

## Finest 261

### Chapter 261 Encounter with Brigands

"Big brother, Big brother!" Qiaoqiao hastened from behind the curtain, calling out with her charming voice. But Lin Wanrong, in his hurried pace, had already left with Guo Wuchang through the cabin door, not even hearing her call.

"Sister Ning, what do we do? Big brother seems to have encountered some urgent matter and abruptly left without explaining anything." Qiaoqiao returned to the room, stealthily casting a glance at Luo Ning.

Luo Ning seemed not to hear her words, her expression vacant, her face pale, lost in her thoughts. The maid came rushing back with a scroll that Lin Wanrong had written before his departure, handing it to Luo Ning, "Miss, this was left by Young Master Lin."

Frantically, Luo Ning grabbed the scroll to read. The writing was powerful, dragon and phoenix dancing in the characters, a poem that had only two lines completed:

Hibiscus form a tent of layered brocade, side by side they coo in the jade dew.

Luo Ning clenched her teeth, her eyes turning red. Picking up the brush, she added two lines to the unfinished poem:

People say the Jade Pool in spring is like a sea, under the bright moon, a pair of mandarin ducks descend.

Now the poem about the hibiscus tent and mandarin ducks was complete. Luo Ning tossed aside the brush, looked at the verses one last time, then abruptly collapsed on the desk, weeping bitterly...

The people in the main hall, having seen Miss Luo send out two items, had already discerned her affection for Lin San. They were all anticipating a beautiful love story between a talented man and a beautiful woman. Yet, unexpectedly, Lin San, the victor of the poetry contest, abandoned Miss Luo and left hastily, causing considerable astonishment. For a moment, everyone was murmuring, wondering what had transpired.

Luo Min stood up, laughing heartily, "Gentlemen, there's no need for surprise. You all must have seen my daughter's feelings toward Young Master Lin. It seems Master Lin had to attend to an emergency at home, so it's understandable that he had to leave in a rush. Tomorrow, I will personally announce the outcome of this matter to everyone in our hometown. Now that the poetry contest is over and night has just begun, let's enjoy fine wine on this Qinhuai River and return only when we're drunk. Young Prince, Commander Cheng, esteemed guests, do grant me this favor."

Seeing the governor personally explain, everyone felt relieved, believing his words. The entertainment was over for the day, and now it was time to enjoy the scenic beauty of the Qinhuai River. In a moment, the atmosphere in the cabin became lively again. Zhao Kangning and Cheng De exchanged glances before taking their seats.

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Lin Wanrong quickly walked out of the cabin. Young Master Guo followed him anxiously, "Lin San, my aunt and cousin Yuruo have met with trouble. What can we do?"

Lin Wanrong said, "Young Master, don't be anxious. Tell me the details."

Young Master Guo nodded, "Today's poetry contest, Governor Luo and the Prefect specially sent invitations. Every influential family in Jinling received one, and our Xiao family was no exception. Due to the competitions, I left home early. My aunt and cousin said they would arrive later. But they didn't show up after a long time. Just as I was getting worried, a servant came to report that they found the carriage my aunt and cousin were supposed to be in, in the city. But the two of them were nowhere to be found. It looked as if they were kidnapped. Lin San, what should we do? You must find a way to save my cousin and aunt"

Lin Wanrong's heart blazed with fury. Damn it, what in the world is this? I haven't been home for just a few days, and these two were abducted. Not only the Eldest Miss was taken, but even the Madam was taken as well. Without these two, the Xiao family is practically disassembled. What kind of grudge does this person have against the Xiao family?

"Weren't there any servants accompanying the Eldest Miss and the Madam when they went out?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"They were with Xiao Feng and Little Cui, but these two were knocked unconscious. When they woke up, they couldn't remember anything. Lin San, who do you think bears such a grudge against us that they'd act so viciously?"

Knocked unconscious? Lin Wanrong paused. If someone were seeking revenge, like the White Lotus Sect last time, they would kill on sight and not leave survivors. So why had the culprits merely knocked out Xiao Feng and the others? What was their purpose? He initially thought it might have been the work of Zhao Kangning and Cheng De, but given Xu Wei's character, his plans were always thorough, and Cheng De and the others were likely being secretly monitored by Xu Wei, denying them such an opportunity. So, who could these villains be?

The two talked at the prow of the ship for a while. The ship was originally in the middle of the Qinhuai River, and the surrounding flower boats had long since departed. They waited a long time without seeing a single ferry boat.

Lin Wanrong thought back to his encounter with Du Xiuyuan and Hu Bugui earlier that day and realized, Oh no, Xu Wei and Luo Min, these two old foxes, are probably going to make their move against Cheng De tonight. The waters of the Qinhuai River must have been sealed off by now.

Thinking of this, he became even more anxious. Damn it, if we can't get out of the Qinhuai River, where can we find the two of them? Two weak women, as beautiful as flowers and jade, falling into the hands of villains, if we can't find them by tonight, everything will be over. Xiao Yuruo, what was she thinking, acting so capriciously. Next time I see her, I'll have to give her a good spanking to teach her a lesson.

"A boat, a boat, Lin San, there's a boat coming." Young Master Guo suddenly pointed into the distance and shouted.

Lin Wanrong quickly looked in the direction he was pointing. It was already dusk, and the surface of the water was misty. A small wooden boat was approaching in the distance, with two people on the boat waving at Lin Wanrong.

"Brother Hu, brother Du" Lin Wanrong recognized the two figures and shouted happily.

Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan rowed faster and soon reached the foot of the ship. Lin Wanrong didn't wait for the boat to steady before he jumped down, landing in the middle of the boat. Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan each grabbed an arm and exclaimed, "General Lin, we thought we had lost you."

Lin Wanrong excitedly said, "Brothers, I missed you too. How are the men, are they well?"

Hu Bugui laughed, "They are all good, hiding around here, ready to do something big tonight."

Just as expected, Lin Wanrong nodded to himself. Now that he was no longer in the military, Hu Bugui had openly shared even this secret with him. This bond of life and death, this trust, was incomparable to anything else.

With tears in his eyes, Du Xiuyuan said, "General Lin, when Tong Cheng cowardly fired cannons behind our backs that day, we all thought you were... After that, the tens of thousands of brothers from my Right Wing Army sought out Tong Cheng to avenge you. Had it not been for Marshal Xu stopping us, we would have chopped up that Tong Cheng to feed the turtles long ago."

Hu Bugui said, "And what if we didn't chop him up? I sent Xu Zhen to ambush him along the road. Just one arrow pierced his skull. It was an easy end for this son of a bitch."

Lin Wanrong clung to the two men's arms, expressing his gratitude. "Thank you, my dear brothers. I cannot express how grateful I am."

"General Lin," Du Xiuyuan began, "how did you escape that bombardment? We saw the intensity of the cannon fire, we all thought you were..."

"Ah--" Hu Bugui cut him off. "General Lin has great fortune and a big destiny. He wouldn't be easily harmed by the wicked. I, old Hu, knew this from the beginning. See, I wasn't boasting, was I?"

Lin Wanrong sighed, "The circumstances were complex, and it's difficult to summarize. I'll have a proper chat with you two about it someday."

Hu Bugui nodded, "Right, we have plenty of time. General Lin, Marshal Xu and the brothers are waiting for you. We should go see them."

Lin Wanrong nodded, and they took Guo Wuchang aboard. Hu Bugui rowed the boat, and they proceeded straight ahead. When they reached the shore, they saw the shore brightly lit, with bright weapons shining. It was Xu Wei with thousands of men personally welcoming them.

"Little brother Lin, I'm so glad to see you again!" Xu Wei's voice came from far away before they even landed. It was the first time Young Master Guo had seen the number one scholar in the world, Xu Wenchang. His hands were shaking slightly, and his legs were trembling.

Lin Wanrong greeted, "I apologize for causing you worry, Mr. Xu."

The boat reached the shore, and they jumped off. Xu Wei took Lin Wanrong's hand, "It's not worry, I sincerely thank you, Little brother Lin. Your contribution in the White Lotus Sect affair was monumental, well-known to all. The officers you promoted also showed great merit and capability. You not only made contributions but also fostered talents. How can I not express my gratitude?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, thinking This old man has quite a high opinion of me. But what's the use of some sweet words? It would be more practical to give some silver as a reward.

Xu Wei looked him up and down for a long while before asking, "Little brother Lin, were you injured in the bombardment that day? If your injuries were due to my mistake, I wouldn't find peace for the rest of my life."

"Well, I didn't suffer any significant injuries. I just got a bit dizzy from the blast and couldn't sleep at night because of nightmares. Sometimes I cough up a bit of blood, but other than that, I'm fine. The doctor said that with some good nourishment, I should recover in about thirty years."

Listening to his nonsense, Xu Wei didn't argue, but smiled slightly, "Little brother Lin, for our Great Hua, you devoted yourself entirely, risking your life to fight against the enemy's leader, the Holy Mother of the White Lotus cult, and killed her amidst the cannon fire. Such spirit and courage are truly a model for our soldiers. I must report to the Emperor and request a hefty reward."

The old man was clearly being sarcastic. Even though Lin Wanrong had an exceptionally thick skin, he couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed. However, since Xu Wei pretended to be unaware of the truth, he played along, laughing and said, "Mr. Xu, are you planning to take action today?"

"Indeed. I've been in the Jiangnan region for a while now, and there's a lot waiting for me in the capital. The matter at hand in Jiangsu will mark the end of my visit here. Once it's taken care of, I intend to return to Beijing to report to His Majesty." Xu Wei glanced at Lin Wanrong, "Little brother Lin, how would you have dealt with the situation tonight if you were in my shoes?"

Dammit, he's the strategic mastermind here, why's he asking me? He's just making fun of me, isn't he? Lin Wanrong laughed, "I'm not adept at such things. Aren't these situations where you excel, Mr. Xu? Isn't it all about condemning crimes and taking decisive actions? Surely, you've already prepared for everything. Where would you need my input?"

Xu Wei nodded and sighed, "Little brother, you were born smart. Accusation and execution, indeed, are the tricks of the trade in the world of politics. Many people go their whole lives without grasping these concepts, and yet you've pointed them out in a single statement. If you chose to pursue a political career, I fear no one could match you."

Not interested in his flattery, Lin Wanrong responded, "As for tonight's affair, I look forward to hearing your good news, Mr. Xu. Oh, and another thing. Since you were planning on acting, you must have started keeping an eye on Cheng De and his men. Have they done anything unusual today? Have they kidnapped anyone?"

Xu Wei slowly shook his head, "Indeed, I have been discreetly observing Cheng De and his subordinates. But so far, they haven't made any strange moves today. Why do you ask?"

Lin Wanrong told Xu Wei about Madam Xiao and her daughter's abduction. Xu Wei was shocked, "Such audacity! Who would dare to kidnap Miss Guo? Aren't they afraid of execution to the ninth degree of kinship?"

Kidnapping Madam Xiao equates to execution to the ninth degree of kinship? You must be joking! Lin Wanrong shook his head. He counted on his fingers, the enemies of the Xiao family boiled down to two factions. One was the group led by the unsuccessful intimidator, Young Prince Ning, and the other was the White Lotus cult. Zhao Kangning and Cheng De couldn't pull any tricks under Xu Wei's watch, while the White Lotus cult was practically extinct, leaving behind only two "remnants".

Remnants? Lin Wanrong paused for a moment, recalling all the clues related to the kidnapping of the mother and daughter, suddenly understanding dawned on him. He called out loudly, "Mr. Xu, please prepare a fast horse for me"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's anxious expression, Xu Wei didn't dare delay. He quickly commanded, "Prepare a fast horse for General Lin. Hu Bugui, you take a thousand elite riders, under General Lin's command. Ensure Madam Xiao is rescued unharmed."

By the time Xu Wei had finished arranging, Lin Wanrong was already impatient. As soon as the horse arrived, he didn't bother about Guo Wuchang, quickly mounted, shouted, and spurred the horse onwards. He sped off towards Xuanwu Lake, swift as an arrow released from its bow.

Hu Bugui, leading a thousand elite riders, followed closely behind, their hooves thundering, breaking the silence of Jinling City.

Once he reached Xuanwu Lake, Lin Wanrong dismounted. Looking across the vast lake, there was no sign of any boats to be seen.

"Xian'er, Xian'er," Lin Wanrong called out across the lake.

Waterfowls nestled in the bushes flapped their wings and took flight, amplifying the desolation and silence of the lake. There was no sign of Xian'er's pleasure boat.

"General Lin" Hu Bugui arrived leading a thousand cavalymen, dismounted hurriedly, and announced loudly, "I am at your disposal, General."

Lin Wanrong waved his hand, "Brother Hu, split your men onto small boats and search the Xuanwu Lake for a pleasure boat. If there are people aboard, tell them"

Before he could finish his sentence, Hu Bugui, pointing towards the lake, asked, "General, is it that one?"

Lifting his head, Lin Wanrong saw a large pleasure boat slowly approaching from across the lake. A woman of remarkable beauty was standing at the bow, looking towards the shore and smiling...

## Chapter 262

For the sake of the patient's stability, Micalin allowed no one other than himself and Yuder to follow. Yuder shot a glance toward Kishiar, then followed Micalin directly up to the upper floors.

Inside the room they entered, following a corridor cluttered with broken items, several wounded mages lay asleep.

"These are the ones who were injured at dawn. I put them to sleep with magic for a quick recovery."

With that explanation, Micalin moved towards the innermost bed. As he gently touched the shoulder of a sleeping mage, the man slowly opened his eyes.

"Leader... are you here?"

"Yes, Skelly. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I apologize for causing you concern and being unable to help....."

"The wounded needn't trouble themselves with unnecessary thoughts."

At Micalin's response, the mage called Skelly sighed.

"How can I not, knowing everyone is injured and struggling. But who is that behind you... I seem to see a new face."

To the young mage's anxious and defensive gaze towards Yuder, Micalin extended a reassuring hand.

"He's a collaborator who agreed to help overcome this situation. Just listen to our conversation, no need to worry."

"A collaborator?"

"Yes, Skelly. Actually, the reason I came to see you today is to hear more about the crack in the air phenomenon you mentioned yesterday. Do you remember what you said then?"

At Micalin's words, Skelly widened his eyes.

"If you mean the one I saw at the ruins... Wasn't it concluded that I was just being overly sensitive?"

"It was. But I thought that it might not be a false alarm."

"Pardon?"

"The crack you saw appeared again today. So, I thought we should revisit your account."

The mage, his arm bandaged, alternated his gaze between Micalin and Yuder, then slowly sat up.



"If that's the case... I understand. It was too strange to simply dismiss as a figment. I'll tell you everything I remember."

Skelly began to slowly recount the previous day's events.

"It was in the afternoon when I went to do my shift at the ruins. Gemma and Shail were repairing the barrier, and I was monitoring the changes in the distribution of magic power. It had definitely increased compared to a few days ago. While I was recording that, something strange caught my eye. At first, I thought it was the shadow of a tree, but upon closer inspection, it was a long crack that had appeared in thin air."

The crack that Skelly described was almost identical to what Yuder had seen.

'So, it wasn't the first time it appeared today.'

The crack witnessed before the disaster in his previous life wasn't a one-time occurrence. During the earthquake in the south, more than ten witnesses claimed to have seen something similar to the crack in different areas on different dates.

While not all of their statements might have been true, even the number of witnesses found after the incident suggested the possibility that cracks might have appeared and disappeared without anyone noticing.

Tracking the crack alone was difficult, so he had left it as a hypothesis. Now, knowing the truth quickened his heartbeat.

Fearing a monster might emerge, I had hurried off to summon Gemma and Shail, but by the time I returned, the crack had vanished. Gemma speculated I might have seen an illusion. Shail too suggested that some had been seeing such illusions at the ruins recently and advised me to take a break from research for a while. I had agreed, but just in case, I reported it to the Leader.

However, Micalin, upon hearing Skelly's report at that time, did not take the matter too seriously. It was common for mages, weary from long research, to occasionally see things. And not long after, the surprise attack by monsters that appeared with the darkness of night had robbed them of all leisure, and the story of the strange crack in the air soon faded from their minds.

"Thanks for telling me. Now rest a bit more."

After speaking, Micalin put the weary Skelly back to sleep and looked back at Yuder.

"What do you think?"

"It seems that the crack he saw is not much different from what I've seen."

"So, there is indeed a connection between these phenomena..."

Micalin frowned and fell into thought. Yuder, watching his expression, hesitantly spoke up.

"You just mentioned that there were mages who have seen illusions at the ruins recently, could it be possible that these illusions include such cracks?"

"Hmm, I knew that the number of people seeing illusions had increased, but I assumed it was due to the strain of recent advances in research."

Yet, Micalin fell silent, seemingly considering the point valid.

"We should look into it."

They headed back down the stairs. Yuder followed Micalin, mentally preparing what he would report back to the party.

"Leader, have you finished speaking with Skelly?"

"Yes, it seems what he saw was the same phenomenon as the strange crack that appeared today."

At Micalin's brief explanation, everyone gasped.

"So, ..."

"Although you're all busy with cleaning up the site, there's something you need to investigate immediately."

Micalin gave orders to the mages under him, including Lorna.

"Weren't there quite a few who claimed they saw illusions while exploring the ruins recently? Ask them what they saw, where they saw it, and if they felt anything strange at the time. Anything they can remember, even vaguely."

The mages nodded solemnly.

"Understood."

It didn't take them long to find answers. The responses they gathered while circling around were astonishing.

"It seems like two really saw illusions, while about half a dozen saw something like a crack in the air that could be mistaken for a shadow, like Skelly did. If we include those who are currently out in the village or those in the western base, the number may even increase."

The mages who had retrieved the answers also looked surprised, as if they hadn't expected such a result. The expression on Micalin, their Leader, grew even more grave.

"...So, did you also find out when this was first seen?"

"It's not certain, but among those present here, the first one to see it... it seems like at least a month ago. At the time, it appeared very briefly and vanished, startling them with the thought of a possible monster appearance, but when nothing happened, they soon forgot about it."

"Was it also near the ruins?"

"Yes."

Micalin, who seemed dumbfounded, raised his voice toward the mages.

"But how did not a single one of you think to pay attention to this until now? You should have reported to Tainu immediately!"

"I-I apologize."

"No... no, it's not your fault. It's probably because we've been constantly moving between Tainu and the Great Sarain Forest, with no one consistently staying put. Even I have not visited in the past few months, so who can I blame?"

Micalin, tucking back his tousled hair, turned his keen, saffron-colored eyes towards Yuder.

"It seems we, who claimed to be in pursuit of truth, have turned a blind eye to the phenomenon that was already unfolding. We've shown a shameful image."

"That's not true."

"About a month ago, coincidentally, significant changes in the distribution of magic power were observed at the ruins we were studying. It seems highly likely there's some sort of connection, but... right now, due to the crisis, it's difficult to go there."

"Then could you at least explain a bit more about what you were studying at the Magic Spring Ruins? I'm not sure what you mean by a change in the distribution of magic power, but if I understand what it is, it might help."

"Well..."

Micalin looked thoughtfully at Yuder and the rest of the Cavalry, struggling with what to say. Even though they had decided to cooperate, discussing the details of the research was obviously causing him some consternation.

However, he quickly made his decision.

"Have you ever heard that the number of mages entering the Pearl Tower every year is dwindling?"

The words, heavily uttered by the old mage, made all the Cavalry blink in unison. Yuder had vaguely heard about the issue in his previous life, but feigned ignorance for the moment.

"I think I've heard something about it... but I'm not quite sure."

"Among us mages, this has been one of the big problems that have been going on for at least several hundred years. Especially in the past few decades, it has gotten worse. There are even rumors that at this rate, mages might disappear altogether."

"..."

"The only reason why the number of mages is dwindling and the number of those who can't use offensive magic is increasing is simple. The magic power in this world is slowly thinning."

Upon hearing Micalin's direct explanation, the expressions of the mages standing behind them darkened.

"We were excavating the Magic Spring Ruins to find a solution to this. Although, by now, even the Pearl Tower doesn't have much hope for our research."

The research was on a much larger scale than Yuder had anticipated. As he listened to the complex explanations that followed, he tried to recall what the mages of the Western Mage Union had previously said about the Magic Spring.

Kishiar had told the Cavalry that there was a legend that the earliest mages drew their power from the Magic Spring. It seemed that the mages of the Western Mage Union had been excavating ruins presumed to be this Magic Spring in an attempt to find a way to restore their power.

'It's unclear whether the ruins they discovered really are the Magic Spring or where it once existed... But it's certain that, even unknowingly, more magic power has pooled there than anywhere else. Just like the mountain range where the Red Stone was found.'

Yuder didn't know much about magic, but thankfully, he now had Kishiar, who was knowledgeable on the subject, with him. When he subtly shifted his gaze, he saw the tall man still standing motionless, showing no reaction. He was fully focused, not missing a word of Micalin's explanation.

The mere thought that he didn't have to find the answers on his own made him feel significantly better.

## Chapter 263 The Surprise Kiss from a Maiden

Upon the Qinhuai River, the after-competition atmosphere of the poetry competition was in full swing among the participating scholars. Freed from the constraints of rank and wealth, they appeared exceptionally carefree. Amid the cycle of cups and goblets, the atmosphere was incredibly heated.

With a smile, Luo Min said to Cheng De and Zhao Kangning, "Young Prince, Commander Cheng, this poetry competition has been held several times, and this year's is by far the most lively. Not only have we attracted many scholars, but even the Young Prince has graced us with his presence. Truly, it is an honor for Jinling."

Zhao Kangning snorted, "I think the most exciting part is that you, Governor Luo, have managed to attract a good son-in-law!"

"Is that so?" Luo Min laughed heartily, "Nothing is decided yet, and I cannot make promises. As for the young ones, let them sort things out themselves."

Cheng De said, "Having been on military campaigns for many years, I am not much of a poetry person. I came here today merely to show my support for the Young Prince and Governor Luo."

Gao Shou, standing outside the cabin, gave Luo Min a slight nod. A glint of joy passed through Luo Min's eyes, and he turned to Cheng De with a smile, "Speaking of military campaigns, Commander Cheng, reminds me. News came yesterday from the Capital that Marshal Xu Wei led tens of thousands of troops against the White Lotus sect, eliminating all the bandits lurking in Jining, Shandong. Marshal Xu has captured the leaders of the White Lotus bandits, Lu Kanli and his son, and executed the Holy Mother of the White Lotus. The White Lotus sect has been entirely wiped out. The bandit problem that has plagued us for years was exterminated overnight, truly a cause for joy. It is said that the Emperor was greatly pleased and ordered this news to be sent to all provincial officials. I suppose, the imperial edict to celebrate this great victory will soon reach Jiangsu..."

Cheng De and Zhao Kangning exchanged glances, a hint of ruthlessness flashing in their eyes. Cheng De nodded, "Indeed, the White Lotus has been a menace for years and it deserved its fate."

It's a pity though, given Jiangsu's proximity to Shandong, our cavalry and infantry from Jiangsu made no contribution to the campaign. It is somewhat regrettable."

Shaking his head with a laugh, Luo Min replied, "Commander Cheng, there's no need for modesty. Everyone contributed to the eradication of the White Lotus. If it weren't for your men guarding the borders of Shandong and Jiangsu, wouldn't the White Lotus bandits have slipped into Jiangsu? In this respect, your contribution is far from minor."

The words between them carried underlying messages, which others failed to understand. Sitting in the center, Zhao Kangning chuckled, "Both of you need not be modest. This was a collective effort by all provinces. When it comes to credit, neither of you can be excluded. Let's just wait for the Emperor's decree. I believe everyone will be rewarded."

The three men burst into hearty laughter. Each had his own thoughts, understood only by themselves.

"Governor, the Emperor's jubilant news of the victory over the White Lotus sect has arrived," a messenger hurried in, reporting to Luo Min.

"Oh, speak of the devil! Today's poetry competition is full of surprises indeed!" exclaimed Luo Min, delighted. Turning to Cheng De, he added, "Commander Cheng, let's go receive this good news together."

Cheng De gave a slight nod, and they both left the cabin. As Young Prince Ning wasn't involved in the political arena of Jiangsu, he didn't need to personally greet the news. Watching Luo Min's retreating figure, a cold glint flashed in Zhao Kangning's eyes.

Luo Min led Cheng De into a side room, which was entirely empty. Where was the sight of the imperial envoy who had supposedly brought the good news? Cheng De, puzzled, asked, "Governor Luo, where is the envoy?"

"The envoy? Oh, he'll be here soon," Luo Min laughed, no longer able to hide the murderous intent in his eyes.

Cheng De sensed that something was amiss. He demanded loudly, "Governor Luo, where is the envoy? Why have you led me here? What are you trying to do?"

"Cheng De, are you aware of your crimes?" a stern voice echoed. From behind the curtain, a man emerged. His hair was white as snow, and he radiated an imposing aura. It was none other than Xu Wei, the great commander who led the crackdown on bandits in Shandong.

"Minister Xu? You... you... why are you here?" Cheng De was shocked. He backed away quickly, his voice trembling. His hand instinctively reached for the saber at his waist.

Behind him, the figures of Gao Qiu and several armed guards appeared, effectively trapping Cheng De.

Driven by shock and fear, Cheng De's hand pressed onto his saber. Gathering his courage, he asked, "Minister Xu, what are you doing? What crime have I committed?"

"You've been corrupt, using troops arbitrarily, colluding with the White Lotus, and plotting rebellion. Are these crimes not enough?" Xu Wei responded with a cold laugh.

"Nonsense! I've led troops for many years. My loyalty to the court is as clear as day and night. How could I possibly rebel? You should not slander me!" Cheng De defended himself. "You are just trying to pin a crime on me. I will report this to the military department, to Prince Cheng, and to the Emperor himself!"

"Enough with your excuses!" Xu Wei shouted, "Your deeds have been thoroughly investigated by Governor Luo. The evidence is undeniable, and it's all in my possession. You've been colluding with the White Lotus bandits, and your eldest son, Cheng Ruinian, was sent by you to deliver messages to Lu Kanli of the White Lotus. He's now in my custody, and we've found a letter bearing your personal signature. Cheng Ruinian has confessed, and he said it was you who sent him to inform you about our military movements. Do you still dare to deny it? What's more, an hour ago, I personally led soldiers to search your mansion. You've hidden a golden knife and a jade seal in your back garden. Cheng De, are you planning a rebellion?"

"That's impossible!" Cheng De yelled, "You are framing me. I did not hide any golden knife or jade seal. That letter wasn't written by me, it was..." He paused, remembering something, and dared not continue.

"Who wrote it, then?" Xu Wei gave a cold smile, "We have ironclad evidence. Are you still trying to deny it? Bring in Cheng Ruinian!"



Two soldiers pushed Cheng Ruinian out from the inner cabin. His hands were tied behind his back, his body covered in bruises, his face deathly pale. It was evident that he had been tortured. A cloth was stuffed in his mouth, and upon seeing Cheng De, he began to wail, struggling desperately.

"Cheng De, now that we have both the material evidence and the witness, what else do you have to say?" Xu Wei's voice was stern, his demeanor imposing and inviolable.

In agony, Cheng De screamed, "Luo Min, you... you and Xu Wei conspired against me. I will report you to the Emperor, I will accuse you!"

Luo Min scoffed, "Cheng De, you have committed countless atrocities alongside your master over the years, and you are well aware of them. Did you truly believe that you are untouchable? As for today's matter, even your master won't be able to save you."

Xu Wei pulled out an imperial edict from his sleeve and read, "The Commander-in-Chief of Jiangsu, Cheng De, has been found guilty of corruption, collusion with traitors, and plotting rebellion. He is to be executed immediately, by the Emperor's decree!"

"No, this can't be. This is a forged edict. You're committing treason. I'll report you, Prince Cheng--" Cheng De screamed madly, drawing his sword and waving it frantically, his face a mask of despair.

Xu Wei gave a signal to Gao Qiu. Holding a steel blade, Gao Qiu slowly advanced.

Fear was etched on Cheng De's face as he let out a scream and charged forward. He was the Commander-in-Chief of Jiangsu and a veteran soldier; his sword strike was strong. However, it was nowhere near enough against Gao Qiu.

Gao Qiu deflected his attack easily and pushed back, positioning his steel blade on Cheng De's neck, about to finish him off, when a loud shout from outside the cabin interrupted, "Fire, we've got a fire—"

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Lin Wanrong stared blankly at the firecracker soaring into the sky, the whistling, bright light, burning out, and falling, a vague unease creeping in his heart.

Seeing his strange demeanor, Qin Xian'er asked anxiously, "Husband, what did you say? What's happening?"

An Biru gave him a meaningful glance and said, "With the destruction of my White Lotus, Xu Wei's next step would be to clean up the Jiangsu bureaucracy. I fear today is Cheng De's death anniversary."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. This Sister An was really not simple, guessing the attack on Cheng De with a single sentence, he absolutely couldn't underestimate her. He couldn't help but look at An Biru more carefully. He had only seen the coquettish side of Sister An before, never witnessing such insightful analysis from her. Thinking back to the fall of Jining City, if not for the White Lotus King Lu Kanli's refusal to heed her advice, how could Jining have been conquered so easily? This Sister An, although seemingly flirtatious, was in fact extremely wise. Her insights far surpassed many men.

"Why are you staring at me? What are you plotting?" An Biru smiled, caressing her hair subtly, her charms were evident. She leaned in and whispered in his ear, "Little brother, do you want to hold me? Wait till Xian'er is away, and I'll let you hold me. He he, I wonder what it feels like to be in a man's embrace. I really want to know."

This enchantress knew men all too well, tantalizingly out of reach, making him yearn for her, despite his frustration. Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, acting as if he hadn't noticed her seduction. He sighed slightly, "Sister, I've only just realized how incredibly lucky I was to capture Jining that easily. If the entire White Lotus Army had followed your advice, the battle would have been tough."

An Biru, thinking of the past, gave a bitter smile, "What's the use of saying that now? I spent twenty years on a task, only to fail at the last hurdle. However, you weren't bad yourself, besieging without attacking, feigning reality, and then striking when our morale was low, turning the false into real. You're really cunning. You little rascal, you ruined my plan, I hate you, he he—"

Lin Wanrong shivered, this fox was mocking him by talking like Eldest Miss Xiao, wasn't she?

Xian'er snuggled against him and said, "Husband, you and Master met under adversarial circumstances, yet now we three are together, and isn't it quite nice? Master and I will leave it to you to take care of us for a lifetime."

Sweating, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, "This little imp Xian'er is intentionally tempting me, doesn't she know that I and her master are both desirous of each other? A little slip could lead to

something beyond friendship. By then, when your Husband becomes your Master, you'll be too late to cry.'

"Even a tiger caught napping is still a tiger. Little brother, from the looks of it, your plans must be foolproof," An Biru said with a laugh.

Suddenly, Lin Wanrong remembered that Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning were still on the ship. His face changed, he sprang up and rushed toward the deck.

"Husband, what are you doing?" Xian'er exclaimed in surprise.

"I need to go to the Qinhuai River. Xian'er, you and Master Sister wait for me on the boat," Lin Wanrong hastily replied without looking back.

Thankfully, the swift horse left behind by Hu Bugui was still tied up on the shore. Lin Wanrong untied the reins, and as he was about to mount the horse, he felt a soft body lightly float onto the horse, her arms tightly wrapping around his waist, her full chest rubbing against his back.

"Husband, I will accompany you, I want to protect you," Qin Xian'er said with deep affection, pressing her cheek against his broad back.

This girl, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but smile, fondling her buttock. In his anxiety, he didn't bother to stop her and spurred the horse into a gallop.

An Biru watched as the young couple rode away, shaking her head and sighing softly. Her gaze lightly fell on the water surface, her thoughts inscrutable.

When they arrived at the Qinhuai River, the place was already sealed off by Xu Wei's soldiers, permitting entry but no exit. These soldiers, mostly elite troops drawn from the right-wing army that Lin Wanrong once commanded, recognized him instantly. Seeing Lin Wanrong, they shouted, "General Lin, General Lin has returned!"

From the camp, a young officer rushed over excitedly, "General Lin, General Lin, so you're really alive—"

Lin Wanrong and Qin Xian'er dismounted. He patted the young officer's shoulder and said, "Xu Zhen, you've done well. It's been only a few days and you're already an officer. I see you and Brother Hu are on the fast track to becoming top commanders."

When Lin Wanrong was harmed by Tong Cheng, his subordinates plotted revenge for him. It was Xu Zhen who Hu Bugui had assigned to assassinate Tong Cheng, so naturally, Lin Wanrong wanted to thank him.

Xu Zhen gratefully said, "General Lin, you were the one who saw my potential and promoted me. All that I have today, I owe to you. I'm ready to risk my life at your command."

Back when Lin Wanrong was the commander of the Chuzhou army, Xu Zhen was still somewhat immature. Now, with a few days' passage and the experience of war, the boy had shed his youthful naivety and grown into a true soldier.

Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "Let's save that for later. Xu Zhen, quickly arrange a boat for me to get to the large ship in the middle of the river."

Xu Zhen urgently said, "General Lin, today Marshal Xu has ordered that passage through this river is only allowed inwards, not outwards. There seems to be serious trouble brewing. The area ahead is very dangerous, you must not risk your personal safety."

"You're regressing, lad, having fought so many battles yet still speaking of taking risks," Lin Wanrong laughed, "Hurry and prepare a small boat, I worry that a mishap may occur if we delay."

Somewhat embarrassed, Xu Zhen quickly smiled and made arrangements. Qin Xian'er stood close to him, her face lighting up in a sweet smile, "Husband, your soldiers are very loyal to you."

Lin Wanrong shook his head and sighed. This loyalty was won with life and death battles; how could they not be faithful?

Xu Zhen was in charge of sealing off the waterway, and thus he had numerous fast boats at his disposal. He found a sturdy wooden boat for Lin Wanrong, and personally rowed it, ferrying Lin Wanrong and his wife towards the flower boat of Luo Ning.

They had covered just over half the distance when Xu Zhen suddenly exclaimed, "General, look, it's on fire!"

"What?" Lin Wanrong was startled. Looking ahead, he saw thick smoke billowing out from Luo Ning's flower boat and the two adjacent scholar's leisure boats. All three had caught fire simultaneously. Someone had intentionally started the fires. This night was destined to be anything but peaceful.

Lin Wanrong yelled, "Go, we must hurry."

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"Where's the fire?" Xu Wei, who commanded an army of tens of thousands, heard of the fire. He felt a jolt of surprise but maintained his composure and shouted outwards.

"Reporting to Marshal Xu and Governor Luo, the adjacent two boats and the upper room of this boat have caught fire. The people are panicked, and the situation is chaotic. We need your decision," came the reply.

Luo Min sneered, "Cheng De, so you had prepared for this."

Cheng De laughed heartily, "Governor Luo, I've been a cautious man ever since I was in the army. While your extravagant courtship on behalf of your beloved daughter may be due to deep affection, it cannot but arouse suspicions. My preparation was necessary. If I'm not mistaken, this fire probably started in Miss Luo's boudoir."

Before Luo Min could respond, a crashing sound was heard as two agile shadows burst through the window. Their steel blades gleamed as they lunged toward Luo Min and Xu Wei.

"Protect the two masters—" Gao Qiu, the head of the palace guards, reacted calmly. He held the blade to Cheng De's throat and shouted. His guards hurriedly formed a human shield around the two masters. The two assassins made a feint before they both attacked Gao Qiu. Their target, naturally, was to rescue Cheng De.

"Behead Cheng De—" Luo Min shouted.

"Behead Cheng De—" Gao Qiu bellowed, bringing his steel blade down. Cheng De's head separated from his body instantly, with blood spurting out several feet high from his neck.

The two assassins did not expect that in such a dangerous situation, Luo Min would disregard his own safety and overstep his authority by ordering Cheng De's execution without a second thought. Seeing Cheng De's body fall apart, the two assassins paused momentarily. Gao Qiu, with blood on his blade and a murderous aura surrounding him, pounced forward and killed one of the assassins. The guards rushed forward and surrounded the remaining assassin.

"Quickly, extinguish the fire, ensure Miss Luo's safety, and keep an eye on the Young Prince--" Xu Wei urgently commanded.

Luo Min smiled, "Mr. Xu, I wouldn't worry too much about my daughter. With Gao Shou there, nothing will go wrong."

Xu Wei nodded, "This arson, I fear, isn't the work of Cheng De. Today, you seized the opportunity amid chaos to kill Cheng De, indeed removing a future threat, but explaining this to the Ministry of War might not be so easy."

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Lin Wanrong anxiously glanced at Luo Ning's burning ship. The fire seemed to have originated from the main cabin. He suddenly remembered Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao were in the cabin, his heart pounded with fear. "Row faster--" he shouted.

Seeing his urgency, Xian'er took his hand, "Husband, don't worry, let me help you."

Qin Xian'er stood at the bow of the boat, exerting force from her feet. Her energy turned sharply, and the boat shot forward like an arrow released from a bow.

"My God, why didn't I think of this before? That sister An always used this trick to row, and I can do it too." His heart filled with urgency, Lin Wanrong moved forward and grabbed Xian'er's small hand, "Wife, I'll help you."

Qin Xian'er smiled sweetly, holding her husband's large hand. Both of them together exerted their energy. Lin Wanrong's power was exceptional; with the combined efforts of husband and wife, the boat instantly sped up even more. Xu Zhen and several soldiers watched in awe as the general and his wife rowed without oars, truly miraculous.

Du Xiuyuan had long led several thousand soldiers on small boats. Holding high torches, they illuminated the water surface like daylight, and surrounded the three large ships. The two boats carrying the scholars had already plunged into chaos. The soldiers rapidly approached the large boats, bailing water and fighting the fire.

On the boat carrying Luo Ning, which was full of influential figures and officials from Jinling City, the sight of the weapons and open flames caused widespread panic. Zhao Kangning sat among the crowd, completely calm. A smirk played on the corner of his mouth as he periodically glanced upstairs at Luo Ning's boudoir.

Just as Lin Wanrong's small boat neared the painted boat, he was about to step aboard when Qin Xian'er suddenly pulled him back, "Husband, wait--"

Lin Wanrong turned back, confused. Xian'er took a handkerchief from her clothing, covered her face, and shyly said, "In the past, when I was at Miaoyu Pavilion, I had to deal with various people for the sect's greater cause. Many in Jinling might recognize me. Now that I'm married to you, if they were to recognize me, it would surely bring trouble for you."

Such thoughtful consideration. Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, watched as she concealed her face, then took her hand and stepped aboard.

Lin Wanrong, anxious for Qiaoqiao's safety, had rushed here. He scanned the crowd, chaos and noise everywhere. After several sweeps, he could not spot Luo Ning or Qiaoqiao.

"Husband, look!" Xian'er pointed, her voice urgent.

Lin Wanrong looked up and saw that the flames in the upper cabin were raging. The paper windows had all caught fire, popping and crackling. Two shadowy figures were sneaking along the edge of the cabin, so well hidden that, if not for Xian'er's keen eyes, they would have been hard to spot.

"Dammit, there's foul play indeed," Lin Wanrong yelled, leading Xian'er upstairs in a rush. With a rustling sound, a burning piece of wood fell before them, nearly igniting his clothes.

Seeing her husband risking himself like this, Xian'er hastily shielded him. Lin Wanrong looked up to see two shadowy figures being intercepted by a burly man. The three stood together, allowing Lin Wanrong to recognize the man who had stopped the two thieves - it was Gao Shou, the expert fighter.

"Big brother, big brother—" a sweet call came from the room.

Lin Wanrong spun around to see Qiaoqiao at an intact window, waving her hand animatedly, shouting towards him with excitement.

"Qiaoqiao, wait for me—" Lin Wanrong shouted back, leaping to his feet. Only when he saw Qiaoqiao safe did he feel relief in his heart.

Just as he and Xian'er were about to continue upstairs, Luo Min and Xu Wei emerged from a room, swiftly walking towards them, saying, "Little brother, don't be anxious. I have already sent guards to protect the young ladies. They will not be in danger. You must not risk yourself; just wait calmly."

'Not anxious? Damn, that's my wife. Of course, you wouldn't worry.' He felt contempt for the two old foxes; a good plot to catch a turtle in a jar turned into a messy porridge by them, yet they had the nerve to tell him not to worry. His gaze swept over to Zhao Kangning, who sat leisurely with a cup of tea in his hand, his face displaying a self-satisfied, sardonic smile.

'Son of a bitch, he's even showing off now.' Lin Wanrong whispered something into Xian'er's ear. She gave a light smile, broke a bamboo chopstick in half, and with a flick of her slender finger, a light 'pop' was heard. Zhao Kangning's chair disintegrated beneath him, and he landed flat on his butt, the scalding tea spilling all over him. Zhao Kangning let out a pained yell, silencing the chaotic crowd in the cabin.

With a smug grin, Lin Wanrong hurried upstairs with Xian'er amidst the confusion. They found Gao Shou and a dozen guards surrounding four assassins. Damn, there were two more hidden. Luckily Luo Min and his men were prepared, otherwise today's matter wouldn't have ended well. These assassins were skilled and fought stubbornly, even though they were surrounded. A single glance was enough to tell that they were loyal to the death.

Lin Wanrong laughed loudly, "You ignorant fools, your master has already been captured, yet you still resist in the corner."

Although the assassins were well trained, human instinct made their gaze involuntarily drift toward Zhao Kangning.



'As expected, it's this bastard.' Anger flared within Lin Wanrong. Should he let Xian'er use a divine needle to kill this bastard while he was unprepared? This reckless thought gave him a start. He couldn't deny, it was a tempting idea. But if he did that, Xu Wei and Luo Min would be in trouble.

He suppressed the idea with resentment, but on the other hand, Xian'er wasn't idle on the side. With a flick of her fingers, the four assassins inexplicably froze, giving Gao Shou the opportunity to capture them all at once.

"Qiaoqiao, Qiaoqiao—" Lin Wanrong rushed into Luo Ning's boudoir, Qiaoqiao, her eyes teary but a smile on her face, hurled herself into his arms and sobbed, "Big brother, big brother, you've finally come!"

"My little treasure, you're the apple of my eye, of course I had to come," Lin Wanrong said softly in her ear, while sneakily glancing at Xian'er. He saw his usually jealous sweetheart smiling at Qiaoqiao, surprisingly tranquil. The often vinegar-eating Xian'er being this peaceful with Qiaoqiao was indeed a twist of fate.

"Qiaoqiao, this building is on fire, it's so dangerous, why didn't you come downstairs?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"It's not that I didn't want to, but Sister Ning..." Qiaoqiao paused here, surreptitiously glancing toward the bed. "She said she would only come downstairs when you arrived—"

Lin Wanrong followed her gaze, only to see Luo Ning sitting on the bed, traces of tears still visible on her face. However, she showed no emotion, staring at him blankly without uttering a word.

Feeling a bit creeped out by her gaze, Lin Wanrong thought, 'What's gotten into this girl? She's not looking for a fight, is she? I did have an urgent matter, didn't I just rush back?' Feeling a little guilty, he suppressed his unease, walked over, squatted in front of her, and asked softly, "Miss Luo, are you... are you alright?"

Suddenly, a warm, fragrant softness threw itself into his arms. Luo Ning's voluptuous, fiery body pressed tightly against his chest, her hands circled around his waist. Her soft, hot lips forcefully covered his, a scent like orchids and musk filled his nostrils, leaving him a little dazed and dizzy.

Caught in a state of surprise and confusion, Lin Wanrong's mind buzzed. 'Holy crap, did this girl just kiss me?'

## Chapter 264 You're Mine Now

'Dammit, this is so sudden, so terrible, with my two wives standing right there. Please, miss, have some decency.' He leaned against Luo Ning's chest, thinking helplessly.

Luo Ning's lips were soft and warm, like the sweetest honey, simply irresistible. The scent filled his mouth, accompanied by a sweet aroma. Miss Luo's breath was hot, the gentle whimpers from her mouth signaled she had forgotten where they were!

'Kiss then, let's see who is scared.' Lin Wanrong embraced Luo Ning with a swift move, pulling her body into his arms. He gently kneaded her back with his warm hands, savoring the sweetness of her lips with delight.

"Big brother, you are mine now." Luo Ning, nearly suffocated by his kiss, felt both startled and thrilled. She struggled slightly, her almond-shaped eyes slightly open, her emotions bewildered, and she whispered.

"Eh? What?" General Lin, immersed in the sweetness, paused, his mind not yet catching up. His intuition told him something was off with what she said.

Realizing her words were inappropriate, Luo Ning bashfully punched him a few times, murmuring, "It's all your fault, always making me say the wrong things. Big brother, I belong to you."

His mood lifted at these words. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Miss Luo, if you don't mind, shall we continue—"

"Big brother (Husband)——" Qiaoqiao and Qin Xian'er called out simultaneously, their faces slightly aggrieved.

Suddenly, Lin Wanrong remembered they were still on the burning boat, the cabin could collapse at any moment. He had lost his mind! Luo Ning was also dangerously reckless.

"Husband, this room is on fire, we should leave soon. This is no place for lingering," Qin Xian'er huffed, her lips puckered.

Reluctantly kissing Luo Ning one more time, Lin Wanrong cleared his throat to hide his awkwardness, "Exactly, exactly. What Miss Luo and I just did was a temperature test experiment in high heat, don't take it seriously. We act on affection, but also respect the proprieties. Qiaoqiao, Xian'er, Miss Luo, let's go down."

Hearing his glib explanation, all three women scoffed lightly, their faces blushing. Luo Ning, most embarrassed of all, had acted out of character, far beyond her usual limits. Hearing his teasing, she let out a soft whimper, lowering her head, not daring to look at them.

Xian'er pulled Qiaoqiao, Lin Wanrong grabbed Luo Ning, and they rushed downstairs. After a few steps, Luo Ning suddenly looked up at Lin Wanrong, whispering, "Big brother, I have something to say—"

"Speak in bed—oh, no, I mean, speak on the deck," Lin Wanrong hurriedly said.

Luo Ning firmly stopped, softly saying, "Big brother, I need to say it now, otherwise, I fear I might change my mind later."

'Clever girl, expressing her feelings on a burning ship, so bloody thrilling, my heart's pounding.' Lin Wanrong laughed bitterly, "Speak quickly, or we'll end up as roast ducks."

Luo Ning, utterly unafraid of the raging inferno around them, turned to face Lin Wanrong and asked, "Big brother, when I gave you the mandarin duck handkerchief and the hibiscus tent, why did you hastily leave?"

"Busy...I was..." Lin Wanrong said, glancing nervously at the leaping flames. "I had urgent matters to attend to, life and death affairs. Look, I just dealt with that, and didn't I rush back here without a pause? Just so you know, on the way back here, I didn't think about Qiaoqiao at all, only you."

"I don't believe you," Luo Ning said, her cheeks flushed — whether from the heat or embarrassment, he couldn't tell. "Today, in front of so many people, you abandoned me. Even with urgent matters, you didn't even have time to finish the poem? As a young maiden, I gathered enough courage to give you the handkerchief under the hibiscus tent, and this is how you treat me. If you were in my place, wouldn't you be angry, wouldn't you feel wronged?"

Lin Wanrong knew she was right, but he couldn't admit it. "It was really urgent, and I had no choice. Miss Luo, please forgive me this once," he implored hastily.

Luo Ning shook her head. "Whose life were you saving? In your eyes, am I not as important as that person?"

He hadn't considered that, and her question left him somewhat dumbfounded.

"No matter what," Luo Ning said, sounding hurt, "I lost face in front of everyone today. You must compensate me, Big brother."

"Compensate? How?" he asked, curious.

Blushing, Luo Ning said, "Since we've been seeing each other, it's always been me making the moves, and you've never shown any sign of affection. Even though I know how you feel about me, others might think I'm shamelessly chasing you. Today, you came to save me on the burning ship, and I threw caution to the wind, expressing my love for you. I know in my heart, in this life and the next, I belong to you. But you have so many beautiful women who fancy you. I don't know where I stand in your heart, and it troubles me. If you don't feel the same about me, I'd rather spend the rest of my life alone than cause any animosity between you and your other ladies. But if you do feel the same about me, I'll be waiting for your message. I want everyone to know that you and I are a pair of loving mandarin ducks."

Lin Wanrong understood what she was implying: in their relationship, she had always been the one taking the initiative while he played the passive role. This time, she wanted him to pursue her and save her some face.

Such was the unique thinking of this talented woman. But her wanting him to take the initiative? 'Miss, I'm very busy, with beautiful women lining up to marry me. If I pursued them all, how could I possibly manage? And besides, you were the one who pursued me in the first place. If I took the initiative now, it'd be like adding fuel to the fire. If I devour you whole, you wouldn't even know it. Silly girl, don't you see I'm trying to protect you?'

Lin Wanrong laughed softly, feigning ignorance, "Miss Luo, I'm not quite sure what you're getting at."

"You're so annoying, Big brother," Luo Ning reproached him, her eyes full of playful shyness. She pouted, "You know exactly what I mean, yet you play dumb. If you don't come... I'll proclaim to all of Jinling that you have abandoned me for another, having had your fill of me, yet tossing me aside..."

"Had my fill of what? What is it?" Lin Wanrong laughed, playing along.

"You're so naughty!" Luo Ning playfully slapped his chest a few times before standing on her tiptoes to plant a light kiss on his lips. "So, it's settled then. Big brother, I'll be waiting for you..." With those words, she cast him a shy yet coquettish smile. With a flirtatious sway of her body, she scurried down the stairs.

Qin Xian'er watched Luo Ning's retreating figure, grumbling, "That sly little fox, taking advantage of my distraction to bewitch my husband."

Qiaoqiao laughed as she took her hand, "Sister Xian'er, it's not Sister Ning who's the fox, you're the one who seems more like it."

Xian'er, who was fond of Qiaoqiao, asked curiously, "Why?"

Qiaoqiao responded with a giggle, "In just a few days of Big brother's absence, you became his wife, no one can match your speed. Isn't it you who bewitched him? Besides, sister, you're so beautiful, there's nothing wrong in being a vixen and captivating Big brother, right? Hehe—"

Watching Luo Ning's graceful figure descend the stairs, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but admire her. His gaze lingered on her swaying hips before he swallowed hard.

Xian'er hurriedly came over, grabbing his arm, "Husband, what's the matter? What did that Luo girl say to you to leave you so entranced?"

He couldn't tell her. Not even if his life depended on it. If Xian'er and Qiaoqiao knew Luo Ning's thoughts, they would demand the same attention, and he'd have no time left for anything else. Pretending to look around, he suddenly exclaimed, "Oh no, the fire is spreading! Xian'er, Qiaoqiao, you go first, I'll cover—"

"Annoying—" The two girls laughed at his theatrics, not pressing him further about what Luo Ning had said. They took him by the arm and guided him down the stairs.

Du Xiuyuan's soldiers, who had already boarded the big boat, were busy putting out the fire. Seeing Lin Wanrong approach, they rushed over to greet him, "General Lin, Governor Luo is waiting for you over there."

Looking in the indicated direction, Lin Wanrong indeed saw Luo Min sitting on a large chair, smiling at him. Luo Ning, who had just come down, stood obediently next to Luo Min, her gaze straight ahead, yet a small smile tugged at her lips.

Seated in the large chair to Luo Min's left was the Young Prince Zhao Kangning, his face livid. His clothes were still wet from earlier and his face was contorted with anger, a stark contrast to his usual debonair demeanor.

One of Zhao Kangning's guards approached him, whispering something in his ear. Zhao Kangning's hand slammed down on the table, his face turning pale with rage, "What? They dare to be so audacious? Presumptuous! Utterly presumptuous!"

Luo Min maintained a poker face, acting as if he hadn't heard the words. He fiddled with the teacup in his hands, a flicker of excitement flashing through his eyes.

As Lin Wanrong descended the stairs, Old Dong and Qingshan immediately surrounded him, "Big brother (Son-in-law), you're okay!"

"I'm fine, a wildfire can't burn out everything; with the spring breeze, it revives," Lin Wanrong replied with a chuckle. Qiaoqiao and Xian'er stood on either side of him, radiant as flowers. Even without seeing Xian'er's face, just by her exquisite figure, one could imagine her unmatched beauty.

Luo Yuan came over and asked, "Big brother, what's going on with you and my sister? I noticed that she seems a bit different. You must keep the hibiscus curtain and handkerchief she gave you."

This little Luo was really oblivious! Couldn't he see that he had won his sister's heart? Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Don't worry, I'll keep them and appreciate them every day."

Xu Wei entered with Gao Qiu. Gao Qiu, having seen Lin Wanrong from a distance, was overjoyed. Since their parting in Jining, he thought Lin Wanrong had perished in cannon fire. Seeing him again, he was naturally extremely pleased. He disregarded formalities, waving his arm at Lin Wanrong energetically, and shouted, "Brother Lin, Brother Lin!"

Lin Wanrong gave a playful smile, greeted him with a salute, "Brother Gao, I'm doing well."

Seeing Xu Wei enter, Zhao Kangning's face changed, and he yelled, "Mr. Xu, the Young Prince needs an explanation from you."

Xu Wei, seeing Zhao Kangning, expressed joy and quickly approached, "Isn't this Young Prince Kangning? I didn't expect to see you here on Qinhuai River in Jinling City."

Zhao Kangning waved dismissively and sneered, "Mr. Xu, this Young Prince also didn't expect to run into you here, quite unexpected."

Xu Wei squinted his eyes, smiling, "I've just finished subduing the White Lotus rebellion and have been appointed to work in Jiangsu by the Emperor's decree. What brings the Young Prince to the South? Could it be official business?"

Fumbling in his response to Xu Wei, the number one scholar, Zhao Kangning admitted, "Oh, I am here in the South to visit a few old friends on behalf of my father. Mr. Xu, I don't understand one thing, and I'd like you to clarify."

At this time, the hall had been vacated. The elites of Jinling had all been moved to another boat. Only a few soldiers putting out the fire and a handful of people remained on the large boat. Lin Wanrong smiled, pulling up a stool to sit aside and enjoy the show between these dignitaries.

Xu Wei nodded with a smile, "Young Prince, please proceed!"

Zhao Kangning's face turned beet-red, "Mr. Xu, what crime has Cheng De, the Commander-in-chief of Jiangsu, committed that you want to execute him? He is a high-ranking official of the court, in charge of the soldiers of a province. If he has committed any crime, he should be reported to the Ministry of War for judgment. What are you trying to achieve by doing this?"

Xu Wei gave Zhao Kangning a meaningful glance, "The Young Prince is well-informed. Since the Young Prince has asked, I won't conceal it. Cheng De, the Commander-in-chief of Jiangsu, has not only hidden his corruption and fraud from the court, but he has also privately mobilized soldiers, colluded with the White Lotus, concealed gold knives and jade seals, and conspired to rebel. I have obtained irrefutable evidence of his crimes. I have been commanded by the Emperor to reorganize the officialdom of Jiangsu. Dealing with Cheng De is in line with public sentiment and heaven's will. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Zhao Kangning paced frantically within the cabin, suddenly slamming his hand onto the nearby table. "Master Xu," he cried out vehemently, "Cheng De is a significant figure in the court. You cannot arbitrarily accuse him of treason. Even if there were conclusive evidence, it must be first reported to the Ministry of War before any action is taken. By executing such an important official without proper process and taking lives without a second thought, how do you intend to explain your actions to the Ministry of War, the court, and the Emperor?"

Luo Min, sitting nearby, let out a hearty laugh. "Young Prince, please don't worry," he began, "It was my order that led to the execution of Cheng De. In the urgency of the situation, Cheng De attempted to assassinate Master Xu and me, and his accomplices even burst in to rescue him. Given these circumstances, I had no choice but to order his immediate execution to prevent his escape. After this incident, I will personally report the matter to the Emperor and the officials at the Ministry of War. There's ample evidence for every single crime Cheng De committed; he won't be able to evade this. If the court deems Cheng De innocent, I am prepared to bear all consequences. If the Emperor and the officials conclude Cheng De is innocent, I am ready to give my life for his."

As he concluded, Luo Min's face showed a defiant pride, and there wasn't a trace of fear. The faces of his children, Luo Ning and Luo Yuan, went pale, and they both cried out, "Father—"

With a dismissive wave and a smile, Luo Min quieted them. "Ning, Yuan, your father knows what he is doing. In one's life, it's difficult to do the things one wishes. This time, however, I have found great satisfaction in doing what I wanted, eliminating this villain for our great nation. Even if it costs my life, it's worth it. You both need not worry for me."

With tears in her eyes, Luo Ning grabbed his sleeve and let out a soft sob. "Father—"

Observing the elderly Luo's impressive stance, Lin Wanrong sighed internally. Considering his efforts in tax collection and water conservation, he thought Luo Min was a good official. The people of Jiangsu were fortunate to have such a governor.

"Fine, fine—" Zhao Kangning was so infuriated he was speechless. Gazing at the tear-streaked Luo Ning standing next to Luo Min, his grievances, both old and new, welled up within him. With a loud crack, he smashed the tea cup on the ground and laughed bitterly. "Governor Luo, you have a sharp tongue indeed. I hope you'll maintain your composure in front of the other court officials. As for you, Master Xu, you shield Luo Min, mixing personal feelings with public duties. I will report this to the Emperor, my father, and all the court officials. Both of you had better prepare yourselves. Goodbye!"



Xu Wei was a celebrated scholar and the top official of the current regime. He was instrumental in helping the current Emperor ascend the throne. Despite his advanced age, he never lost his scholarly pride. Seeing Zhao Kangning's blatant disrespect, Xu Wei broke into laughter. "Young Prince," he chuckled, "let me be frank. You're not qualified to throw a tantrum in front of me. Even if Prince Cheng himself were here, he would need to be careful in how he spoke to me. Your father was far more formidable than you twenty years ago, and now this responsibility falls to you — alas! Farewell, no need to see you out!"

With his teeth grinding and body trembling, Zhao Kangning kicked the door frame, breaking it with a loud snap. He stormed out with his guards in tow. Luo Min and Xu Wei exchanged a glance and burst into delighted laughter.

Lin Wanrong clapped twice, walked up to them, and said with a chuckle, "Well done, Governor, Minister, that was quite the scolding. If that Young Prince isn't scared to death after this, he'll surely die of humiliation. I have much to learn from you both."

Xu Wei gripped his hand and said, "Little brother, don't ridicule us old bones. When it comes to the art of taunting and outsmarting others, no one in this world can surpass you."

"You flatter me," Lin Wanrong responded unabashedly, "I'm merely following your example, Mr. Xu."

Xu Wei let out a hearty laugh and clapped his hands vigorously, "Brother Luo, today's events were exhilarating! I feel compelled to borrow some of your fine wine to toast. Quickly, bring out your best Daughter Red. Let us, the three of us, drink heartily and return only when we are drunk."

"And not return even when drunk—" Luo Min laughed heartily, feeling extremely satisfied, though the laughter induced a bout of coughing.

Luo Ning and her brother had already fetched the Daughter Red, the finest wine. Upon seeing the seal on the wine jar, an old red paper label with a row of tiny characters that read, "Celebrating the full moon of our Little Ning," Xu Wei exclaimed in delight, "Indeed, it's a twenty-year-old Daughter Red. Little brother Lin, we are in for a treat."

Luo Min declared heartily, "Indeed, we are. This wine was saved for Ning when she was just a month old, originally meant to be opened when she marries. But today is indeed a day for celebration, let's drink to our heart's content."

Xu Wei laughed heartily and cast a meaningful glance at Luo Ning and Lin Wanrong, "Today is indeed the day Miss Luo commits her heart. Opening this wine couldn't be more fitting, we should drink and enjoy ourselves. Brother Luo, you are a fortunate man."

Luo Min roared with laughter while Luo Ning stole a glance at Lin Wanrong, quickly lowering her head in embarrassment.

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The flower boat was now devoid of anyone else. The fire had been completely extinguished, but the doors and windows were burnt to a crisp. Soft moonlight filtered in, casting a gentle glow on the two old men and the young man.

Discarding small cups, the three of them sat on the ground with large bowls in hand, drinking joyfully. The crescent moon was reflected in the wine bowls, forming a beautiful shimmering image.

The three of them drained their bowls in one gulp and wiped their mouths with satisfaction. Xu Wei said aloud, "Little brother Lin, you are our Young friend. Despite your young age, your abilities are not to be underestimated. In my life, I have only admired a handful of people, and you are one of them."

Luo Min laughed heartily, "Indeed, what an amusing title, 'Young friend'. Come, Young friend, to this chance encounter and newfound friendship, let's drain another bowl."

Lin Wanrong raised his bowl high and declared, "To the joy that fills Older friends' hearts every day, cheers!"

"It's hard to find joy every day, not knowing whether we're awake or dreaming. Young friend, your toast is profound. I admire, I admire, cheers!" Luo Min laughed loudly and the three of them drank their wine.

Luo Min and Xu Wei, both with snow-white hair, were essentially scholars at heart. They drank from their large bowls until they were slightly drunk. Amid the laughter, Xu Wei set his bowl down, took up a bamboo chopstick and tapped it rhythmically, softly singing, "Empty reputation, petty gain, why all this hustle? Everything is predetermined, who's weak and who's strong—"

At the peak of the song, Luo Min clapped his hands in understanding, and both men continued together, "— take advantage of youth, before I grow old, let me indulge in some recklessness. A hundred years are nothing but a blur of drunkenness, thirty-six thousand rounds. Thirty-six thousand rounds, thirty-six thousand rounds—"

As the two men sang and sighed together, their faces were painted with melancholy, their eyes shimmering with tears. Both had entered officialdom at a young age and had attained high positions, seemingly splendid to outsiders. However, only they knew the amount of bitterness and tears that lay beneath this façade.

Lin Wanrong had never before experienced the state of mind of these talented scholars. In his tipsy state, he looked up to see the moonlight cast upon these two white-haired old men. Two elderly figures, around their fifties or sixties, had tears in their eyes as they clapped and sang. The scene was full of unmatched sadness and desolation.

He too felt a wave of emotion, recalling his own experiences, a sense of sorrow welled up within him. Suddenly, he stood up and sang out loud, "Heroes like us shape the world's events, stepping into the jianghu speeds up the passage of time. Life is like a tide, people are like water, one can hardly withstand a lifetime of intoxication. One can hardly withstand a lifetime of intoxication—" He drained his large bowl in one gulp, his face flushed. With a smack, he slammed his wine bowl on the ground, laughing heartily while tears unknowingly fell from his eyes.

For a moment, the old cried, the young laughed. Amidst the crying and laughing, the three of them had become thoroughly drunk.

#### Chapter 265 Farewell

That night was a blur. Lin Wanrong spent his time drinking with two old men, exchanging jokes, and listening to their intriguing tales of the court. It was rather carefree. The three were learned men, and their stories were so lifelike that he could not tell which were real and which were mere exaggerations. Lin Wanrong found it amusing. Talking with educated people was indeed refreshing.

When he woke up early the next day, his head pounded fiercely. Upon opening his eyes, he found himself lying in Xian'er's pleasure boat, with Qiaoqiao, the little girl, watching over him. The young girl was curled up by his side, sleeping soundly with a sweet smile on her rosy cheeks.

Lin Wanrong reached out and lightly touched her face, chuckling, "Wake up, darling, it's daylight."

Qiaoqiao mumbled in response, opening her eyes to see her 'big brother' smiling at her. She instantly squealed in joy, "Big brother, you're awake? Xian'er, hurry, big brother is awake—"

Qin Xian'er entered, pulling back the curtains, her eyes brimming with delight. "Husband, you've finally woken up. Last night, you were so drunk that we had a hard time moving you here. Here, drink this hangover soup first."

Lin Wanrong took the medicine bowl, gulped down the contents, and was immediately choked by a sour and spicy taste, causing him to cough violently. Qiaoqiao gently patted his back, her voice filled with concern, "Big brother, drink slowly. This is hangover soup, not a fine wine. With the way you drank last night, how could you not be drunk?"

The hangover soup Xian'er had prepared was different from other remedies; it smelled strange, but its effect was astonishingly good. After a bout of coughing, his hangover seemed to disappear in the blink of an eye. Lin Wanrong held the bowl and sniffed it carefully, then asked curiously, "Xian'er, what kind of soup is this? How come it works so well?"

Xian'er gave him a mysterious smile, "This is my Master's secret recipe. She said I can't tell you, or else you would vomit the soup out."

Intrigued, Lin Wanrong wondered what ingredient could make such a difference. Qiaoqiao whispered, "Big brother, I heard that last night, Xian'er's master had someone dig up earthworms, saying it was for medicine. I wonder if it was for this soup?"

His face turned pale, 'Digging up earthworms in the dead of winter? Can you even find any? This little demon must be trying to mess with me.' He resisted the urge to vomit, gritted his teeth, and asked, "Xian'er, where's Sister An? Is she practicing her martial arts again? I need to consult her about something. Don't stop me, even if you try to, I'll still find her. Are earthworms even edible—"

Qin Xian'er's face clouded over. She shook her head slightly, "Husband, I'm afraid you can't see my Master today. She left Jinling at dawn and headed towards the capital at full speed."

Gone? She sure fled quickly. The New Year was just around the corner, what urgent business could Sister An have that she'd rush to the capital? Lin Wanrong blinked in surprise, "Xian'er, does your Master have an old flame in the capital, calling her for a reunion?"

Qin Xian'er looked at him with a mixture of exasperation and amusement, "Husband, what nonsense are you spouting? How could my Master be that sort of person? She said she had important matters to attend to, and I didn't dare to stop her."

Lin Wanrong stood up and sighed, "It's a pity indeed. I originally wanted her to stay for the New Year celebrations. Given her modest eating habits, adding an extra pair of chopsticks would not cost much."

Upon mentioning her Master's departure, Qin Xian'er's eyes were initially damp, but Lin Wanrong's remark drew a laugh from her. "Husband, you are so annoying! Countless people would offer fortunes to support Master lifelong, yet she barely gives them a glance. How can you make it sound so unpalatable?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled. His intention of making that joke was merely to distract Xian'er from her sadness. Seeing her laugh, his goal was achieved, so he stayed silent with a smile.

From her sleeve, Qin Xian'er retrieved a letter, "Husband, this is a letter from Master for you."

"For me?" Lin Wanrong wondered. Sister An just left, why would she leave a letter for him without reason?

Little brother, are you happy to hear that I am leaving? Hehe, I don't have any old flames in the capital. If anything, you, a newly acquainted flame, are the only one. Other suitors have not even caught my eye, don't be jealous, okay?

Sweat, a cold sweat appeared on Lin Wanrong's forehead. This enchantress, could she be a worm in his stomach, guessing even this?

You seem nonchalant about everything, yet you're astute in reality. I told your Lady Qiaoqiao last night that I was planning to make soup with earthworms for you. I bet she has told you by now. Hehe, I'd love to see your expression. You destroyed my White Lotus, so I pranked you this once, we're even now. Don't blame me, I was afraid you would bombard me with cannons.

Lin Wanrong had a cannon indeed, but he would not resort to it lightly. He laughed out loud, yet sweat was forming inside, this Sister An indeed knew him well.

The capital is a thousand miles away from Jinling, once I leave, I don't know when we'll meet again. Don't forget what you promised, hurry to the capital. At worst, I will let you hold me as a compensation. If I don't let you, a little rascal, take some advantage, you wouldn't exert yourself.

Neglect of duty is your forte. Of course, if you do well, there will be extra rewards — hehe, I wonder if Xian'er will be happy to see this letter? Take care!

After Lin Wanrong finished reading the letter, his face turned solemn. To Qiaoqiao, he said, "Qiaoqiao, bring a candle quickly."

Qiaoqiao nodded and brought a candle. Lin Wanrong set the letter on fire, and finally took a deep breath. 'This enchantress, clearly trying to harm me, with this evidence destroyed, let's see what tricks you can play.'

Qin Xian'er curiously asked, "Husband, what did Master say?"

"Sister An asked me to do something very important and promised a big reward. But am I the kind of person who seeks advantages? There are secrets in this letter that can't be seen by others. Even though you two are my wives, I can't show it to you. Otherwise, I would be letting down Sister An, the people of Jinling, and the Great Hua." Lin Wanrong solemnly explained, his voice filled with "sorrow."

He turned his lustful intentions into righteousness, exhibiting an air of justice. Seeing his resolute expression, Qiaoqiao gently nestled into his arms, "Big brother, no matter what you are going to do, Qiaoqiao will support you."

Qin Xian'er was unwilling to fall behind, leaning into his embrace from the other side and said, "Husband, I am but your shadow, whatever you do, Xian'er will follow you."

"Really?" Lin Wanrong drew out his reply, "That's wonderful, my dear wives. Today the sun is shining brightly, why don't we return to bed and explore the game of drumming? Please don't look at me like that. Essentially, it's a very noble game, just like my character. Many of our ancestors have tried it, give it a go and you'll understand—"

Of the two women, Qiaoqiao was his bona fide wife, having already consummated their marriage. Xian'er, the little girl, shared his bed every night and was somewhat familiar with his temperament. Seeing his lascivious gaze, how could they not know what he was implying? Both women blushed, escaping his embrace, hand in hand, they ran out.

The relationship between these two sisters wasn't bad at all, Lin Wanrong mused, pleasantly surprised. A life of bliss awaited him.

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Xu Wei had finished his business in Jinling and was to return to the capital today. Having seen Sister An off in the morning, and now with old Xu returning to the capital, for some reason, Lin Wanrong felt an increasing connection with the capital.

As they escorted Xu Wei to the outskirts of Jinling, the old man laughed and said, "Little brother Lin, it has been a great fortune to meet and get to know you on this trip to Jiangnan. It's deeply gratifying. But there's no feast that doesn't end. For now, we must part ways. I'll be waiting in the capital for your arrival."

"Mr. Xu, I like to keep a low profile. Don't go making a big fuss about me when I arrive in the capital. I detest that sort of thing," Lin Wanrong replied, chuckling.

"I understand, I'll keep it low-key," Xu Wei laughed, his gaze fixed on a palanquin from the Xiao Residence, rapidly approaching.

The palanquin stopped before them, and Madame Xiao alighted, saying, "Master Wenchang, why the hasty departure? You should have stayed in Jinling for a few more days to allow me to play the gracious host."

Xu Wei replied, "Miss Guo, you are too kind. I've stayed in Jiangnan too long and there are matters pending in court that can't be delayed. Perhaps when you return to the capital, we can catch up." He paused, hesitated, then added, "There's something I need to convey to Miss Guo."

"Please, do tell," Madame replied, her expression serious.

"Miss Guo, Mr. Zhao has — for years — been missing you. I hope you can find the time to visit the capital," Xu Wei stuttered.

"Mr. Zhao?" Madame Xiao gently brushed her hair, smiling faintly, "Time flows like water. If Master Wenchang hadn't brought it up, I might have forgotten. For Mr. Zhao to remember me so fondly, I'm truly honored. Please convey my gratitude to him."

Recalling what the Old Wei had said, Lin Wanrong had a vague understanding. This Mr. Zhao must be the influential person who had always held feelings for Madam Xiao.

Xu Wei was speechless, he sighed, saluted, and climbed onto his horse. The entourage set off for the capital in grand procession. Du Xiuyuan, Hu Bugui and others waved to Lin Wanrong from a distance. They knew that General Lin would soon be heading to the capital as well, so there was no cause for sorrow, for they would be reunited soon.

Lin Wanrong watched as the group disappeared into the distance, heaving a long sigh, "They've gone, all gone. Just yesterday we were drinking and singing together, but today we part so swiftly. Life truly is unpredictable."

Madam Xiao looked at Lin Wanrong and chuckled, "Lin San, no need to sigh like that. I want to ask you, when will you accompany me back to the Xiao family?"

"Return to the Xiao family? What for?" Lin Wanrong sighed mournfully.

"To get married, of course." Madam Xiao beamed, her smile as bright as a tree full of splendid peach blossoms, unfolding just outside the pavilion.