"Young Master Lin, you jest," Luo Min chuckled. "You are a man protected by many of the nobility, who would dare to oppose you?"

With that, he pulled back a curtain on the wall to reveal a military map.

Although crudely drawn, the map clearly marked mountains, rivers, and the distances between locations. Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Had Old Luo and Xu Wei, two scholars, been studying a military map all these days? Could they understand such a thing, being civil officials, not military generals?

Seeing through his thoughts, Luo Min smiled, "Mr. Wenchang is well-versed in both the pen and the sword, he personally drew this map. In the past few days, he has gathered several generals to study this map, seeking strategies to annihilate the enemy. I have been here accompanying them."

This confirmed Lin Wanrong's guess; Xu Wei had indeed been discussing this matter with Old Luo these past days.

Luo Min sighed. "Young Master Lin, you are no outsider. When Mr. Wenchang left today, he said that there was no need to hide anything from you. The White Lotus bandits are becoming increasingly rampant, posing a great threat to our Great Hua. It has come to the point where they must be eradicated. I believe you must understand that there must be a significant figure backing the White Lotus cult for it to persist despite prohibitions. Furthermore, this figure is not simple. Apart from the White Lotus, according to our knowledge, he has connections with the northern barbarians."

"Barbarians?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback. This was becoming more serious. It was one thing to cause internal strife, but colluding with foreign enemies was a death sentence.

Luo Min nodded solemnly. "Indeed. The barbarians will rise again next spring, and at the same time, there will be the White Lotus causing chaos from within. Under the attack from both sides, not to mention our state, even our Hua nationality is in peril. The schemer behind this is truly cunning and malevolent. For his own gain, he not only disrupts the court but also leads the wolf into the house, disregarding our people. We, the sons of Hua, must exterminate such treachery."

Lin Wanrong remained silent. Such matters were common in history books, so he was not surprised.

"The root of the White Lotus disaster must be eradicated," Luo Min declared, raising his hand firmly. "This winter, in the next few days, the infantry and cavalry in Shandong and Zhejiang will act in concert, led by Master Xu, determined to annihilate the White Lotus once and for all. Only by eliminating the internal threats can we resist the external invasions."

Luo Min revealed both the time and the map to Lin Wanrong, clearly treating him as an insider. Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Governor Luo, I don't doubt your and Mr. Xu's determination at all. But there is one thing I'd like to ask. Why are the soldiers from Jiangsu not mobilized, but instead, troops from the distant Zhejiang are called upon? I am genuinely perplexed."

Luo Min gave a bitter smile. "Young Master Lin, do not mock this old man. Aren't you aware why we are not mobilizing the troops from Jiangsu? Cheng De has committed countless crimes, but I can't seem to topple him. It speaks to my incompetence, I have orders I cannot execute, troops I cannot mobilize. I have truly let down the Emperor and the good people of Jiangsu."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Governor Luo, you're being too modest. In my opinion, bringing down Cheng De is not so difficult a task. In fact, there is a great opportunity right now."

Luo Min quickly urged, "Please, Young Master, do tell."

Lin Wanrong asked, "Governor Luo, you've been at odds with Cheng De for years. Do you have any evidence of his corruption and misconduct?"

Naturally," replied Luo Min. "If it wasn't for some people in the court covering for him, I would've brought him down long ago."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, a glint of cold light flashing in his eyes. "No matter if you can't impeach him, you can directly cut him down."