

Finest 276

Chapter 276 A Faint Trace

From afar, amidst the bustling crowd, there walked a woman dressed in a yellow gown, her face obscured by light veil, her steps light and graceful. Even in the throng of thousands, her figure remained exquisite and her beauty indescribable. Strangely, no one could get near her in the crowd.

The pencil in Lin Wanrong's hand dropped onto the ground, his mind a blank canvas. He had envisioned their reunion countless times, but when it finally arrived – and so quickly at that – he found himself unprepared. He stared blankly at her side profile; although her face was obscured, he couldn't help but recognize the strange yet familiar figure. His heart pounded anxiously: "Qingxuan, is it really you?"

"What's wrong?" the Eldest Miss holding a kite string asked gently.

Lin Wanrong snapped out of his daze. 'Have I lost my mind? How did I become speechless upon seeing Qingxuan?' Without a care for the two sisters before him, he sprinted towards the woman, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Qingxuan, Qingxuan, I'm here—"

The Eldest Miss tied the red string onto the kite, sneaking glances at him. Initially delighted, she froze upon hearing him call out another woman's name, as if struck in the acupoint, left speechless.

Having been kidnapped and rescued with Lin Wanrong, she knew who this Qingxuan was, and knew that he came to the capital city for this Miss Qingxuan. Although Lin San never detailed about this lady, Xiao Yuruo could infer from his words that Miss Qingxuan held a significant place in his heart. She was both a lifesaver and a lover, which could easily qualify as his most important person.

They had just arrived in the capital city, hadn't even rested their feet, were about to release the red lantern kite together when he ran into the most important person in his life. Could this be fate? Recalling the scene on Su Qinglian's boat, where the red string was severed by Qin Xian'er, the Eldest Miss's eyes welled up with tears. Was this her fate?

Only when he came to the capital city and suddenly saw this woman did Lin Wanrong realize how important Qingxuan was to him – a significance he himself hadn't noticed before.

He shouted loudly, rushing towards the woman who strongly resembled Qingxuan. However, the distance between them was great, with people and lanterns flowing like tides in between, the constant laughter and cheer swallowing his cries. His voice could hardly be heard from several feet away.

He forcefully parted the crowd, incessantly calling out and pushing forward. The moment he moved a person, another quickly filled the spot. This tide of people, like an ever-strengthening spring wall, separated him and the woman, preventing their reunion. The crowd was too dense; even if an immortal descended from heaven, they'd be helpless.

Xiao Qingxuan, sleeves fluttering, steps light, moved forward without looking back. Without any visible effort, people couldn't get close to her and, in the blink of an eye, she was swallowed by the crowd, her trace no longer visible.

"Darn it!" Lin Wanrong found himself crushed within the crowd, feeling as if a ball of fire was burning within him. He had no idea how many times he had screamed, how many people he had pushed past. Staring at the disappearing silhouette of Qingxuan within the crowd, he mustered all his strength to cry out once more, "Qingxuan—" The sound only resonated in his own ears. After shouting for so long, his voice had already become hoarse.

Standing amidst the bustling crowd, staring at the glowing lanterns and the crowd filled with laughter, he was dumbstruck. He couldn't believe his own eyes. "Was that really Qingxuan I just saw? Was I seeing things? How could I have so easily crossed paths with Qingxuan? And just as easily lose track of her? Damn it!"

The anticipation and the unexpected encounter with Qingxuan, coupled with the bitter loss of losing her again so close at hand, simultaneously washed over him. Even a hardened man of steel wouldn't be able to bear such emotions. Lin Wanrong's hands clenched tightly as he stood in the middle of the crowded street, facing the surging crowd. He let out long cries of despair. His hoarse voice was grating to the ear, yet it carried an indescribable sense of sorrow and desolation.

Amidst the sea of people on the lantern-lit street, some laughed while some lamented. Lin Wanrong stood there in a daze for a long while, his heart growing cold. He was usually not one to be easily disheartened, but this feeling of being so close yet so far, of having and then losing, was utterly heartbreaking, even for a man like him who laughed through his days.

"Lin San, Lin San—" Amid his daze, a soft voice calling out to him fell upon his ears. This voice was very faint amidst the crowd's clamor. Had it not been close enough, he would not have heard it.

"Eldest Miss, Second Miss—" On hearing the voice, Lin Wanrong was startled. Damn it, he had completely forgotten about them while he was preoccupied with Qingxuan.

He quickly lifted his head to look back, only to see that not far from him, Yuruo was tightly holding Yushuang's hand, their faces red with fear as they anxiously looked in his direction. A group of ruffians with sneering faces were slowly approaching them. Yushuang looked terrified while Yuruo appeared resolute. The sisters moved forward hand in hand, still carrying the red string lantern that they had yet to release.

"Bloody hell," Lin Wanrong's anger flared up, and he pushed his way back to the sisters. Within a few steps, he reached their side. On seeing him, Yushuang cried out softly and threw herself into his arms, refusing to let go. Yuruo bit her lip, not uttering a word, her hand tightly gripping the lantern. The branches of the lantern were already scattered and on the verge of falling off due to their hurried running and pushing. Yet, the couple attached to the red string remained tightly together.

"Hey, pretty little ladies, which family's daughters might you be?" The approaching ruffians slowly moved closer with a smirk on their faces. Seeing them, the surrounding crowd quickly dispersed as if they had seen a ghost, leaving a wide-open space.

"Eldest Miss, Second Miss, are you scared?" Lin Wanrong shielded the two women behind him, his face expressionless.

"As long as you don't leave, we're not afraid." Yuruo softly replied.

‘Remember, always together, we won't separate even at the cost of our lives.’ Lin Wanrong suddenly recalled his words to the two ladies when they had alighted from the carriage. Back then, he had spoken lightheartedly, never intending to break his word, yet unexpectedly, it was he who had separated from them first after meeting Qingxuan.

"I'm sorry, it was my mistake this time," Lin Wanrong apologized, feeling a sense of shame for the first time since he had known the ladies.

The Eldest Miss softly responded, her face flushed, "What do we do now? We've just arrived in the capital, it's best to avoid trouble."

Was it him causing trouble or was trouble finding him? Guilt-ridden towards the Eldest Miss, he managed a bitter smile, "I'll do my best."

His mood had been dreadful that day. Glancing around, he picked up two wooden sticks from the ground and smashed them together forcefully, snapping both instantly. He was a battle-hardened man; how could he take these ruffians seriously? His eyes, cold and deadly, were full of a murderous aura.

The approaching hoodlums were taken aback. One who seemed to be the leader hurriedly said, "What are you doing? We belong to the residence of Minister Tie."

Lin Wanrong snorted, his voice seething with killing intent, "Minister Tie of the Ministry of War? Hmm, very impressive. You dogs, if it wasn't for Mr. Xu's command not to stir up trouble, I would have crippled you lot tonight."

"Mr. Xu?" the leader stuttered, "Which Mr. Xu?"

Lin Wanrong threw a broken stick at the man, hitting him, and yelled, "How dare you question me? When Mr. Xu and I were suppressing the White Lotus rebellion, there was no place for you dogs to speak!"

A man's reputation casts a long shadow. Xu Wei was the number one scholar in the world, the Emperor's favored minister, and the one who had personally led the suppression of the White Lotus Rebellion. His prestige was unmatched in the capital. These hoodlums, accustomed to their bullish ways, were actually cowards at heart. Confronted by a servant emanating such killing intent and hearing him mention Mr. Xu, they intuitively felt that angering this man would result in a terrible end.

"Get lost!" Lin Wanrong roared. The hoodlums exchanged glances before turning tail and fleeing. The previously vacated space instantly filled with people again as if nothing had happened.

The Second Miss gazed at him, her eyes brimming with tenderness, "Were you telling the truth earlier? Did you really fight alongside Mr. Xu on the battlefield against the White Lotus?"

Lin Wanrong, grasping her small hand, chuckled, "It was a lie, I fooled them."

"You trickster!" The Second Miss playfully rebuked, clinging to his hand and refusing to let go.

Lin Wanrong turned back to see the Eldest Miss staring blankly at the red thread lantern scattered in her hands. Feeling guilty, he quickly assured her, "Don't worry, Eldest Miss. I will make sure this red-thread lantern flies safely into the sky, trust me."

Xiao Yuruo gave a slight smile, softly caressing the lantern in her hand and asked gently, "Did you really see Miss Qingxuan earlier?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, his expression darkening, "I saw her, but she didn't see me. Such is life, so unpredictable. We meet unexpectedly, only to lose each other just as unexpectedly."

The Eldest Miss comforted him in a soft voice, "Such gloominess is unlike you. Consider it from another perspective: as soon as you arrived in the capital, you were fortunate enough to see Miss Qingxuan. Isn't that a good start? As long as you continue to search, you'll reunite one day."

"That's how I see it too." Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Eldest Miss, if you always speak with such tenderness, I'll consider myself blessed."

"Slick talker," the Eldest Miss blushed and gently scolded.

A series of thunderous roars echoed through the air as fireworks burst into the night sky. Amid the shower of sparkling lights, a giant twin-lotus lantern slowly ascended from the roof of a tavern, dancing gracefully in the air. Two pink lotus blossoms floated mid-air, radiating brilliant colors, a dazzling sight.

A woman dressed in yellow stood atop the tavern roof. Her skin was fairer than snow, and her beautiful eyes were gently focused on the blooming lotus. A few teardrops suddenly fell, making her appear like a fairy banished to the mortal realm, breathtakingly beautiful...

Chapter 277 The Search

Lin Wanrong and the two young ladies craned their necks to watch the floating lotus lanterns. The three of them stood in silence, like unnoticed clay beads amid a sea of people, their presence unseen.

Looking up at the gleaming jade disk nestled in the vibrant night sky, a woman standing atop a building heaved a faint sigh. Her gaze unwittingly swept over the bustling crowd, but she failed to notice the three unnoticed clay beads amidst the multitude.

Tears shimmered in her eyes. With a light tap of her foot, she transformed into a beautiful crane under the moonlight, disappearing into the vast darkness of the night.

Observing the twin lotus lanterns leisurely floating overhead, Xiao Yushuang clapped her hands in delight, "I wonder which young lady released these lanterns. They are indeed beautiful. This sister must surely be pining for her lover."

The lotus lanterns flew higher and higher, scattering a myriad of radiant colors, dazzling and bewitching, becoming the most captivating sight at the lantern festival. Numerous lovesick men and women put their palms together in respect and bowed their heads, their expressions utmost sincere.

A force seemed to beckon him from the unknown. Lin Wanrong's gaze fell upon the rooftop. With the bright moon in the sky and the world covered in a silvery sheen, the place seemed empty and desolate, devoid of any human figure.

"What are you staring at?" The Eldest Miss asked upon seeing his dazed expression, hurriedly whispering.

"That tavern, I want to check it out," Lin Wanrong affirmed.

The Eldest Miss hummed in agreement, "A tavern? That's good then. After traveling for so many days, we've finally reached the capital. We should go there and celebrate. I will allow you some drinks, but do not let it interfere with our plans."

Lin Wanrong chuckled. The Eldest Miss's rules were becoming more humane. Things were looking up.

The tavern they saw stood tall in the middle of the bustling street, in an ideal location, approximately five to six stories high. It was majestic, a magnificent sight, the busiest establishment on the street.

With great effort, Lin Wanrong led the two young ladies through the crowd to the entrance of the building. The tavern was decorated from top to bottom with lanterns of various sizes. In the middle was a large golden plaque, emblazoned with four big characters – Yun Lai Xian Jing

"Hah, even a dining place is named like this? They've really gone overboard with their taste!" Lin Wanrong laughed.

The Eldest Miss pulled him lightly and pointed to some smaller characters beneath the large plaque, "Look."

Lin Wanrong had been so taken by the grandeur of the golden characters that he had overlooked the small ones in the corner. Reminded by the Eldest Miss, he looked up again to see some more small characters inscribed beneath the main title – "Calligraphy by Xu Wei."

"So, this place had the old man Xu's calligraphy? It must truly be a place of refined taste. We should definitely check it out." Lin Wanrong nodded and said with a smile, "Ladies, let's dine here."

Just as the trio was about to ascend the stairs, a smiling waiter stopped them. "Honored guests, I'm afraid you're out of luck. Our Fairyland Comes with the Clouds has been reserved for the night, and we cannot accommodate other customers. I am sorry, but you'll have to find another place. My sincere apologies."

It was common for taverns to be reserved, especially on a day as big as the Lantern Festival. The waiter was polite. The Eldest Miss nodded in acknowledgment and was about to leave when Lin Wanrong, haunted by the memory of the woman releasing the lotus lanterns on the rooftop, felt a pang of regret. He felt as if missing this place would mean missing out on many things.

"Brother, is there truly no way to accommodate us? My two young ladies have traveled from afar, particularly to appreciate the lanterns here, to admire the renowned Fairyland Comes with the Clouds. Can you not even spare three seats?" Lin Wanrong asked.

The server was caught in a dilemma, "Sir, truth be told, today, Fairyland Comes with the Clouds has been reserved for the young masters and ladies from Jinghua Academy to admire and guess riddles in the lanterns. They have specifically instructed to keep away the common masses. You are aware, the tempers of these young masters and ladies are not easy to handle. Please, don't make it hard for me."

"Jinghua Academy?" The Second Miss was taken aback, then she excitedly grabbed Xiao Yuruo's hand and said, "Sister, could it be the Jinghua Academy where I intend to study?"

The Eldest Miss nodded, "There should only be one Jinghua Academy in the capital, it must be the one."

Yushuang was immediately thrilled. Madam Xiao had allowed her to pursue education in the capital and the academy she was affiliated with was Jinghua Academy. Lin Wanrong was also taken aback. Jinghua Academy? Was this not the legendary university? These guys really had deep pockets, reserving such a large restaurant just like that.

While the three could have easily settled for some other restaurant, now hearing the name Jinghua Academy, with the Second Miss looking forward to it, and Lin Wanrong himself having certain considerations, they all wished to make it to the top floor of the restaurant.

As they hesitated, a young man dressed in splendid attire, accompanied by two servants, walked directly towards the upper floor.

The server rushed to greet him, "Young Master Tian, you've arrived? The other young masters and ladies are already waiting upstairs."

This so-called Young Master Tian, a dashing and debonair young man, nodded and asked, "Have Miss Zhiqing and Master Ye arrived?"

The server hurriedly responded, "These two have not yet arrived, but the other young masters and ladies have been here for a while."

Young Master Tian acknowledged the answer, and as he was about to proceed upstairs, his eyes caught the Xiao sisters and he paused. Adjusting his robe, he turned around and elegantly greeted, "May I ask, are you ladies also here to attend the lantern festival at Jinghua Academy? I don't recall seeing you before."

His face was adorned with a friendly smile, displaying a demeanor of grace and fervor. His gaze fell warmly on the two young ladies, stirring a pleasant impression at first sight. However, the likes of Lin San, being a servant, was naturally filtered out.

Being attractive indeed had its benefits, Lin Wanrong thought in contempt. Yet, he was helpless, unable to go up and punch this audacious inquirer.

The Eldest Miss responded graciously, "Your courtesy is appreciated, sir. We sisters are not from the capital, but came from afar. Having heard about the reputation of Fairyland Comes with the Clouds and coinciding with the Lantern Festival, we thought of joining the festivities."

Young Master Tian responded enthusiastically, "I see. The two ladies are remarkably beautiful, akin to ethereal beings, where do you hail from? Could it be that you are the fairies who have descended from the Moon Palace?"

The Second Miss, younger in age, felt her cheeks grow warm at the public praise from the young man. Shy, she lowered her gaze.

‘Damn, he’s even thicker-skinned than me,’ Lin Wanrong grumbled, ‘My wife doesn’t need your flattery.’ Yushuang secretly took his hand, her face blooming into a smile as she whispered, "You scoundrel, I prefer when you tell me I’m pretty."

The Eldest Miss responded with a gentle smile, "Your flattery is unnecessary, sir. We sisters hail from Jinling."

Young Master Tian exclaimed, "So, you are the beauties of the south! No wonder you’re so fresh and extraordinary. Why don’t the two of you go up to watch the lanterns?"

"Well, my mistresses were about to do just that, but this waiter here says you and your companions have reserved the entire establishment, so we can’t," Lin Wanrong replied, smirking.

Young Master Tian had wanted to converse with the two ladies, but seeing this servant interrupt and cut off the mistresses, he couldn’t help but frown. He thought to himself, 'What a presumptuous servant.' But seeing that neither lady spoke up, he didn’t feel it was his place to chastise the man. He managed an awkward smile and said, "I apologize for my intrusion! There must be some misunderstanding. My name is Tian Wenjing. I and my friends from Jinghua Academy have reserved this place tonight for the lantern show. We intended to enjoy it without disturbances, and to entertain ourselves with some lantern riddles. According to our rules, anyone who solves a riddle may go upstairs to view the lanterns. I hadn’t anticipated it would inconvenience you, my apologies. I invite you both to join us upstairs."

The Eldest Miss glanced at Lin Wanrong. She didn’t know why he was insistent on visiting this Fairyland Comes with the Clouds, but since he had reasons, and her younger sister was eager to witness the Jinghua Academy’s talented individuals, she smiled faintly and said, "So one must solve a lantern riddle to go upstairs? That’s fair enough. It’s our fault for intruding, and we don’t want to break the rules. Young Master Tian, please bring a lantern. I’ll give the riddle a try."

"Turns out the lady is a scholar herself, my apologies for not recognizing," Young Master Tian said, a glint in his eyes and a more eager smile on his face. "These riddles are just for amusement, no

need to take them too seriously. How about I host the event today and invite both of you upstairs to enjoy the beautiful lanterns and celebrate this prosperous year together?"

The Eldest Miss didn't respond, and Lin Wanrong moved the broken lantern he was holding a bit closer. He thought, 'A prosperous year, huh? Sounds good. If anyone believes you, they'll be celebrating New Year's again tomorrow.'

Seeing the ladies firm in their stance, Young Master Tian had no choice but to nod. Pointing to the various lanterns hanging upstairs, he offered a polite smile, "Then, please choose a lantern, miss."

The Eldest Miss turned to Yushuang and gestured, "Little sister, choose one for me."

The younger sister nodded and stretched out her delicate finger, pointing to a butterfly lantern, "I want that one."

The waiter hurriedly used a bamboo pole to retrieve the lantern and Young Master Tian handed it over to the sisters with a sincere smile, "Please open the riddle, ladies."

The Eldest Miss nodded, pulled out the slip of paper from the lantern, and handed it to the waiter who then passed it to Young Master Tian.

Upon reading the riddle, Young Master Tian paused before reciting, "Ladies, this is a word (character) riddle. Clear when meeting water, bright when meeting fire. Guess the word (character)."

This type of brain teaser-like question was Lin Wanrong's specialty. After a moment of contemplation, he already had the answer. Turning his attention back to the Eldest Miss, he noticed her slightly furrowed brow as she pondered. After a while, she picked up the small brush offered by the waiter and, on the plate in front of her, wrote a beautiful character—"登".

Chapter 278 The Lantern Riddles (Part 1)

"Marvelous," Young Master Tian gently tapped his palm with a small fan, his face filled with a smile. "The young lady's beauty is divine, like a fairy among mortals, and her talent is astounding. I am truly in awe. Please, ladies, accompany me upstairs."

Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up to the Eldest Miss. Xiao Yuruo's face reddened slightly, and with a glance at him, she took her sister's hand and said, "Yushuang, let's go upstairs and take a look."

Young Master Tian led the way, guiding the two young ladies upstairs, and occasionally engaging them in conversation. His refined and polite demeanor made him very charming. After a long conversation, he did not overstep the bounds of propriety by asking for the ladies' names. His elegant manners indeed left a favorable impression.

Given Lin Wanrong's status, he naturally trailed behind. With an unconcerned smile, he followed the group.

Upon reaching the second floor, it was filled with bustling noise, cheering, and laughter. Lin Wanrong looked around to find the Fairyland Comes with the Clouds elegantly decorated. Lanterns were hung everywhere, casting bright light, enhancing the simple yet elegant setup. Numerous tables were arranged in a circle, with young ladies and gentlemen sitting at their leisure, some writing, some composing poetry, others playing musical instruments, creating a lively atmosphere.

Upon seeing Young Master Tian, several young scholars came over, raising their fists in greeting. "Brother Tian, why are you late? You must drink as a penalty, three cups!"

Tian Wenjing laughed, bowing slightly in return. "I was delayed by some matters, which made me late. I hope my colleagues can forgive me."

The laughing women also ceased their chatter, approaching to greet him with a smile. One of them, noticing the Xiao sisters by Young Master Tian's side, gasped, "Young Master Tian, where did you find such beautiful sisters? They are simply gorgeous!"

Tian Wenjing nodded and smiled. "These ladies hail from Jinling. Not only are they beautiful, but their intellect is also remarkable, leaving me in awe." He glanced at the sisters and said, "Oh, I've been rather rude. I haven't yet asked for your honorable names."

The gentleman certainly had tact; his public inquiry, despite not asking their names privately, came across as natural and made refusal hard.

The ladies, being from a business family, nodded. "My surname is Xiao, and my given name is Yuruo. This is my younger sister, Yushuang. We've come from Jinling, drawn by the renowned beauty of Fairyland Comes with the Clouds. We hope you can pardon our intrusion."

Young Master Tian replied, "Miss Xiao, no need for formalities. You came here openly." He then recounted the earlier lantern riddle, leading to everyone praising them, causing the sisters to feel somewhat bashful.

The purpose of Lin Wanrong's visit to the tavern was to investigate, but noticing no stairs leading to the top floor, he felt a twinge of disappointment.

A faint aroma of orchids wafted in the air. While others couldn't detect it, Lin Wanrong was particularly sensitive. This orchid perfume was of his own making, hence he recognized it instantly. In the entire establishment, only the Xiao sisters used this perfume. The sisters, like Madam Xiao, all preferred the rose perfume, with the exception of Qingxuan who used this unique orchid fragrance.

He took a few deep sniffs, a surge of joy filling his heart, and quickly started searching around.

The upper floor was wide open, allowing everyone to see clearly. Lin Wanrong slowly moved closer to the window, the faint fragrance seemed to be wafting from the rooftop. He peered out to scrutinize the surroundings, only to find the moonlight as serene as a pool of water. Where could he spot Qingxuan's silhouette? Remembering the twin lotus lantern, Lin Wanrong stood dazed for quite some time, realizing that Qingxuan indeed had been here.

Young Master Tian was incredibly courteous, introducing the young masters and ladies from the Jinghua Academy one by one to the two Miss Xiaos. The Eldest Miss, contemplating future ventures in the capital, knew these individuals were valuable resources, so they greeted them with gracious smiles.

Seeing the gentle, logical, and elegant Eldest Miss Xiao from Jinling, Young Master Tian's heart was filled with delight. He smiled, "Miss Xiao, these individuals are renowned talents from Jinghua Academy, including scholars well-versed in literature and brilliant students. Some have even been to the royal court to listen to state affairs, they are the future pillars of our Great Hua. There are two more who have yet to arrive, their fame is unmatched in Jinghua, once they arrive, I will introduce them to you."

Young Master Tian's enthusiasm upon their first meeting made Eldest Miss Xiao a bit embarrassed. She thanked him and said, "Young Master Tian, you are quite knowledgeable and modest, a gentleman indeed. May we know from which distinguished family you come from?"

A young master standing next to him named Yu Hang laughed, "Miss Xiao, you might not know that our brother Tian Wenjing is the son of Minister Tian of the Ministry of Public Works, a true blueblood."

"Oh?" Eldest Miss Xiao exclaimed in surprise, "So you are the son of Minister Tian, forgive me for my ignorance."

Tian Wenjing quickly humbled himself, "Miss Xiao, you flatter me. My father always taught me to be modest and respectful, to never bully the weak or the disadvantaged. I have always followed his teachings, I strive to keep a low profile." His face was full of humility, but a glint of pride flickered in his eyes.

Though Lin Wanrong was preoccupied with thoughts of Qingxuan, he couldn't help but chuckle upon hearing Young Master Tian's words. A low profile? This young man truly embodied that, much more than himself.

Eldest Miss Xiao gave a slight smile, not as eager as Tian Wenjing had imagined, which left him slightly disappointed, but also sparked his interest even more.

Noticing Lin Wanrong's low spirits and silence, Eldest Miss Xiao quietly walked over, gently tugged at his sleeve, and whispered, "What's wrong?"

Lin Wanrong looked up and smiled, "Nothing, I'm just a little hungry, Eldest Miss. Let's have dinner—you're treating tonight!"

Eldest Miss Xiao feigned annoyance, "Eat if you want to, who's going to stop you?"

Before ascending the stairs, the 'low-profile' Young Master Tian had offered to host the evening. Knowing that this young master wanted to impress Miss Xiao and was prepared to foot the bill, Lin Wanrong didn't hold back and ordered some of the pricier dishes.

Knowing that Lin Wanrong wasn't in the best of spirits that day, Eldest Miss Xiao poured half of the jug of fine wine before handing it over to him, "You're not allowed to drink too much today, be careful not to cause trouble."

Seeing Miss Xiao treat a servant with such courtesy, Young Master Tian was slightly taken aback. Yu Hang, standing next to him, noticed this and started formulating a plan in his mind.

Yu Hang rose from his seat, lightly patting the table as he declared, "My friends, as Brother Ye and Miss Zhiqing have yet to arrive, let's entertain ourselves. Today is the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the perfect time to admire lanterns and guess riddles. With my modest abilities, I'll start by offering a riddle for everyone to guess. Here it is: 'A pig savors fine wine while a cat learns to walk,' and the answer pertains to something within this hall."

As soon as his words fell, laughter erupted among the people in the hall. The servant from the Xiao family was pouring wine into a cup, intending to taste it, when this anecdote from Yu Hang was obviously a riddle hinting at something in the hall, designed to embarrass the Xiao family's servant.

Seeing his cryptic riddle eliciting praise from the crowd, Yu Hang, tall and skinny, swaggered about, acknowledging the applause and laughing, "I yield, I yield." His movements made him look like a monkey bowing, causing suppressed laughter from the onlookers.

Everyone knew the answer without guessing. Amidst the chuckles and laughter, the Eldest Miss Xiao, her pretty face flushed with anger, was about to stand up when Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, gently grasping her hand, and said, "Let me handle this. I'm quite good at such matters."

Second Miss Xiao was already fuming at the people insulting Lin, and she tightly grasped Lin's hand, saying, "Those bullies! Teach them a lesson!"

Lin Wanrong lightly scratched her hand, stood up, and laughed out loud, "So you're Yu Hang, the esteemed son of Yu, what a grand name, and an impressive presence. Earlier, you presented a riddle that I, in my dullness, didn't understand."

Yu Hang sneered, "A crude servant like you wouldn't understand. It's not your place to sit in front of your master."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Whether or not I sit isn't your call. But since you're so talented, Mr. Yu, I wasn't able to solve your riddle. However, I also have a riddle. I wonder if you could solve it. Your riddle was 'A pig savors fine wine while a cat learns to walk,' mine is, 'A monkey stretches its arm while a dog bows.' It corresponds to your riddle and pertains to something in this hall."

Everyone froze for a moment, but Second Miss Xiao of the Xiao family burst into laughter. A tit-for-tat retort, Lin Wanrong's riddle was brilliant!

Yu Hang, the so-called talented scholar, was beet-red and speechless. The young men and women from the Jinghua Academy exchanged glances, none daring to laugh aloud. They didn't expect this from the Xiao family – not only was the Eldest Miss exceptionally talented, but even a servant was so quick-witted. They really couldn't afford to underestimate them.

Lin Wanrong returned to his seat, and the Eldest Miss softly scolded him, "Always causing a ruckus." But her face broke into a broad smile.

The silent Tian Wenjing, seeing the atmosphere cooling, quickly intervened with a smile, "That was just a little joke earlier, everyone, please don't mind it. Since today is about admiring lanterns and guessing riddles, let's start with the lanterns hanging in this hall. Have you noticed the jade tassels hanging from these lanterns? They're of different colors, each representing a different level of difficulty. There are orange, red, and blue. Orange is the most difficult, these are riddles personally crafted by Miss Zhiqing, and you can imagine the level of difficulty."

Upon hearing that Miss Zhiqing had personally crafted the riddles, the people in the hall showed a mix of excitement and apprehension. Lin Wanrong, unaware of who this Miss Zhiqing was, pulled Xiao Yuruo aside and asked, "Eldest Miss, is this Miss Zhiqing a tiger? Why do so many people look pale at the mention of her name?"

Eldest Miss Xiao didn't respond, but Yushuang laughed, "I understand now. Miss Zhiqing must be a scholar superior to others. Everyone is unable to answer her riddles, hence their respect and fear for her. Hmph, if they can't even solve a riddle proposed by a woman, these people are really gutless. You, on the other hand, rogue, have guts."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, leaning close to her ear and whispering, "Why don't you also propose a few riddles and I'll try to solve them? If I get them right, I get to kiss you as a penalty. If I get them wrong, you get to kiss me as a penalty. How about that?"

Second Miss Xiao snorted lightly, while the Eldest Miss Xiao blushed at his words. Despite the tension, the trio had to maintain a serious demeanor in front of others, which only added to the excitement.

Chapter 279 The Lantern Riddles (Part 2)

"In order to make this more fun, anyone who can't solve the riddle has to drink a cup as a penalty. And if someone can solve Miss Zhiqing's riddle, when she comes later, let's invite Miss Zhiqing to share a drink with him. What do you all think?"

The crowd responded enthusiastically, their eyes filled with eager anticipation. It seemed that Miss Zhiqing held quite the charm. The Eldest Miss was surrounded by people, and it was too late for her to intervene.

Tian Wenjing was the first to pick a red-tasseled lantern and handed it to a servant. The servant took out the riddle and read, "A man cannot stand without trust. Guess one character."

Tian Wenjing laughed, "It seems I picked the easiest one. It's the character for 'word'." The crowd applauded, showering him with praises. The flattery was endless.

Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself. Even a ten-year-old child could solve such a simple riddle.

Next, it was Yu Hang's turn. He climbed up a ladder himself, took down a red-tasseled lantern, and unveiled the riddle - "Biting off a cow's tail in one go."

This riddle was a bit challenging. As Yu Hang racked his brains, the Second Miss lightly laughed, "So dumb, isn't it the character for 'announce' from 'announcement'?"

Although the Second Miss's voice was soft, it reached everyone's ears. Yu Hang blushed, and all the young gentlemen and ladies who saw the Second Miss's radiant eyes and bright smile were absolutely smitten. They broke into applause.

Lin Wanrong gave her a thumbs up. 'Indeed, worthy of being my wife, a true reflection of my teachings.' Yu Shuang's beautiful face turned red, and she hid in her sister's arms, not daring to lift her head.

Then it was Xiao Yuruo's turn to guess. She hesitated between the orange, red, and blue lantern tassels. She softly asked Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, which one should we choose?"

Seeing the Eldest Miss hesitate, Tian Wenjing said with a laugh, "Miss Xiao, why not choose a red-tasseled lantern? Given your exceptional learning, this red tassel will not trouble you. If worst comes to worst, I will join you in guessing this riddle."

At his words, the Eldest Miss' face changed. To guess together? This son of Minister Tian had been polite before, but this statement was almost frivolous. She couldn't take it and gave a cold huff without saying a word.

Tian Wenjing, who had been proud of himself, realized he had made a big mistake as soon as the words left his mouth. He hastily said, "Miss Xiao, don't misunderstand. I didn't mean it that way."

Lin Wanrong, who couldn't tolerate any offense towards him, was a man feared by many. Seeing the Eldest Miss teased before him, if he could endure this, he might as well jump from the building.

Lin Wanrong stood up swiftly. 'Dammit, if I don't teach you a lesson, you won't understand that you can't mess with me, Brother San.'

The Eldest Miss, seeing his expression, knew that he was about to blow up. She hurriedly pulled him, giving him a sincere look, indicating not to be reckless. Lin Wanrong snorted coldly, "When he insults you, he insults me. Sit tight and don't talk."

Seeing his domineering attitude, Xiao Yuruo felt a little wronged, but also a bit sweet. She dared not speak, pulling her sister to sit next to her, watching how he would handle this.

"Miss Xiao, please don't misunderstand, I meant no disrespect earlier—just expressing my concern —" Tian Wenjing regretted his words deeply and was about to explain to Miss Xiao when he saw a servant of the Xiao family rise, grinning and with mocking eyes, and said, "This must be Mr. Tian Eyeglasses, right?"

Tian Wenjing would not be demeaned in front of a servant and with a stern face, replied, "My name is Tian Wenjing, not Tian Eyeglasses."

"Oh, I apologize for the mistake. Lately, I've been so busy traveling and lack of sleep has weakened my memory. Mr. Tian Eyeglasses—oh, Mr. Tian Wenjing, you must not blame me." Lin Wanrong spread his hands in a show of apology, all the while grinning and blocking Tian Wenjing's path.

"What are you trying to do?" Tian Wenjing had to hold his anger in check because the man was a member of Xiao's household, and he needed to maintain a good impression.

"I'm doing nothing much. Didn't you want to solve a riddle with our Miss? I'm here on her behalf to evaluate you, Mr. Tian, and see if you're worthy." Lin Wanrong spoke with a jocular expression, but his words caused a stir amongst the crowd.

It was a shock that a mere servant was sent to evaluate Tian Wenjing, even if he had misspoken earlier. What capabilities could a mere servant have?

Tian Wenjing glanced at Miss Xiao and seeing her silently smiling without denying Lin Wanrong's words, he knew she had approved it. Tian Wenjing, an instructor at Jinghua Academy and the son of the Minister of Public Works, Minister Tian, was a man of reputation. He was being looked down upon, right in front of the woman he admired— it was enough to make his blood boil.

Seeing the furious expression on Tian Wenjing, Lin Wanrong laughed coldly. To dare to flirt with Miss Xiao in front of him, the guy was asking for trouble. "What, are you scared?" Lin Wanrong chuckled.

Tian Wenjing retorted coldly, "What qualification do you, a mere servant, have to solve riddles with me? And I won't even bother guessing the blue tasseled lantern with you, you can just exchange riddles with my servants."

The people of Jinghua Academy burst into laughter at Lin Wanrong's audacity in challenging Tian Wenjing.

Lin Wanrong shrugged nonchalantly, "Initially, I didn't deign to engage in riddles with you. But since you want to play riddles with our Miss, and our Miss is peerless in talent, it's not just anyone who can approach her. Reluctantly, I have to be the pioneer. If you can defeat me, then you're qualified to speak with our Miss. This is what we call fairness. As for the choice of lanterns, you're right, Mr. Tian, the blue one is inauspicious, we cannot choose that. We should choose something more pleasing, let's make do with the orange one."

"Insolent!" Yu Hang was the first to protest, "The orange lantern was chosen by Miss Zhiqing, and who in this world could solve it? You're a disgrace."

Lin Wanrong's expression changed, and he laughed coldly, "Excellent, very excellent. Even Xu Wei, the great Mr. Xu, never dared to call me ignorant. You, a simpering monkey, dare to be so bold."

Upon mention of Xu Wei, everyone was taken aback. How could a mere servant recognize the top scholar of the realm? Surely, he was a fraud.

Upon noticing the man's unique complexion, the confidence in his posture despite his simple green garb, Tian Wenjing began to feel some doubt. This servant showed none of the humility expected from someone of his station.

This name-drop of Old Xu seems quite effective, Lin Wanrong mused with secret delight. He was not overly confident in guessing the riddle of the orange lantern, but seeing as no one else dared to attempt it, he knew their confidence was equally lacking. If they were to attempt a red lantern of moderate difficulty, Tian Wenjing could probably guess a few correctly. Therefore, he concluded, it was better to guess the hardest - the orange lantern. At worst, everyone failed, and he would lose nothing.

After hesitating for a long while, Tian Wenjing finally said, "Very well, you do have some courage. Let's play this guessing game then. To prevent others from saying I am taking advantage of you, I give you another chance to choose between the orange and red lantern."

"I have already chosen orange. I like challenges," Lin Wanrong replied with a smile.

Tian Wenjing glanced at Miss Xiao, then gritted his teeth. "Orange it is. We'll both guess, and whoever gets it right first wins."

Seeing his tense expression, Lin Wanrong chuckled heartily and declared, "As it should be."

The lantern riddles set by Miss Zhiqing always consisted of four parts, representing auspicious beginnings. Although they were only four questions, they were notoriously difficult to decipher, with few ever succeeding. Over the years, everyone had grown apprehensive of Miss Zhiqing's lanterns. They were a challenge no one dared to undertake.

But now, spurred on by Miss Xiao from Jinling, Young Master Tian dared to take on the challenge. The crowd was both nervous and excited.

The servant selected to administer the game carefully took down an orange lantern and read out loud, "The first three riddles are to guess a single character. The first riddle is - the person in the mirror!"

As soon as the words fell, Tian Wenjing's brows furrowed in deep thought.

Upon hearing this, Lin Wanrong paused before breaking into a smile. 'Damn, isn't this just a brain teaser? Who can outplay me in this?'

Eldest Miss Xiao noticed his alternating bewilderment and smiles. Her palms were sweaty with anxiety, not knowing what he was up to.

Lin Wanrong took out a pen and paper, wrote down four characters, and turned to Tian Wenjing with a smile. "Young Master Tian, have you figured it out? I will yield the opportunity of the first round to you. If you know the answer, go ahead and say it. Please, don't stand on ceremony."

Tian Wenjing was sweating bullets from the tension but dared not respond, fearing that speaking would disrupt his concentration.

Handing the paper to the servant, Lin Wanrong instructed, "Read these four characters!"

Confused, the servant unfolded the paper and read aloud, "Peace in going out and coming in. What does this mean? Could this be your answer?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Don't rush, don't rush. Read the second character in this phrase."

Reluctantly, the servant said, "The second character is 'in,' from 'Peace in going out and coming in.'"

Lin Wanrong clapped his hands and announced, "Correct! 'In' from 'Peace in going out and coming in' is the answer to the riddle."

The crowd in the hall paused, but before long, someone reacted, "Isn't the answer just the character ?"

"Lin San, you are truly impressive!" Xiao Yushuang cheered, full of smiles. She rose to her feet, clapping vigorously. The young lady also offered him a smile, nodding slightly in acknowledgment.

Lin Wanrong was in tears, silently thanking his physics and mathematics teachers for teaching him about virtual images and projection theory.

Tian Wenjing hadn't expected this minor servant to guess the first riddle right off the bat. He was anxious and quickly ordered, "The second question, read the second question quickly!"

The steward was also flustered and hurriedly pulled down the second riddle, which read, "Beside flowers and willows."

Sweat rolled down Tian Wenjing's forehead while Lin Wanrong sneered coldly. Just by the virtue of mental fortitude, you've already lost, he thought.

"Bring me a paper!" Lin Wanrong called out lightly with a smile. Tian Wenjing stared at him in horror. Could it be possible that he'd guessed the second one as well?

"Don't be nervous, just wiping off some sweat." Lin Wanrong chuckled and accepted two sheets of white paper from the steward. He wiped his hands with one, and then wrote down four characters on the other.

Everyone glanced and saw the four characters were—"Lantern Festival!"

"What does this mean?" the steward asked.

"Look at the fourth character!" Lin Wanrong chuckled.

"Festival!" The steward turned pale, and the crowd understood. The Xiao family's servant had won again.

Tian Wenjing didn't dare to ask for the next riddle. He now realized why the servant from the Xiao family was so audacious. When it came to solving riddles, this man indeed had a knack for it. The riddles from Miss Zhiqing, which nobody dared to attempt, he solved as if he was picking things out of his pocket. He had guessed two in a row, which was indeed shocking. If a mere servant possessed such skill, what about Miss Xiao herself? Could she be on par with Miss Zhiqing?

"Young Master Tian, do you want to continue?" the steward whispered to Tian Wenjing.

Before Tian Wenjing could respond, someone in the hall called out, "Miss Xiao, let your servant guess all four questions. Every year Miss Zhiqing gives four riddles, but no one has ever solved them all. Today, let your servant test his luck."

The Eldest Miss glanced at Lin Wanrong, uncertain of what to do. Because of his penchant for showing off, he'd guessed two correctly and was now in an awkward position, neither able to

advance nor retreat. She wondered how he'd extricate himself. Despite this, her smile was impossible to conceal.

'Do they think I'm some street performer? Who would do this demanding yet thankless task without any reward?' Lin Wanrong was about to step down when Xiao Yushuang suddenly rushed to his side. Her cheeks flushed, she whispered, "You naughty man, just guess two more. At most, I'll let you kiss me later."

'This girl, trying to seduce me? Well, I fall for this kind of thing,' Lin Wanrong teased her, whispering into her ear, "And where should I kiss? I won't settle for just any place, hehe."

"Stop it!" Yushuang's face turned a deep red, and she ran to hide behind her sister, daring not to come out.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Alright, for a great and glorious mission, I'll guess again. But please, no one laugh."

"Good!" This time, it was the crowd from Jinghua Academy who cheered him on. It was rare to see someone daring enough to challenge Miss Zhiqing in those days.

The steward hurriedly took down another lantern with an orange tassel, respectfully announcing, "The third question, also a word riddle."

He unfurled the paper, and everyone gasped in surprise. The white paper was clean and empty, without a single word written.

Everyone glanced at each other, wondering what this meant. Could Miss Zhiqing have made a mistake?

The steward didn't dare say anything else and could only look at Lin Wanrong, hoping he would speak.

A blank sheet of paper? Lin Wanrong was taken aback. What kind of game was this? He paced anxiously, slowly moving around the hall. Seeing him silent, everyone else fell quiet, afraid of disrupting his train of thought.

Lin Wanrong didn't believe that this was a mistake. There were plenty of people who loved to be mysterious these days. Perhaps this Miss Zhiqing liked to give riddles without any words.

A riddle without words? An idea flashed across his mind, and he almost jumped with joy. 'Oh, isn't this a wordless riddle?' He grabbed a brush and, with flourishing strokes, wrote down four big characters.

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Chapter 280 The Lantern Riddle and the Red Thread

This wordless riddle perplexed the crowd; they couldn't even make out the question of the puzzle, let alone guess the answer. When they saw him pick up a brush, they knew an answer was in the making. Anticipation surged through the onlookers, as they realized Miss Zhiqing's third riddle was on the verge of being cracked.

Lin Wanrong handed the note to the attendant, saying, "Please, read it out loud."

The attendant took the note and recited loudly, "——Lost——Path——Know——Return——"

The crowd listened to these four characters, unable to decipher their meaning. The clever attendant, learning from previous experience, hurriedly asked, "Which character are we guessing this time?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "The first character itself is the answer to this wordless riddle."

Without hesitation, the attendant announced, "The answer is 'lost', from the phrase 'lost path, know return.'"

A flurry of discussion broke out among the crowd; no one could understand why the answer was the character for "lost."

Seeing Lin Wanrong's self-satisfied expression, the Eldest Miss found it amusing. She approached him and gently tugged on his sleeve, "Stop teasing us, just explain how you guessed it."

Lin Wanrong smirked, "If I explain, will you give me a kiss?"

The Eldest Miss' heart pounded, but she kept a straight face, "Always talking nonsense. Say it or don't, I won't bother with you anymore."

This Eldest Miss still had a lot to learn about teasing, Lin Wanrong thought, laughing heartily. "You must all be wondering why the answer is 'lost' from 'lost path, know return.' The truth is simple, worth less than a penny. Once you understand the riddle, you'll figure out the answer."

One of the young masters shouted, "Brother, isn't that stating the obvious? Isn't solving any riddle about understanding it first?"

'I do enjoy stating the obvious, what's it to you,' Lin Wanrong thought, laughing aloud, "You're absolutely right. Most of the riddles posed by Miss Zhiqing... are difficult on the surface. Consider this one: a blank sheet of paper, no one could guess its meaning. But what is this white paper? It's a 'riddle' proposed by the young lady. There are no words in the riddle, but if we remove the word part from 'riddle,' doesn't it become 'lost' from 'lost path, know return'?"

The crowd suddenly grasped the solution, understanding how the riddle had been deciphered. Unraveling the answer was extremely simple, didn't require much wisdom, and everyone assumed they could have guessed it. However, when in the midst of the puzzle, their thinking was confined, and it was this that created the pleasure of enlightenment. The servant of the Xiao family was indeed sharper than most. Considering his performance, it was no surprise he insisted on testing Tian Wenjing first; he had earned it.

"Brother, please hurry and solve Miss Zhiqing's fourth riddle. This year, we must crack Miss Zhiqing's puzzles to restore our male pride," a young noble from the Jinghua Academy loudly called out. With three out of four riddles solved, a little more effort would shatter the invincible myth of Miss Zhiqing's riddles. How could this not excite them?

Lin Wanrong smirked, 'Who is this Miss Zhiqing, to have so many ambitious young noblemen willingly submit to her?' This was indeed strange.

The steward removed the last lantern with the orange tassel and announced, "I must inform this young master that Miss Zhiqing's lantern riddles always consist of three character guesses and one object guess. This final lantern should be the object guess." Seeing Lin Wanrong's extraordinary performance, he tactfully elevated his title to "young master."

With a resigned smile, Lin Wanrong replied, "If it's an object guess, then so be it. Even if I can't guess it, I believe the young masters and ladies here won't blame me."

Everyone had placed their hopes on him, and they nodded in agreement. Even if he couldn't guess the final riddle, his skills in breaking the previous three rounds would be more than enough to secure him a teaching position at Jinghua Academy.

The steward took out the last slip of paper and read, "Whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, it is sitting. Whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, it is standing. Whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, it is walking. Whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, it is lying down. Oh, Miss Zhiqing has clarified that each sentence corresponds to a living creature. There are four in total. If you guess two, you are considered to have solved the riddle."

"This girl is tricky," Lin Wanrong grumbled to himself. One riddle required four guesses - did she think him a fool? It was terribly unfair.

The hall was filled with lively discussions as everyone speculated about the four creatures. Lin Wanrong, with a dismissive smile, didn't bother guessing. He let out a yawn and lazily walked back to the Xiao sisters. He whispered, "Ladies, have you had your fill?"

Yushuang giggled, "How much can we eat? You're the one who's been complaining about being hungry. You should make sure you're full."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I'm stuffed. There's nothing interesting here anymore. Let's head downstairs."

The Eldest Miss, assuming he couldn't guess the last riddle, nodded and said, "That sounds good. You've already guessed three riddles. That's a fair accomplishment."

The younger sister gave a sweet smile, "You're really good at this. Maybe I won't go to Jinghua Academy. You can teach me at home. I bet you're much better than those teachers."

Lin Wanrong's face took on a mischievous grin. He nodded and said, "That sounds splendid. I have some resources - 'The Art of Prolonging Life', 'The Plum in the Golden Vase', and 'The Monk with the Lantern', which should be enough for three to five years of study. We can look into it when we have time."

The sisters didn't understand what 'The Art of Prolonging Life', 'The Plum in the Golden Vase', and 'The Monk with the Lantern' were, but having spent time with him, they recognized the intent behind his grin. Both of their cheeks flushed simultaneously and they scoffed in unison.

Yushuang pinched his waist and shyly warned, "If you keep talking nonsense, I'll ignore you. I'll even tell my sister to ignore you too."

Lin Wanrong shrugged, laughing heartily. The girls were flustered, creating a sweet and intimate atmosphere that left everyone else forgotten on the sidelines. The Eldest Miss wanted to ask him what he was doing in the "Fairyland Comes with the Clouds," but seeing his joy and the absence of his usual dispirited look, she relaxed. Rising, she bid farewell to Tian Wenjing and the others.

The crowd was engaged in animated discussion, enthusiastically guessing the riddles, so when Miss Xiao and her clever servant announced their departure, everyone paused. Tian Wenjing hurriedly entreated, "Miss Xiao, two important figures from Jinghua Academy haven't arrived yet. They are well-read, incredibly learned, among the top talents in the land. Once they arrive, I'll introduce you. Then you can leave."

Miss Xiao gently shook her head and smiled, "We've already overstayed our welcome, and we still have many matters to attend to since we've just arrived in the capital. The hour is late, so we really should return home and settle down. My servant lacks manners, if he has offended any young masters or ladies, I hope you will forgive us."

Seeing that Miss Xiao was resolute in her departure, Tian Wenjing knew he couldn't persuade her to stay. Initially, he'd performed well, but as the night wore on, he became overconfident and forgot his manners. Losing the riddle game to a mere servant, his pride was severely dented, and he was forced to laugh a few hollow laughs.

The crowd had held high hopes for Lin Wanrong, but seeing his departure, they assumed he could not solve the final riddle. Disappointment spread.

The young master who had encouraged Lin Wanrong several times before approached him. "Young brother, I am Fang Ruchuan. My compliments to your insightful guesses earlier. Why did you not guess the last riddle? Couldn't you solve it? That's a pity. If you had solved all four riddles and cracked Miss Zhiqing's lantern riddles, you'd have become famous overnight."

Famous for cracking a young lady's riddles? Lin Wanrong couldn't help but shake his head at the thought. Seeing Fang Ruchuan's amiable demeanor, very different from the arrogance he had shown earlier, Lin Wanrong merely smiled, neither confirming nor denying.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's nonchalant smile, Tian Wenjing fumed inside. He snorted, "It's probably for the best you didn't solve it. I'm sure Miss Zhiqing wouldn't be pleased to know her riddles were solved by a mere servant."

Hearing him belittle Lin San, the Second Miss Xiao became furious, "You're not even as good as a servant! Lin San, let's go, we'll ignore him."

The Eldest Miss Xiao merely smiled without speaking, while Yushuang huffed and dragged Lin Wanrong downstairs.

"Why so angry, Second Miss? People can say whatever they want, it won't make us any less." Lin Wanrong laughed it off.

"Hmph, you're more knowledgeable than any of them. If anyone dares bully you, I won't let them off. Besides, in a few years, when we get married, you'll be mine, my—" The Second Miss Xiao blushed and stumbled over her words. Lin Wanrong, puzzled, asked, "Your what?"

"My husband!" Yushuang, her face flushed, whispered firmly, her chest puffing out with shy determination.

Upon hearing their conversation, the Eldest Miss Xiao felt a rush of heat to her cheeks. She lightly tugged on her sister's hand, laughing, "You shameless girl."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, his spirits soaring as if he had consumed a powerful stimulant. Halfway down the stairs, he suddenly turned around and called out, "Hey, what's-his-name... Fang Ruchuan, could you come here a moment?"

Fang Ruchuan was taken aback, hastily saying, "Brother, are you calling me?"

Lin Wanrong gave a slight nod, asked for a paper and brush, wrote four characters, and chuckled, "The answer to the final riddle is here, if you want to see it, come and take it."

Overwhelmed with joy, Fang Ruchuan hurriedly lunged forward. Lin Wanrong handed him the note and, laughing heartily, led the two young ladies down the stairs.

Fang Ruchuan stared at the characters for a long time, dumbfounded, before suddenly leaping up exclaiming, "Brother, you've guessed it, you've indeed guessed it, you've solved all four of Miss Zhiqing's riddles!"

The crowd quickly surrounded him, and they saw the note bearing four characters—"Frog, Horse, Fish, Snake", indeed four creatures.

"Miss Zhiqing and Young Master Ye have arrived—" an alarmed cry came from an unknown source, and everyone hurriedly looked up to see a man and a woman gracefully ascending the stairs.

Tian Wenjing sighed and hastily greeted them, "Ah, the two of you are late."

The lantern viewing was still bustling, although not as crowded as at its peak. As Lin Wanrong and the two young ladies walked at the bottom of the building, a burst of uproar came from the floor above. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but shake his head, even guessing a few riddles could amuse them to such an extent, it seemed these young masters and misses had a very impoverished nightlife.

The Eldest Miss curiously asked, "What characters did you write just now? Did you really guess it right?"

Lin Wanrong read out these characters, chuckling, "I don't know if I got it right or not. Anyway, I just made a blind guess."

Upon hearing these four characters, the Eldest Miss knew he had indeed solved all four riddles, yet he still pretended to be so nonchalant. She said, amused and annoyed, "If you've guessed it, you've guessed it. You love to play mysterious. Do you want that clever and witty Miss Zhiqing to think about you?"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback, "Eldest Miss, you've seen through me, well, it would be good if you thought about me too."

"Nonsense, disgusting." The Eldest Miss took a look at Yushuang and secretly snorted.

The Second Miss was extremely happy, hugging his arm and saying, "I knew it. Naughty man, you're the strongest!"

Rubbing lightly against her high, soft chest, Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, making a face and saying, "Strong, indeed very strong, you'll find out in the future."

The Second Miss blushed, but bravely looked up at him, smiling seductively. That instant radiance faintly had the shadows of Madam Xiao.

The Xiao family's branch in the capital was an enterprise established by the Old Mr. Xiao during his lifetime (The grandfather). Two large courtyard houses, located at the mouth of Dongsì Hutong, were indeed the bustling place in the capital. The prosperity of the capital was extraordinary indeed, even though it was night, the street was still crowded with endless traffic.

The word "Hutong" refers to a type of narrow street or alley, commonly associated with northern Chinese cities, especially Beijing. Most Beijing hutongs are aligned in a grid pattern and have their origins in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

"Dongsì" is a historic area in Beijing, named because it originally contained the easternmost of the city's four main Buddhist temples. Thus, "Dongsì Hutong" refers to the alleyways in the "Eastern Four" area of Beijing. It's an area that's rich in history and traditional Chinese culture.]

When the Eldest Miss's carriage stopped at the shop's door, the servants who had received the news came forward to greet them. Seeing Xiao Yuruo stepping down from the carriage, everyone flocked to bow to the young ladies.

According to the traditions of Great Hua, it was never too late to give New Year's greetings during the first lunar month. The Eldest Miss gave Lin San a glance, and Lin Wanrong distributed the red envelopes they had prepared to the workers. "Happy New Year, wishing for good luck," they said, seeking a good start for the year.

The steward of the capital's branch office was an efficient woman. Her husband's surname was Song, so everyone called her Sister Song. According to the Eldest Miss, Sister Song had served as a maid in the Old Madam's quarters when she was young, so in a way, she was part of the family.

Sister Song held the Eldest Miss in conversation, asking a great deal. When she mentioned the late Old Madam, her eyes filled with unshed tears. After some discussion, Sister Song personally brought out the cooked Tangyuan, presenting it to the two young misses, saying, "Eldest Miss,

Second Miss, you have traveled far and celebrated the festival outside. I apologize for not taking better care of you. I am not sure if this Tangyuan will suit your tastes."

The Eldest Miss held the bowl and tasted it, then laughed, "Sister Song, this is the Lotus Seed Eight Treasures Tangyuan. It's thoughtful of you to remember our mother loved this. The flavor is excellent."

Hearing the Eldest Miss's praise made Sister Song happy. Upon hearing that their mother enjoyed the Lotus Seed Eight Treasures, the Second Miss couldn't help but taste a few bites.

The Eldest Miss then passed a bowl to Lin Wanrong and said, "Didn't you ask if you could have Tangyuan tonight? Try this. This is our authentic Jinling Tangyuan."

Lin Wanrong scooped up a Tangyuan and put it in his mouth. The lotus paste inside was scalding hot. He coughed a few times in distress, quickly spat it back into the bowl, his face flushed.

The Eldest Miss laughed out loud, "Who told you to rush and gobble it down, you're too greedy."

According to custom, the servants could not eat before the Eldest and Second Miss had done so. Seeing how intimate the Eldest Miss was with this Lin San, Sister Song was surprised, but she held back her laughter and said nothing.

After having the Tangyuan, which symbolized the fullness of the coming year, the two young misses looked tired. They had been working hard day and night for more than ten days. Even though they were as resilient as their mother, they were exhausted. Now that they had arrived at their destination, they naturally wanted to rest as soon as possible.

Sister Song respectfully said, "Eldest Miss, the inner courtyard is prepared for the two of you. Maids and servants are all ready. You and the Second Miss should rest early."

The Eldest Miss hummed in acknowledgement and, holding Yushuang, started walking inside. After a few steps, she turned back, "Sister Song, have you arranged Lin San's accommodations?"

Sister Song quickly replied, "It has been arranged. It's right next to the inner courtyard."

The Eldest Miss pondered for a moment, then said softly, "He's one of the most important people in our family. I still have many things to discuss with him. Let him stay in the inner courtyard with us, it will be more convenient. Also, having a man around will make me feel safer. Hey, you, still eating, I'm talking about you--"

Lin Wanrong swallowed the last Tangyuan in his bowl, which was so hot it made him pant and fan himself. Only after a while did he gasp, "I know, I know you're talking about me. Go ahead, Eldest Miss, I'm listening."

Xiao Yuruo looked at him and chuckled. This man, with his not insignificant knowledge and his insatiable appetite, amused her. "I asked you to stay in the inner courtyard, are you willing?"

"To protect the two misses? That's my specialty," Lin Wanrong chuckled.

The Eldest Miss blushed, glared at him, and turned to leave. The Second Miss sneakily gestured to him, and Lin Wanrong quickly followed.

The courtyard in the capital had a distinctive feature - square and symmetrical with two flower beds planted in the center. Its simplicity and elegance were unmistakable. The ground was paved with green bricks, exuding a refined and classical charm.

For a considerable length of time, this place would be his home. Lin Wanrong looked around, feeling somewhat moved. The Eldest Miss shared the same sentiment, and she couldn't help but glance at him. After the fifteenth, Xiao Yushuang was to live in Jinghua Academy, so naturally, she didn't feel as strongly about home as the two of them.

The Eldest Miss chose a room on the south side to live in, a practice known as sitting south and facing north. When it was Lin Wanrong's turn to choose, he unhesitatingly picked a room on the north side, sitting north and facing south.

Seeing the Xiao sisters looking tired, Lin Wanrong said, "You've traveled a long way, and you must be weary. Why don't you both take a comfortable bath and rest early?"

The Eldest Miss nodded, gave a light hum, and was about to return to her room. But she felt something was amiss and quickly asked, "And what will you be doing?"

With a serious expression, Lin Wanrong replied, "While the two ladies are bathing and changing, I will be on guard outside to prevent anyone from sneaking a look. Please rest assured, as long as I, Lin San, am here, no one can enter."

‘No one else can enter, but it seems only you can,’ the Eldest Miss thought, her face flushing with embarrassment. She felt as if she was inviting the wolf into the room. She glanced at him, too shy to speak. Yushuang, with a bashful look in her eyes, softly said, "You bad man, my sister and I will be bathing together, and you are not allowed to come in. Otherwise, I will have my mother punish you."

Lin Wanrong felt weak in the knees. The Second Miss might be young, but when it came to the art of seduction, she was top-notch. ‘If I really did barge in, it wouldn't be my fault, but yours for stirring the fire.’

The two ladies stripped off their clothes and soaked in the wooden tub. The transparent steam moistened their cheeks, and their bodies felt soft and comfortable.

The Eldest Miss' skin was as white as snow, and her chest was crystal clear. In the mist, she looked like a naked jade beauty.

Yushuang's gaze lingered on her sister's chest for a while, a hint of envy flashing in her eyes. Suddenly, she mustered up the courage, leaned into the Eldest Miss's ear, and whispered a few words. Xiao Yuruo's face turned red with anger, and she said, "If this scoundrel dares to take advantage of you again, I will fight him."

The Second Miss' face turned red with embarrassment, and she softly said, "It's not like that. He said the massage was to promote my development, and he even said that mine would grow bigger than yours in the future."

The Eldest Miss couldn't bear to listen anymore. Her face turned red, and she slapped the water in the tub, causing it to splash everywhere. She said angrily, "I'm so angry, this bad guy, this dead thing, this heartless thing."

The Second Miss hummed and said, "He's just that bad. Sister, he said he would guard us outside, but why is there no sound? Could he be hiding somewhere and peeping?"

The Eldest Miss let out a startled cry, quickly covering her chest with her hands. Remembering his "misdeeds," she knew that he was capable of such a thing. She anxiously looked around the room, at the windows, the door gap, the skylight on the roof, everything was intact, and there was no sign of that detestable man.

Lin Wanrong, with his ear against the window, listened intently. He frowned, shook his head helplessly, and thought, 'Eldest Miss, you underestimate me. How could I, Lin San, do something as tasteless as peeping? Stealing hearts is the real art.'

He yawned, about to return to his room for a good sleep, when he suddenly noticed the broken red string lantern in the corner. He couldn't help but sigh lightly, picked up the lantern, and took it into his room.

The two sisters finished their bath amidst giggles. When they opened the door, they saw that Lin San's room was brightly lit, and he seemed to be busy with something.

The Eldest Miss whispered, "Yushuang, go and see what that bad guy is doing. It's so late, and he's still not sleeping. Does he want to exhaust himself?"

The Second Miss hummed in agreement, tiptoed over, and peeked through the crack in the window. She saw Lin San holding a lantern, busily working on something. She couldn't figure out what he was doing and didn't dare to disturb him, so she tiptoed back to her sister and whispered a few words in her ear.

The Eldest Miss frowned and huffed, "Let that scoundrel mess around, we should rest."

After sleeping for an unknown length of time, the Eldest Miss was restless and couldn't close her eyes. She put on her robe and stepped outside.

The moon was high in the sky, and the night was as clear as water. In less than half an hour, the fifteenth of the first lunar month would be over. The lights in the room across were all out, and there was no sound, presumably, that guy had fallen asleep.

'He's asleep so early, like a pig!' The Eldest Miss was annoyed, gave a small kick, and was about to return to her room when she saw a wooden ladder leaning against the wall.

Following the ladder with her eyes, the Eldest Miss covered her mouth in surprise. Tears of joy fell as she saw a sturdy lantern slowly rising from the roof, ascending into the sky. The red string tied around the ankles of the two little figures was shining brightly in the orange light.

Lin San was lying on the roof, his eyes lightly closed, breathing evenly. The moonlight shone on his face, and the drool dripping from the corner of his mouth was clearly visible. He had, indeed, fallen into a deep sleep...