

Finest 301

Chapter 301 Appreciating Flowers

"Why are you just arriving?" From a distance, she saw Lin San and Huan'er approaching, playfully bantering. The Eldest Miss hastened to meet them, grumbling, "Everyone else is working their heads off, yet you seem to have all the leisure time in the world."

"As a wounded person, a bit of coddling is appropriate." Lin Wanrong chuckled, his eyes roving appreciatively over Xiao Yuruo. "Miss, you look quite beautiful today," he sincerely complimented.

Xiao Yuruo felt a surge of joy at his words, a flush rising on her face. "No need for such flattery. You're late. Sister Xu invited me to appreciate the flowers earlier, but seeing you weren't here, I had to decline."

The Eldest Miss was normally a workaholic, always consumed with business and having no time for such diversions. But things were different now. She was in love and being a young, beautiful woman, she naturally yearned for these lovely moments under the flowers and moon. Having had a hugely successful promotion that day, what was the harm in rewarding herself by enjoying the scenery?

She held this thought but was too embarrassed to voice it first. Seeing Lin San's cheerful yet unserious demeanor, she couldn't help but snort softly in annoyance. Couldn't he see the opportunity, even at such a moment, where was his usual tact?

However, Lin Wanrong was astute. Seeing the Eldest Miss's shy demeanor, her gaze occasionally drifting towards the Grand Prime Minister Temple, he could hardly be in the dark. A thought amused him privately. Spring had indeed arrived; even the Eldest Miss was falling into its charm.

He laughed out loud, calling out, "Sister Song, could you please handle the distribution of gifts? I'll accompany the Eldest Miss for a walk in the temple. Don't get me wrong, we'll be scouting for potential big clients. Oh, what a pity! Even during this flower-viewing event, I'm still thinking about work. I'm truly the model of loyalty and morality."

"Go ahead," Sister Song replied with a laugh. "I'll keep an eye on things here. You and the Eldest Miss go and have some fun. She has indeed been very busy these days."

For the perfume promotion, Lin Wanrong only contributed ideas, using just his lips. Though it required a high level of expertise, the Eldest Miss and Sister Song arranged the remainder, managing all the details. Preparations for such a large-scale promotion, without prior experience, had indeed kept the Eldest Miss extremely busy.

A blush spread across Xiao Yuruo's face as she retorted, "It's Lin San who wants to shirk his duties. I didn't want to go - hey, don't pull me!"

Watching the pair depart, Sister Song shook her head and smiled, hoping for a good outcome for Lin San and the Eldest Miss. The two entered the main gate of Grand Prime Minister Temple, a wave of warmth immediately greeted them. The temple was bustling with visitors, even more lively than outside. Lin Wanrong wondered, was the flower-viewing event at Grand Prime Minister Temple so enticing that it felt as though all of the capital had poured into it?

Seeing the slightly flushed face of the Eldest Miss, Lin Wanrong teased, "Is there a furnace in this temple? Why does it feel even warmer inside?"

The Eldest Miss chuckled at him, "You're normally so clever, understanding everything clearly. How is it you don't know this? Behind Grand Prime Minister Temple lies a large hot spring, its climate comfortable and spring-like all year round. The temple's garden is irrigated by this hot spring, allowing the flowers to bloom early in spring, presenting a spectacular sight. That's the origin of Grand Prime Minister Temple's flower-viewing event. Otherwise, where could you appreciate such beautiful scenes this season?"

"So, that's how it is," Lin Wanrong chuckled, realizing why the flower-viewing festival was such a grand event. Apparently, this was the premier harbinger of spring in the capital. 'However, it's quite a waste to have a hot spring located within a monk's temple. If it were situated in the courtyard of the Xiao family's mansion, I'd design some bikinis and thongs, and frolic in the water daily with two young ladies. What a delightful scene that would be.'

The Grand Prime Minister Temple had a rich history and long-standing reputation, and its back garden was especially famous due to the unique climate created by the hot springs.

Since they met, the two of them had not had such a relaxed moment together. As they strolled around the temple unrestrainedly, uttering words that made the Eldest Miss's heart beat wildly, Xiao Yuruo was teased until her face turned beet red. Although her heart pounded, and she wanted to scold him, her eyes radiated tender affection like gentle waters.

By the time the pair reached the back garden, laughing and chatting, a light, refreshing, cool fragrance was already wafting toward them.

Lin Wanrong looked up and saw a circular archway before his eyes, with two large characters in the center — Mei Yuan (Plum Garden).

Seeing him dumbstruck, the Eldest Miss laughed, "Don't know what it is, do you? The gardens within the Grand Prime Minister Temple are divided based on the type of flower. The most famous ones are Mei Yuan, Tao Yuan, Lan Yuan, and Mu Dan Yuan. This is just the first one." [TL: Respectively, Plum Garden, Peach Garden, Orchid Garden, and Peony Garden.]

The plum, being the leader among the four noble flowers, has a reputation for purity and elegance, and is the first choice for literati to admire. Upon entering the archway, they found themselves immersed in an ocean of plum blossoms.

The plum blossoms on the branches were scattered and layered, red as fire, white as snow, pink as dawn, with a fragrance everywhere. The garden was awash with colors, vibrant and captivating. People's voices filled the air, lively and cheerful, with graceful figures flitting to and fro.

Joy radiated from the Eldest Miss's face. With a surprised yelp, she twisted her petite body and hurried into the falling petal clusters. The specks of plum blossoms reflected on her exquisite cheeks, making her exceptionally charming.

The usually stern and serious Eldest Miss rarely showed such a sweet smile, like that of a young girl. Lin Wanrong's heart warmed, and he quickly caught up, laughing, "Eldest Miss, you seem so cheerful, why don't we play a flower-picking game?"

"What flower-picking game?" The Eldest Miss stopped in her tracks and asked curiously.

"Well, it's quite simple. See the highest branch on this plum blossom tree? Either I'll hold you to pick that flower, or you hold me to do so. What do you think, isn't it extremely simple?"

"You rascal, is there nothing else in your mind?" The Eldest Miss shyly huffed, a blush spreading across her face. Having heard his nonsense daily, she had developed an immunity, even a habit, of it. She felt odd if she didn't hear him speak for a day.

The Eldest Miss reached for a plum tree in front of her. Its trunk was dry, with twists and turns spiraling upward, and pink flowers dotted with droplets of water bloomed beautifully as if they had just received rain. Unable to resist, she plucked a plum blossom and held it in her hand, softly reciting, "To break a plum branch when the courier comes, to send to the man at the Longtuo mountain pass. South of the river has nothing to give, so I send a twig of spring in stead."

"That's sentimental, so very sentimental," Lin Wanrong clapped and laughed. "Are you missing Jinling, Eldest Miss? When the weather gets warmer tomorrow, why don't we bring your mother to the capital to relieve your longing?"

The Eldest Miss glanced at him, chuckling, "Any attempt is worth a try, it's not necessarily good poetry. Yet, you always know how to flatter. You claim it's good poetry, then why don't you compose a poem about plum blossoms for me to hear?"

"Plum blossoms, ah, that's easy," Lin Wanrong laughed, "I can not only write about plum blossoms but also about lotus flowers, would you believe it?"

"You, if you excel at anything, it is being the world's greatest braggart," the Eldest Miss laughed, covering her mouth. Her body shivered like a flower branch, her allure surpassing the full bloom of the garden.

Seeing her rosy cheeks and spring-like demeanor, a warmth surged in Lin Wanrong's heart. He took her small hand, leaned into her ear, and playfully whispered, "Why chance upon a lotus, when one is fortunate enough to not need a plum? Eldest Miss, is this poem good?"

This rascal. The Eldest Miss felt a sweet sensation in her heart. She gave a soft 'hmm', lowered her head quickly, her blush overpowering the red of the plum blossoms on the tree branches.

"Miss Xiao, Miss Xiao," a woman's voice rang out. The Eldest Miss jumped in surprise, hastily releasing Lin San's large hand.

From beneath the plum tree, a pretty figure emerged and took Xiao Yuruo's arm, laughing, "What's this, waiting for your family's Lin San?"

Xiao Yuruo's face flushed with embarrassment. Uncertain whether her intimate moment with Lin San had been seen, she hurriedly replied, "Sister Xu, what are you talking about? I don't understand."

Lin Wanrong was annoyed. This Xu Zhiqing had come out of nowhere, disrupting his romantic moment with the Eldest Miss. Seeing her talking warmly with the Eldest Miss, he felt it wasn't appropriate to express his irritation and had to swallow it.

"Sister Xu, have you all finished touring the garden?" Xiao Yuruo, feeling guilty, diverted Xu Zhiqing's attention with a question.

"I just entered a moment ago. Brother Ye and Brother Tian found this plum garden exquisite and were engaged in a poetry duel over there. I found it uninteresting, so I came here to chat with you," Xu Zhiqing replied lightly.

Lin Wanrong found it peculiar that Xu Zhiqing, being a knowledgeable person, would find the poetry recital between Young Master Ye and Young Master Tian uninteresting.

While they were speaking, Ye Yuchuan and Tian Wenjing arrived. Seeing the Eldest Miss, Tian Wenjing quickly approached her, smiling, "Miss Xiao, your arrival is timely. Brother Ye and I are having a plum blossom poetry duel, could you be our judge?"

The Eldest Miss knitted her brows, unsure of what to say. Lin Wanrong, however, understood. This was not about a poetry duel; they were blatantly showing off in front of the Eldest Miss.

"East wind now, west wind later, among the trees in the mountain, all leaves are empty. Only the plum blossoms can withstand the wind, still fresh and white, embracing the new red. This is the new poem I just wrote, Miss Xiao, please appreciate it." Without waiting for the Eldest Miss to speak, Tian Wenjing recited his poem, eagerly looking at the Eldest Miss, hoping for her approval.

Ye Yuchuan also glanced at Xu Zhiqing and said with a smile, "People come and go in the land of many fragrances, bird hangs upside down in the wind carrying flower messages. I am even more pleased to see the light of the water reflecting, oblique sparse shadows entrusted to the waves."

Lin Wanrong watched the expressions of the two gentlemen. The one named Tian Wenjing was clearly pursuing the Eldest Miss, and the one named Ye Yuchuan seemed interested in Xu Zhiqing. Good, he was out of the picture. Suddenly, he laughed out loud, "Two good poems, better than drinking wine, splendid, splendid indeed!"

Young Master Tian was defeated by him that very day, and upon hearing his words, he shot him a fierce glance. Young Master Ye, however, seemed to be on a higher plane. He simply glanced at him indifferently, smiling without a word.

The Eldest Miss laughed lightly, saying, "Both Young Masters are highly talented, I must admit that I cannot compare. I'd rather not comment on these poems." With her evasion, a deep disappointment flashed through Tian Wenjing's eyes. However, Ye Yuchuan turned his expectant gaze towards Miss Xu.

Conventionally, Miss Xu, a highly accomplished lady, should have appreciated the fine plum blossom poems penned by the two young masters. However, she shook her head slightly, saying, "Brother Ye, Brother Tian, it's not that your poems are badly written. In terms of their descriptive prowess, both of them can be considered masterpieces. But as the ancients say, 'prose carries the Dao, and poetry expresses aspiration.' These poems were composed merely to suit the occasion; they are somewhat lacking in deeper implications."

So it was. Lin Wanrong nodded in agreement. Miss Xu herself had 'depth,' and naturally, she would favor those who also possessed depth. Unfortunately, no matter how deeply he cultivated himself, Lin Wanrong would never match her depth. He chuckled at this thought, letting his gaze travel over Miss Xu, his eyes gleaming with lust.

Miss Xu's remarks were straightforward, but the two young masters did not seem irritated. Instead, they bowed deeply, saying, "Thank you for your guidance, Miss Xu. Yuchuan (Wenjing) has indeed learned much."

Seeing the two young masters' respect for Miss Xu, Xiao Yuruo managed a teasing smile, saying, "Miss Xu, if you're interested, why don't you compose a plum blossom poem yourself? It would let me experience what it means to have both scene and meaning."

"Exactly, exactly." Tian Wenjing applauded, moving closer to the Eldest Miss, saying, "What Miss Xiao says is exactly what Wenjing has been thinking."

'Oh, what he wished, what he wished, wish your head!' Seeing how this Tian fellow was getting so close to the Eldest Miss, Lin Wanrong felt a surge of anger. In a flash, he positioned himself in front of her, facing Tian Wenjing with a forced smile, saying, "Brother Tian's wish is also Brother Lin's wish — Brother Tian, how have you been these past few days? How's your little brother? Are your grandmother and Second Auntie well?"

‘This rascal is actually jealous,’ thought the Eldest Miss, feeling both amused and sweet inside. However, she cleverly hid behind him, letting him shield her from any trouble, her heart filled with tender affection.

Tian Wenjing snorted, ignoring his words. Xu Zhiqing took a few steps, slowly reciting, "Steadfast on earth's end, clinging to all things beautiful. Cold plum is the most resented, constantly blooming as last year's flower." Her words were of a somber scenery, yet they expressed sorrow through the environment, apt for her own situation.

A poem in seven steps, this girl really had some talent. Recalling her quick-wittedness when learning Arabic numerals, Lin Wanrong had to admit that geniuses did exist in this world.

"Excellent poem!" Both Young Masters Tian and Ye exclaimed at the same time, their faces filled with admiration. Xiao Yuruo grasped Xu Zhiqing's hand, saying, "Sister, your knowledge is profound, your learning is vast. It's like looking up at a tall mountain, you truly make me admire you."

Xu Zhiqing sighed, "You flatter me. This matter of poetry is a flower of prosperous times, only for the amusement of oneself and others. If it arises in times of turmoil, it is a disaster for the nation and its people."

"Well said!" Lin Wanrong raised his thumb in praise. ‘This girl's view aligns with mine,’ he thought suddenly, remembering his first debate with Qingxuan. To sing songs of prosperity in times of turmoil was not a crime of the people, but a mistake of the country.

Young Masters Ye and Tian obviously understood Miss Xu's implication. They dared not argue with her, but when Lin San chimed in, they couldn't hold back anymore. Tian Wenjing glared at Lin Wanrong and snorted, "This is not your place to butt in. Go away."

Before Lin Wanrong could respond, the Eldest Miss retorted indignantly, "Young Master Tian, when Lin San speaks, it's not your place to interrupt."

Young Master Tian was stunned. The Eldest Miss's face flushed with embarrassment as she saw Lin San smiling at her. She reached out and pinched his arm hard.

Xu Zhiqing cast a curious glance at Lin Wanrong and chuckled, "So, that's how it is. Miss Xiao, your choice is indeed unique. Lin San, aside from solving riddles and doing math, you even have such methods. I had underestimated you."

‘Damn, I have many more methods you haven’t tasted,’ Lin Wanrong thought to himself with a smirk. Yet the Eldest Miss’s defense had made him pleased from head to toe.

Tian Wenjing’s face changed, and without any regard for his manners, he left abruptly. Ye Yuchuan tried to stop him but failed. He could only look helplessly at Xu Zhiqing and said, "Miss Xu, Brother Tian, he..."

Xu Zhiqing dismissed it with a smile, "If he wants to leave, let him. His petty competitiveness is unbecoming of a gentleman. But..." She looked at Lin Wanrong and laughed, "Lin San, considering how Miss Xiao looks out for you, shouldn’t you express your gratitude? I won’t make it difficult for you. Since we’re composing plum blossom poems today, why don’t you write one as a token of your appreciation?"

"A poem? I’m not very good at it," Lin Wanrong modestly said. The Eldest Miss gave him a stern look, as if to say: you could win the poetry competition in Jinling for that little demon Luo Ning, but you can’t write one for me? You need to be fair!

Xu Zhiqing didn’t say anything. She smiled at the Eldest Miss, waiting to see how she would handle it. Xiao Yuruo was irritated. Her face turned pink, and she stomped her foot angrily.

‘Ah, this is one jealous tigress,’ Lin Wanrong thought to himself with a smirk. He pointed at Miss Xu and Miss Xiao, laughing, "Everywhere I look, beauties abound, lotus steps and jade faces glow."

Ye Yuchuan almost burst into laughter. What kind of poem was this? It made no sense at all. He couldn’t help but wonder how this young man had solved Miss Xu’s lantern riddle. The Eldest Miss seemed nervous, fearing that this rascal had suddenly lost his mind.

"Rosy lips and cheeks reveal..." Lin Wanrong pointed at the blushing faces of Xiao Yuruo and Xu Zhiqing and continued, "...dots of plum blossoms."

‘You sly man, always playing with metaphors and scaring people,’ the Eldest Miss thought. Despite the flush on her face, she was delighted. This poem, the first three lines were rubbish, but the last one transformed the rubbish into gold—a truly splendid stroke of genius.

Xu Zhiqing gave a light smile. This poem was amusing but seemed more like a playful composition, far from expressing profound thoughts. Was this all Lin San was capable of?

Seeing the faint smile on her lips, Lin Wanrong knew he was being looked down upon. 'Damn, when I turn on my charm, even ten of you can't resist. Someday you'll know.' He didn't bother to explain, giving the Eldest Miss a victorious hand gesture and sending her a sneaky kiss.

Though Xu Zhiqing was a woman, she possessed the air of a great general. Her calm and indifferent demeanor was something that even men found difficult to emulate. With Tian Wenjing gone, only two men and two women remained. Lin Wanrong, ever the faithful companion, walked beside the Eldest Miss. Recalling the affectionate display of Xiao Yuruo earlier, he couldn't help but whisper into her ear, "Eldest Miss, when we return tonight, I will indulge you in sweet pleasures. Hehe."

The garden was teeming with flower admirers. Xu Zhiqing and the Eldest Miss seemed to remain unbothered by Tian Wenjing's abrupt departure. Hand in hand, they strolled through the plum garden, then the peach garden, appearing like a pair of close-knit sisters.

Having taken a few steps into the peach garden, the two women were in deep conversation when boisterous laughter echoed from outside the garden. A burly figure, surrounded by a crowd, slowly made his way in.

"Prince Cheng!" Xu Zhiqing's brow furrowed as she spoke softly. Lin Wanrong hastily turned his head to look. The man had wide brows and large eyes, with a robust physique. It was indeed Prince Cheng, whom he had seen from a distance earlier.

Chapter 302 The Virtuous Prince

"Long live the Prince." Upon hearing of the arrival of the Virtuous Prince, the commoners and officials admiring flowers in the garden were filled with trepidation and fell to their knees in unison.

The Virtuous Prince was a paternal half-brother of the current emperor, superior to all but one, standing at the pinnacle of nobility. Every official had to show their respect upon his arrival, let alone the commoners.

Ye Yuchuan, who was standing beside Miss Xu, hurriedly kneeled. Xu Zhiqing furrowed her brows slightly. Even though she was a learned scholar, she was still the daughter of Xu Wei. Despite her status, she had to abide by these hierarchical formalities. Sighing lightly, she reluctantly bent down to kneel.

Lin Wanrong snorted secretly. 'Damn it, what kind of prince is he? He's still a man, isn't he? Expecting me to kowtow? No way.' Even though he was usually carefree, he never faltered when it mattered. If he said he wouldn't kneel to the Virtuous Prince, he meant it.

The Eldest Miss noticed that while everyone else was kneeling in greeting, only Lin San stood there with a defiant expression, erect and motionless. In her haste, she grabbed him and said in a charmingly reproachful tone, "What's the matter with you? You won't bow even before the prince? Do you have a death wish?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "A man's knees are as precious as gold! In the world, one only kneels to the heaven, the earth, and his parents. What kind of thing does this prince think he is that I should kneel to him?"

The Eldest Miss was stunned. She wondered if he was living in the same world as her. How could he utter such rebellious words? It was lucky she was the one who heard him. If someone else had, would he still be alive? This man, carefree most of the time, chose to show his stubbornness at this moment.

Xu Zhiqing gave him a surprised look. This man had a proud backbone, a trait not often seen. It did him justice as a man. However, recalling his refusal of Li Tai's goodwill and his refusal to serve his country, she realized he was a person of complex character, indeed a mystery to her.

Seeing the Eldest Miss's anxious expression, Lin Wanrong let out a sad sigh. It was tough to be powerless. He was clearly at odds with the Virtuous Prince, yet he was still expected to kowtow to him. Thinking of power, his mind suddenly sparked. That day outside the Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, he met an elegantly dressed old man who had given him a strange golden plaque. He said that with this plaque, Lin San could find him in any government office in the capital. Judging by his aura and demeanor, he was far superior to Xu Wei, certainly a powerful figure. But being busy in the capital, Lin San had completely forgotten about it.

His thoughts racing, he looked at Xu Zhiqing and an idea came to him. Miss Xu, with her extensive knowledge and experience, might recognize this object. With this in mind, he reached into his pocket to take out the heavy golden plaque. Just as he was about to produce it, the Virtuous Prince lifted his hand with a smile and declared loudly, "Please rise, everyone. Today, I am here to admire the flowers, to enjoy the beautiful scenery, and to rejoice with the people. Let's forego these formalities."

"Your highness is wise." Everyone rose, clasping their fists in respect. The peach garden was vast, and with so many people present, no one noticed that Lin Wanrong, standing behind a tree in the garden, had never knelt in the first place.

Prince Cheng was surrounded by a throng of officials. Young Prince Zhao Kangning was walking by his side. However, Sister An, with her fox-like charm, was mysteriously absent, her figure nowhere to be seen. The peach blossoms, which typically bloomed in the third month, had burst forth a month early, thanks to the warm springs benefiting Grand Prime Minister Temple. This unusual occurrence made the vibrant peach blossoms even more startling. The garden was a riot of scattered petals, with red and white creating a stunning contrast. It looked like a true paradise of peach blossoms.

Prince Cheng and his entourage slowly made their way into the garden. In front of them, a group of monks from Grand Prime Minister Temple were explaining and narrating, serving them with the utmost attention and meticulousness, fearing any negligence might offend the royal guest.

Young Prince Zhao Kangning, with his keen eye, only needed a few steps to spot Miss Xiao and Lin Wanrong standing under a peach tree. He paused, his face betraying a hint of surprise. A cold smirk appeared at the corner of his mouth as he leaned over to whisper something into his father's ear.

Prince Cheng gave a low grunt of acknowledgment. His tiger-like eyes flashed like lightning, scanning the place where the two stood. Prince Cheng indeed carried an aura of authority; his gaze was so intense that it felt tangible, compelling people to avoid his stare.

Miss Xiao bit her lip lightly but defiantly raised her head and squared her shoulders, refusing to show any sign of fear. Lin Wanrong, however, appeared nonchalant, seemingly ready for a fight, as he had been numerous times before. He wasn't afraid at all. He offered a slight smile to Prince Cheng, completely at ease.

Taking tiger-like strides, Prince Cheng slowly walked over, laughing, "Isn't this Miss Xu Zhiqing? Are you here to enjoy the blossoms too?"

Xu Zhiqing gave a slight bow, "Your Highness, it's a pleasure to see you. This is Grand Prime Minister Temple's flower appreciation banquet. I'm here to join in the fun and I didn't expect to run into you, Your Highness. It's truly my great fortune."

Prince Cheng laughed heartily, "What fortune? Miss Zhiqing, you're too polite. I have been friends with your father for many years. Seeing you grow into a confident and courageous young woman makes me happy for my old friend."

Xu Zhiqing offered a small, silent smile. Prince Cheng laughed again, his gaze swept across Miss Xiao and Lin Wanrong, he pondered for a moment, "And these two are..."

Gritting her teeth, Miss Xiao curtsied, "Xiao Yuruo of Jinling's Xiao family greets Your Highness Prince Cheng."

Prince Cheng gave a sound of acknowledgment, laughing, "The Xiao family from Jinling? You must be the descendant of Elder Xiao, please rise, Miss Xiao." His gaze landed on Lin Wanrong, "Looking at this young man's clear and energetic aura, and his impressive appearance, could this be the Brother Lin San?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "So, the majestic figure whom everyone respects is His Highness Prince Cheng? I'm Lin San. I wish Your Highness a long and prosperous reign and to rule all under heaven."

Zhao Kangning's face changed, as if he was about to explode with anger, but Prince Cheng slightly shook his head to stop him, bursting into laughter, "Interesting! Lin San, you truly live up to your reputation, very interesting indeed. Although I live in the capital, I have heard many stories about you in Jinling. Making perfume, washing hands with hot oil, burning copper coins, you really are a clever one!"

"Too kind, too kind." Lin Wanrong laughed, "These are just some trinkets, tricks to fool others, not to be brought onto the stage. It's nothing compared to Your Highness who manages 'chickens' every day, and 'labors' day and night for the sake of the country and its people. I truly admire your ambition, Your Highness."

Prince Cheng took a few steps forward, smiling warmly, he came to stand before Lin Wanrong. He affectionately took hold of Lin's hand, "Lin San, there's no need to be so modest. Although your remarkable achievements haven't been officially recognized by the court, I'm well aware of them. A talent like you is indeed a sign of auspiciousness, a blessing to our Great Hua. My son, Kangning, being young and inexperienced, may have made some mistakes in the past. I ask you not to bear grudges against him. On his behalf, I offer you an apology."

As Prince Cheng spoke, he surprisingly bowed to Lin Wanrong. The spectators were stunned to see the royal prince offer such a gesture to a commoner. This act of appreciating talent and treating virtuous scholars well instantly earned Prince Cheng respect from the crowd.

Such a tactful move. If Lin Wanrong wasn't aware of Prince Cheng's covert scheming, he might have been taken in by his sincere expression. People like Prince Cheng were either extremely good

or extremely wicked, never walking the middle road. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but marvel internally, acknowledging Prince Cheng as a remarkable character of the times; possessing magnanimity, courage, and willingness to overlook minor details in order to achieve great things - a true 'heroic overlord'.

"Your Highness is too kind," Lin Wanrong helped him up, feigning confusion and waiting for the prince to complete his bow before reacting - a deliberate move to assert some advantage over the prince. "Young Prince Kangning and I share a good friendship. We've competed in poetry contests in Jinling, where did he ever act improperly? He's a rare gem among men. Your Highness, having such a son, is indeed enviable."

Prince Cheng had long been aware of Lin Wanrong's abilities. His failed plans in Jiangnan were largely due to Lin San's interference - from thwarting his plot to rob the Xiao family, to ruining the Jiangsu and Zhejiang Merchant Association, to destroying the White Lotus Cult, and even the destruction of his own 'granaries' in Jiangnan. Yet, the more obstacles Lin San posed, the more it demonstrated his unparalleled talent. If Prince Cheng could win him over, his loss in Jiangnan would be insignificant.

As a man of great ambition, Prince Cheng had lofty vision and profound cunning. He never wore his emotions on his sleeve. Grasping Lin Wanrong's hand, he smiled, "That's good to hear. Kangning is young and there's a lot he can learn from you. I hope you'll continue to guide him in the future."

As he spoke, he waved his hand and several attendants stepped forward with gift trays. Prince Cheng chuckled, "I've long heard of Mr. Lin's great reputation. Today, being our first meeting, I've come unprepared. Please accept this humble gift."

At his signal, an attendant pulled away the red silk covering the trays, revealing dazzling gold leaves that instantly caught the eye. There was enough gold to amount to a hundred taels.

From 'Brother Lin', to 'Lin San', to 'Mr. Lin', Prince Cheng's mode of addressing Lin Wanrong kept evolving, elevating Lin San's status to an incomparable height. Even the proud Prince Cheng addressed him as 'Mr. Lin', a title that escalated Lin Wanrong's status immensely.

Ye Yuchuan, standing beside Miss Xu, looked at Lin Wanrong in astonishment. Prince Cheng, known for his relentless pursuit of talent and given the nickname 'Virtuous Prince', had an unquestionable eye for talent. His extraordinary treatment of Lin San suggested that Lin San might indeed possess an unrivaled talent.

Although Xu Zhiqing had heard of some of Lin San's exploits, most of what she knew came from others, even the fact that he had secretly learned Arabic numerals. She had never actually witnessed his capabilities. Seeing Prince Cheng's action piqued her interest. She turned her gaze to Lin Wanrong, curious about his response.

In the crowd, the most anxious of all was Xiao Yuruo. Regardless of Lin San's actual abilities, he had already become the cornerstone of the Xiao family. Prince Cheng, upon first meeting Lin San, presented him with such generous gifts, which showed how highly he valued him. If Lin San were to be tempted, and choose to follow Prince Cheng, her Xiao family would be utterly doomed.

With anxiety surging in her heart, she hurriedly tugged at Lin San's sleeve, her eyes filled with intense hope and anticipation.

Chapter 303 Defiant and Unyielding

Lin Wanrong chuckled lightly, feigning surprise as he said, "Oh, what is this, your Highness? Are you amusing yourself by flaunting your gold leaf? It's so glittery that it's blinding! What an intriguing hobby."

Seeing Lin San's nonchalant demeanor, Prince Cheng grinned and said, "Brother Lin, please don't misunderstand. You are a recluse of high wisdom, naturally uninterested in these mundane treasures. This is merely a token of my respect. I hope you won't find it offensive."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Your Highness is too kind. I am no hermit. Who wouldn't love glittering gold and shining silver? As a man of common tastes, seeing these worldly treasures makes me all the happier. But, accepting such a generous gift out of the blue makes me uneasy. I am afraid I cannot accept it."

A glint flashed in the eyes of Prince Cheng, as he focused his gaze on Lin San, saying, "Brother Lin, you speak swiftly and honestly, just as I had hoped. Truth be told, my court lacks a young, talented, and courageous scholar like you. Therefore, I took the liberty to invite you to join me at my mansion. I promise to reward you handsomely in the future."

Prince Cheng indeed was a formidable figure, publicly recruiting talent and promising rich rewards to lure people. Even if he failed to recruit, he gained public favor, ensuring that many talents would seek him out to serve under his command.

Lin Wanrong shook his head, taking a few steps back as he laughed, "Your Highness is overly generous in your praise. I am but a lowly servant in the Xiao family, basking in the glory of the Madam and nurtured under the care of the Eldest Miss. I grow strong and healthy, spend my days tending to the flowers, nursing the grass, sketching landscapes in my leisure, leading a carefree life. Apart from this, I am unskilled. Your talk of a young scholar assisting and supporting you is like playing a lute before a cow, I'm afraid. Oh, just touching this gold leaf doesn't cost me, does it? That's good then, gentlemen, please take it back."

Prince Cheng was no ordinary man. His expression remained calm, but a sharp light gleamed in his eyes as he glanced at Lin Wanrong, then shifted his gaze to the Eldest Miss, "Brother Lin, won't you reconsider— Oh, Miss Xiao, are you running your operations in the capital now?" Seeing Miss Xiao nod, he smiled and nodded, "That's excellent, very good indeed."

A change flickered across Lin Wanrong's face. The others might not understand the implications in Prince Cheng's words, but he did. The Prince was threatening him using the Xiao family. Lin Wanrong cursed inwardly, 'Such is the nature of a hero, unscrupulous in his ambition. If soft tactics don't work, he turns to threats. Well, I'm not scared. I would rather write my name backward than bow to you.'

"I have made up my mind." Lin Wanrong plucked a peach blossom, held it near his nose, sniffing its fragrance with an air of defiance, "Whatever I intend to do, I will do, even if you try to stop me. And if I don't want to do something, nobody can force me. Your Highness, isn't this peach blossom beautiful? Here, have one."

"How dare you!" Zhao Kangning, standing beside Prince Cheng, could bear it no longer. His expression darkened, and he roared in anger, "You dare to show such audacity in front of my father! Seize him at once—"

Lin Wanrong burst out laughing and declared, "Your father is your father, but what does that have to do with me? I, Lin San, don't seek officialdom, and don't crave talent. What gives you the right to dictate my actions? We stand under the Emperor's rule. Despite your princely status, you're not the highest authority. The Gods watch us from above, and the Emperor presides over the golden court. It's up to the law and the emperor to decide my fate, not a young prince like you."

Prince Cheng managed to maintain his composure quite impressively, letting out two curt exclamations of "Well done!" However, a trace of grimness flickered in his eyes.

Lin Wanrong fingered the gold medal in his pocket. 'Damn it, I'm not afraid of you. Our enmity didn't start today. Even when I was a penniless nobody, I wasn't afraid of you. Am I supposed to be scared now? My wife is a princess, I have Xu Wei by my side, and the old man from Lingyin Temple hidden in the wings. Why should I be scared of you?'

Lin Wanrong let out a hearty laugh, snapped two peach blossoms off a tree and twirled them around. He began to stride away, singing loudly, "In the peach blossom hut lies the peach blossom temple, below it, the peach blossom fairy; the fairy planted peach trees, picked the blossoms to sell for wine money. Sober, he'd sit before the flowers, drunk, he'd sleep beneath them. This cycle of half-sobriety, half-drunkenness was repeated day after day, as the flowers bloomed and fell, year after year. He'd rather die amidst the flowers and wine, than bow to the trappings of power..."

Everyone listened to his mad poetry, quietly admiring his eloquence but too intimidated by the Prince's power to utter a word.

Xu Zhiqing watched Lin Wanrong's retreating figure and thought to herself, 'He's not even afraid of Prince Cheng. Anyone who tries to force him onto the battlefield is asking for humiliation.' She didn't understand him; he was at once lascivious and noble, making it impossible to figure out what kind of man he was.

"Lin San..." the Eldest Miss cried, tears brimming in her eyes. This damned man, one minute he's fooling around, the next he's excessively serious, always pulling at heartstrings.

Even Prince Cheng, with all his patience, was at a loss dealing with the unruly Lin San. Should he really apprehend Lin right here in the public? That would destroy the good reputation he had painstakingly built.

"Where's the Sect Leader An?" Prince Cheng finally asked after a moment of silence, a heavy murderous intent flashing in his eyes.

Zhao Kangning answered hurriedly, "Your Majesty, Sect Leader An said she ran into an old friend and left to visit. I don't know where she's gone."

Prince Cheng snorted and said, "An Biru and this Lin San have a deep-seated grudge, their feud is a matter of life and death. She won't let Lin San off the hook. Let her handle this."

The garden was bustling with activity. However, atop the bell tower of Grand Prime Minister Temple, someone was quietly enjoying the spectacle. An elegantly dressed old man sat on a stool,

his fine eyebrows and narrow eyes exuding a formidable aura. A handsome young man stood respectfully by his side.

The old man's gaze swept across the scene, catching Prince Cheng's embarrassment. He couldn't help but smile, "Interesting, very interesting indeed. I came out to enjoy the flowers today, but I didn't expect to watch such a good show. This youngster, not seen for a few months, is still as intriguing. He dares to offend even Prince Cheng. He has developed some mettle indeed. It appears that I underestimated him at the Lingyin Temple."

The young man cast a glance at Lin Wanrong's retreating figure and asked respectfully, "Is this the man you mentioned, the one you encountered outside the Lingyin Temple?"

The old man nodded and peered at the young man, a glimmer of light flickering in his eyes. "This young man, despite his carefree and nonchalant demeanor, is very decisive and cunning. You, despite your status as the top scholar, can match his cunning, but you lack his broad-mindedness."

The young man slightly lowered his head without saying a word, his expression unreadable to anyone.

Behind them, a blind old man stood quietly, as if he had heard nothing...

Lin Wanrong walked swiftly and managed to exit the peach garden in just a few steps. Recalling his playful demeanor earlier, he seemed to embody the charm of Tang Yin - charismatic and handsome. However, in his self-satisfaction, he slapped his forehead suddenly: "Ah, I've been too carried away with my charm, and I've left Eldest Miss behind."

[TL: Tang Yin, courtesy name Bohu, was a Chinese painter, calligrapher, and poet of the Ming dynasty period.]

Just as he was about to return, a series of shouts came from behind, "Lin San, Lin San—"

Turning his head, he saw Xu Zhiqing rushing towards him. The Eldest Miss, lifting her long skirt, followed behind, with Ye Yuchuan inseparable from Xu Zhiqing's side.

Lin Wanrong approached them and chuckled, "What's all this, ladies?"

The Eldest Miss gave him a warm look and gently reprimanded, "You, once you've had your fun, you just forget about me. Wait till I get you back home." Her cheeks blushed a charming pink, her brows arched with a smile, her eyes radiating a tenderness that seemed to drip water.

Xu Zhiqing smiled, "Lin San, was the poem you recited just now composed by yourself?"

‘Another conversation about poetry? So what if I did write it? Can you appreciate me just because of one poem?’ Lin Wanrong laughed, seemingly determined to contradict her. "Miss Xu overestimates me. How could I possibly compose such a fine poem? I merely copied it. My modest talent can only capture some plain and mundane scenes. I am thousands of miles away from reaching such a realm."

Xu Zhiqing paused upon hearing his frank admission that the poem was copied. Could someone be so unabashed about copying? But when she heard his self-deprecating comment, she couldn't help but burst into laughter. So, this Lin San did hold grudges.

Upon hearing his words, the Eldest Miss, oblivious to Miss Xu's presence, impulsively grabbed his hand and shyly said, "Lin San, I like your honesty."

Lin Wanrong felt a cold sweat. Just one instance of honesty had earned the Eldest Miss's open confession. If he were honest a hundred times, would she shout out, "My dear, I want you"?

Seeing Xu Zhiqing's puzzled expression, Lin Wanrong remembered the gold medallion tucked away in his robe. He wondered whether he should bring it out for this well-read and talented girl to appreciate, but a sudden cheer from ahead distracted him. "Exotic flower, it's an exotic flower—"

‘What exotic flower? None of my business,’ he was about to say, but the Eldest Miss pulled his hand, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. "Lin San, let's go and take a look."

"Yes, let's go see it." Miss Xu echoed with a mysterious smile.

Laughing so slyly, there must be a scheme. Lin Wanrong firmly shook his head and said, "I won't go. Miss, I need to visit the privy. Will you come? Let's go together!"

"Disgusting." Xiao Yuruo was emotionally stirred because Lin Wanrong would rather offend Prince Cheng for the Xiao family. She was about to speak softly to him when he made his crude remark, utterly shattering the amorous atmosphere. She couldn't help but blush and give him a reproachful look.

Was he truly audacious or just crass? Which one was the real Lin San? Xu Zhiqing let out a small sigh, "Appreciating a flower is like appreciating a person. To find one that is unique and different from the rest is no easy task. Whether it's a blooming flower or a poisonous weed, one won't know until it's tried."

Chapter 304 Top Scholar

What was this girl getting at? Her words carried a strange philosophical undertone that he naturally despised. 'Speak plainly, damn it, I hated your cryptic ways.'

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong steal the limelight, Ye Yuchuan couldn't bear it and shot him a glare, saying, "Miss Xu, to appreciate flowers, one needs to have the heart for it. Since Lin San doesn't want to go, let's proceed ourselves."

Seeing the crowd's cheering sounds came from the orchid garden, Xiao Yuruo couldn't help but say, "Among the four noble flowers of plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, I'm particularly fond of orchids, Lin San, shall we go take a look?"

'Weren't you fond of roses? Even the perfume you wear is of a passionate rose scent. How did you connect it with the elegant, subtly fragrant orchid? Could it be that you have a dual personality? Modest in public, but wild in private? Damn, this could be a treasure, I am in luck.' He gave her a once-over, his gaze lascivious to the extreme.

Xiao Yuruo hurriedly tugged at his hand, asking, "Are we going or not? Everyone is waiting for you!"

'Sweat, since when did I become the leader?' Overwhelmed by the unexpected favor, he chuckled, "Alright then, I won't go to the restroom just yet—I'll go after we're done admiring the orchids."

The two young ladies felt uncomfortable hearing this. Something as beautiful as admiring orchids was awkwardly connected with a trip to the restroom—it was as distasteful as it could get.

Lin Wanrong was no stranger to orchids. In his past life as a sales manager, his clients had a variety of hobbies—some loved risky adventures, others indulged in extreme sports, and yet others had a refined taste, a fondness for flowers and plants—especially for orchids. An exclusive pot of precious orchids was not cheap, and it made an inconspicuous gift, an excellent subtle way of giving presents.

Upon entering the orchid garden, they found it exquisitely arranged, filled with blooming orchids everywhere. Orchids were different from other flowers, their blossoms exuding a subtle fragrance. If mixed with other strongly scented flowers, one could not smell the scent of the orchids at all. The garden was filled with nothing but orchids and green grass, perfectly highlighting the aroma of the flowers. Whoever had arranged this garden was undoubtedly a true connoisseur of orchids.

As soon as the Eldest Miss entered the garden, she started looking around, gently touching any pretty orchid she laid her eyes on. Lin Wanrong watched her, finding it amusing. Although she was mature and steady, in the garden she became youthful and adorable, like a child. True orchid lovers would never touch the blossoms. The proverb "One can look but not play" perfectly applied here.

"Miss, do you truly like orchids?" Lin Wanrong chuckled.

Xiao Yuruo nodded earnestly, "Of course, I used to keep a few pots in my room." Lin Wanrong had a sudden realization. Unlike plum or peach trees that needed to be planted outdoors, a small potted orchid placed indoors, watered periodically, could thrive. Thus, the Eldest Miss also became a "lover of orchids."

Lin Wanrong shook his head with a smile, and said nothing. He thought about how this young girl was always busy with family affairs, where she could find time to take care of these plants. A girl as delicate as a flower was working so hard. He didn't ridicule her any further. With tender feelings swelling in his heart, he took her hand, "If you truly love orchids, I will accompany you every day to grow them, and tell you about their habits, ensuring that you can grow the most beautiful orchids in the world."

The Eldest Miss could feel his emotions and was deeply moved within. She yearned to throw herself into his arms and sob uncontrollably, yet given the present company, she could only manage a quiet murmur of acknowledgment, a simple sound carrying a thousand unspoken words.

"Where is the unique flower, where is it?" Xu Zhiqing noticed their intimate moment and interjected with a jovial tone.

A crowd of young men and women had formed a circle, pointing and discussing a pot of orchids at the center. Standing beside the orchid, a handsome young man was smiling at the crowd. "This is a

new orchid that I recently acquired, but I do not know its name, let alone how to appreciate it. Today, it so happens that we are here at the Grand Prime Minister Temple's flower viewing festival, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to find connoisseurs who can appreciate this unique flower with me."

Lin Wanrong glanced at it and couldn't help but burst into laughter. He observed the orchid splitting from the center into two petals, resembling two open hands joined tightly at the base. Was this also considered a unique flower? Damn, then he could be considered a unique individual too.

The Eldest Miss, feigning her love for orchids, naturally could not identify what it was. She grasped Lin Wanrong's hand, and upon seeing his smiling face, she couldn't help but ask, "Do you recognize this orchid?"

Xu Zhiqing was also contemplating, hearing this, she said, "Lin San, do you also appreciate orchids?"

Lin Wanrong spread his hands, indicating that he didn't, Miss Xu smiled and said, "Our great nation is the birthplace of orchids, with a long history of cultivation. Its beautiful flowers and fragrant scent make it beloved. The appreciation of orchids can start from the four aspects of fragrance, color, posture, and shape."

The Eldest Miss responded with an 'oh', and laughed, "Sister Xu, you really know a lot."

Xu Zhiqing responded with a slight smile, "What does it matter if I know a lot? I've just wasted time and remained the same. It's rather shameful, really."

Listening to her elaborate explanations, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but say, "Miss Xu is a master in the world of orchids, I admire your knowledge. Do you know the name of this orchid?"

Xu Zhiqing scrutinized the orchid closely, then softly said, "This orchid embodies the 'shape' aspect of the four appreciation categories. I believe its name is inspired by its shape. However, it seems to be a new cultivar. I have never seen it before and thus, do not know its name."

The dashing young man holding the orchid glanced at Lin Wanrong, a peculiar glint in his eyes, and chuckled, "This gentleman appears to know its name. Please enlighten us."

'Damn, was this guy eavesdropping on me?' Lin Wanrong cast a sideways glance at the man, noticing his striking features, dressed in a white robe with a friendly smile on his face, exuding charm and grace. Many ladies around were stealing glances at him.

"Pretty boy!" Lin Wanrong cursed under his breath. To him, anyone with fairer skin deserved this title.

"Well, it's called a 'Sword Orchid,'" Lin Wanrong said with a smile, "Aside from its unusual petals, there's nothing particularly impressive about it."

"Sword Orchid? Indeed, the flower lives up to its name." The young man laughed, "I thank you for your guidance. I have another orchid here, a rare variety. I would like to invite you to take a look at it as well."

He carefully removed an orchid from the brocade box he carried with him. The leaves of the flower were thin and long, reminiscent of a willow's graceful droop. The stem was tender white, pale as jade, and four petite flowers blossomed from it, immaculate as snow. As soon as the flower was revealed, a faint, refreshing fragrance wafted from the foliage.

As soon as this orchid appeared, it immediately drew the attention of everyone present. The orchid was so beautiful, pure white and sparkling, that anyone would have desired to touch it, yet also hesitant to lay a hand on such a precious thing.

The Eldest Miss was utterly captivated, tightly clutching Lin Wanrong's hand and asking, "Lin San, what kind of flower is this? Could you teach me how to grow it?"

Lin Wanrong was privately astounded. Goddamn, the best flowers were wasted on the undeserving. Such a premium orchid was a priceless rarity even in future times. He wondered where this young lad had gotten it from. Hearing Yuruo's words, he patted her hand with a smile and said, "Don't worry, there's nothing in this world I can't do."

"Boasting," the Eldest Miss replied with a lovely smile.

Xu Zhiqing sighed, "This should be the Great Snow Lotus."

The young man looked at Xu Zhiqing and said, "The lady is indeed knowledgeable. Since you know its name, do you also know its origin?"

Xu Zhiqing truly was talented, Lin Wanrong thought with private admiration. This Great Snow Lotus was a rare and prestigious breed of orchid, known to very few in the world, yet beloved by those in the orchid connoisseur community. Lin Wanrong remembered it well because of its exorbitant price when he had once gifted it.

Xu Zhiqing shook her head and said, "I happened to hear a flower craftsman from Yunnan describe this orchid's shape. I've never seen it before, let alone know its origins."

Lin Wanrong was secretly astounded by her sharp memory. The handsome man turned to Lin Wanrong and said, "It seems that this brother is quite knowledgeable. I wonder if you could enlighten us."

Lin Wanrong glanced at the man and replied with a smile, "This Great Snow Lotus is a famous flower from the Duan Family in Yunnan, mainly grown in the Wuliang Mountains. It blooms in the first month of the year, its roots buried in snow while enjoying ample sunlight. That's why it's so white and sparkling, highly sought after, a top-quality breed among orchids."

The man nodded slightly and said, "Brother, you have impressive knowledge and a strong memory. I'm greatly impressed by your knowledge of the Great Snow Lotus's origin."

Lin Wanrong responded, "My knowledge is nothing extraordinary. What's extraordinary is you. The Great Snow Lotus, which grows in the snow, will wither and die within three days once removed from the snow. Traveling from Yunnan to the capital, a journey of thousands of miles, and preserving the orchid in such excellent condition, surely required constant protection by ice and snow and reaching the destination within days. This is no easy feat, and it shows you are no ordinary person."

Upon hearing Lin Wanrong's speculation about the flower's history, Xu Zhiqing was already somewhat surprised, but his subsequent reasoning left her even more astonished. Lin San was meticulous and quick in his thinking. No wonder he had been the chief contributor in quelling the White Lotus rebellion in the past. Prince Cheng's persistent wooing of him was not unfounded.

"My apologies for any misunderstanding," the young man bowed with a smile. "My name is Su Mubai. It's a pleasure to meet the two young ladies and this gentleman here."

"Su Mubai? This name sounds familiar." The Eldest Miss murmured softly.

Lin Wanrong chuckled in her ear, "And what about my name, does that sound familiar to you?"

"You're so annoying." The Eldest Miss pinched his hand and chided him, her radiant and charming annoyance tickling his heart.

The silent Xu Zhiqing, however, looked surprised. "Su Mubai? Are you the newly crowned top scholar, Young Master Su Mubai?"

Chapter 305 The Reward of the Peony Garden

"Yes, yes." Xiao Yuruo exclaimed in surprise, her face lighting up with joy. "I remember now. Last spring, during the imperial examination, wasn't the top-ranked scholar none other than Young Master Su Mubai? He even received a golden decree from the Emperor, a proclamation that was made across dozens of provinces."

Su Mubai clasped his hands and smiled without a word, tacitly acknowledging the statement.

Being the top scholar on the imperial list was the dream of all scholars. The surprise was understandable when they realized that this stunning gentleman standing before them was indeed the newly-decorated top scholar. Even Xu Zhiqing, usually indifferent, could not help but cast an extra glance at Su Mubai.

‘What's so great about being the top scholar?’ Lin Wanrong thought to himself, ‘When I was in college, I was the top scholar too. Moreover, there are top scholars from prestigious universities who go back home and sell meat. This guy, peddling orchids in the garden and feigning elegance, isn't much better.’

"So, you're the top scholar, huh? I've never met a top scholar before, even though I've lived this long. Nice to meet you, what an honor." Lin Wanrong enthusiastically shook Su Mubai's hand.

With grace, Su Mubai nodded and smiled, "I'm but a simple scholar, favored by His Majesty to be named the top scholar on the golden platform. It's a cause for great humility. Today, hearing Brother's discourse on orchids, I'm even more filled with admiration. I hope to have more opportunities to learn from you in the future."

Upon hearing that the one presenting the orchids was the newly decorated top scholar, Su Mubai, there was an immediate stir in the garden. If Prince Cheng was the subject of awe, then the top

scholar was admired by all, especially the ladies who came to enjoy the flowers. They had a natural affinity for the top scholar. Seeing the elegant and exceptional demeanor of the scholar, their hearts began to flutter, showing signs of love at first sight.

"Thank you all for your kindness." Su Mubai, now the center of attention, smiled and greeted everyone around him. His demeanor and style were top-notch, winning people's hearts instantly.

Lin Wanrong watched helplessly as he shook his head. Orchids were supposed to love tranquility, but this scholar had turned a quiet orchid garden into a vibrant scene of blooming peach blossoms. It seemed to contradict the elegant name of the orchid.

Seeing that the two young ladies held this scholar in high regard, Lin Wanrong pulled Xiao Yuruo aside and asked, "Miss, it's not too hard to become a top scholar, right? I could go and bag one myself, make a scene... uh, where do I sign up? How much is the registration fee? Is there a prep class before the exam?"

Xiao Yuruo, both annoyed and amused, replied, "What nonsense are you spouting? Do you think becoming the top scholar is a child's game, that it's easy? The imperial examinations are held once every three years, starting with the entrance examination. Only those who pass this can become scholars. Just this one step stops countless scholars in their tracks. Many people spend their entire lives studying and still fail to pass this level. Only the top two levels of scholars can take part in the provincial examination. This is called 'recorded admission'. The provincial exams are held every three years, and each province sets their own questions. Only those who pass this can become 'recommended persons,' with the first rank called 'Jieyuan'. Only recommended persons can participate in the metropolitan exam, selecting a hundred to become tributes, with the top rank called 'Huiyuan'. Only then comes the palace exam, personally presided over by the Emperor, selecting the three ranks of scholars. This Su Mubai was ranked first in all three exams, and was personally selected by the Emperor as the top scholar of the imperial examination, and thus be called Zhuangyuan. He was selected from hundreds of thousands of participants. Do you still think it's not hard?"

Sweat dripped down Lin Wanrong's face, the challenge of passing four examinations was no small feat. He let out a chuckle, the Eldest Miss studied him once more with a serious gaze, saying, "However, if you were to change your nature and dedicate yourself to studying, with your intelligence and wisdom, achieving the highest honors in the imperial examination wouldn't be a problem."

Lin Wanrong couldn't help but smile at her flattering words. Xu Zhiqing, overhearing the Eldest Miss explaining these fundamental concepts to Lin Wanrong, couldn't help but wonder about him. Had he fallen from the sky? How could he not know about the imperial examination system? Where had his knowledge come from?

Seeing Lin Wanrong absorbed in the conversation, Xu Zhiqing added with a smile, "This Top scholar Su, was not only chosen by the Emperor himself on the Golden Hall but he was even more extraordinary. Typically, top scholars, once appointed, are sent to various locations to serve as officials. After gaining experience, they are promoted. However, this Top Scholar Su was favored by the Emperor and kept in the imperial academy, often accompanying the Emperor. He is in the Emperor's good graces and is envied by all."

With this information, it seemed this Su Mubai was indeed a favorite at the Emperor's side. "This youngster's made it," Lin Wanrong said, nodding his head in acknowledgment.

After exchanging pleasantries with everyone, Su Mubai approached with a smile, "I'm humbled and embarrassed, I didn't expect such a spectacle. I apologize to the young ladies for my inattention. I can tell from your remarks and demeanor that you are both extraordinary, may I ask for your names?"

Xu Zhiqing responded with a gracious smile, "I am Xu Zhiqing, and this is Miss Xiao from Jinling."

Su Mubai expressed his surprise, "Xu Zhiqing? Could you be the beloved daughter of Master Wenchang, the chief instructor of Jinghua Academy, Xu Zhiqing?"

Xu Zhiqing responded with a gentle smile, which Su Mubai took as confirmation. He quickly gave a deep bow and said, "This humble self has long admired Mr. Xu's great name. Today, this humble self is fortunate to meet you. You are as beautiful as a celestial being and one can't help but admire you."

'What a bootlicker,' Lin Wanrong thought to himself, laughing secretly. But he couldn't deny that Top Scholar Su was humble, cautious, and polite. There wasn't much to criticize about him. Only Lin Wanrong, driven by jealousy, found him disagreeable. The other guests in the garden didn't seem to mind him at all.

The noise in the garden disturbed Xu Zhiqing, and she couldn't help but frown. She turned to Su Mubai, "Young Master Su, did you grow those two unusual flowers yourself?"

Su Mubai answered, "You flatter this humble self. These two were gifts from a friend. This humble self brought them here today in hopes of finding a connoisseur. To meet Miss Xu and you sir, is truly a fortunate event in this humble self."

Lin Wanrong, unaccustomed to Su Mubai's repeated use of the word "humble self," gave a yawn, "Miss, I think we've admired these unusual flowers enough, I need to visit the restroom."

The two young ladies glared at him simultaneously. Xu Zhiqing said, "Just now, we admired two orchids, both were stunning. Although I am unskilled, I've also found an orchid to share--"

As her words trailed off, Ye Yuchuan, who had been standing silently next to Xu Zhiqing, unveiled a curtain, smiling, "Miss Xiao, Mr. Su, please look--"

All eyes swept into the unveiled space. Inside the curtain was a delicate orchid, half white with spots of purple and red, its petals curling backward, giving an impression of a butterfly in flight.

Su Mubai circled the orchid, marveling after a long inspection, "Among all orchids, each has its trace. But this flower, like an orchid yet like a butterfly, is rare in its beauty. I wonder if it is an orchid among butterflies or a butterfly among orchids? Miss, you possess the refined nature of an orchid, but where did you find this top-notch among orchids?"

Top scholar Su really had a slick tongue. Regardless of whether he recognized the orchid or not, he began by showering it with praise, speaking of 'orchids among butterflies, butterflies among orchids.' Damn, why didn't he just straightforwardly admit he didn't recognize it? Why all the pointless talk?

Lin Wanrong snorted coldly, sneering in silence.

Xu Zhiqing laughed and said, "Top Scholar Su, you flatter me. Do you know the name of this orchid?"

Su Mubai hesitated for a while before shaking his head, "I consider myself a lover of orchids, but this strange species is not only unfamiliar to me, I've never even heard of it. Brother, do you have any insights?" He smiled at Lin Wanrong, a hint of inscrutability in his eyes.

Lin Wanrong recognized the orchid. What confused him was how this clearly mutated species could be cultivated in this era. Whoever did it was a genius.

Xu Zhiqing seemed to have anticipated that Su Mubai wouldn't guess it. She smiled at Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, can you tell us the name of this orchid?"

‘Damn, calling him 'Top Scholar Su' but referring to me as 'Lin San.' Can't you just call me 'Brother Lin'?’ He didn't care for these scholars to begin with. Hearing her, he laughed, "This is called the Butterfly Orchid, a mutated variant of the orchid. Its petals, labellum, and column are all serrated, resembling a dancing butterfly, hence the name 'Butterfly Orchid'. This particular one has nearly fifty percent of its petals transformed, making it a true 'Full Butterfly Petal', a top-quality orchid."

Su Mubai looked at him in surprise. Lin Wanrong's capabilities and knowledge were far beyond his expectations. The Eldest Miss stared at him in delight, her red lips parting as if to say something. Yet when the words reached her mouth, she only smiled shyly, gripping his hand tightly and not letting go.

Lin Wanrong was also quite proud. Damn, they were lucky to have him today. Otherwise, none of these rare flowers in the orchid garden would be recognized. Wouldn't that be a joke if it got out?

Seeing his smug look, Xu Zhiqing laughed, "Lin San, are you saying this is a Butterfly Orchid?"

‘Damn, could I be wrong?’ He nodded, glancing provocatively at Xu Zhiqing.

Miss Xu covered her mouth with a smile, looked at him amusedly but said nothing. Ye Yuchuan laughed, "Lin San, it's quite impressive that you recognized the first two orchids. But you are quite wrong about this one. This exceptional orchid is a variety cultivated personally by Miss Xu. It doesn't yet have a name. So, isn't it a mistake to call it a Butterfly Orchid?"

He had been had! Lin Wanrong felt a jolt of alarm. So this Butterfly Orchid was actually a creation of Xu Zhiqing herself and hadn't been named yet. Clearly, this was the girl tricking him. She hadn't named it, what was there for him to guess?

Observing Lin Wanrong's deflated arrogance and having recovered some ground, Xu Zhiqing's face lit up with a faint smile. "Lin San, your observations are commendable. Aside from the name, everything else you said was incredibly accurate." Seeing Lin Wanrong's unyielding demeanor, she managed to hold back her laughter and said, "This orchid was successfully cultivated by me only recently, and I have not yet had time to name it. Since you call it the 'Butterfly Orchid,' this name is indeed quite elegant. Very well, I'll use the name you've suggested. Let's call it the 'Butterfly Orchid.'"

Looking at her smug satisfaction, Lin Wanrong could only shake his head helplessly. An intelligent woman was indeed troublesome.

Of the three exotic orchids, Lin Wanrong identified two and a half. However, this Top Scholar Su didn't seem to care at all. Just as the group was conversing, a young servant walked up to Su Mubai and whispered a few words in his ear.

Su Mubai's expression changed briefly, but he quickly regained his composure. He looked deeply into Lin Wanrong's eyes before speaking with an earnest smile. "It's been an honor to meet both the ladies and gain acquaintance with gentlemen like Brother Lin and Brother Ye. The last garden is full of beautiful and fragrant peonies, which must be admired. A distinguished elder, learning of my acquaintance with a few young talents, has asked me to invite you all to appreciate the peonies together. I hope the two ladies and gentlemen won't decline."

'Damn it, I'm fed up with this endless appreciation of flowers,' thought Lin Wanrong. Just as he was about to make an excuse to slip away, the Eldest Miss tightened her grip on his arm. She leaned over and whispered into his ear, "You've offended Prince Cheng. Although Mr. Xu is helping you in the court, he's on thin ice. Since Top Scholar Su has extended an invitation, you should try to get along with him. If he speaks well of you to the Emperor, even Prince Cheng won't be able to harm you."

The Eldest Miss was genuinely worried for him. However, things in the court were not as straightforward as she made them out to be. Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile and, rather than arguing with her, he followed the group into the peony garden.

The Peony Garden was the largest in the Grand Prime Minister Temple. In its center was a two-story pavilion, adorned with hanging bamboo curtains, as if someone was inside appreciating the flowers.

"King of Flowers, National Beauty, and Heavenly Fragrance," these were the accolades the world had given to the peony. The environment of the Grand Prime Minister Temple was an ideal home for these blooms, and the early spring flowering of the peonies was indeed a marvel to behold. As soon as one entered the garden, the intense fragrance of the blooming peonies was overwhelming, with endless rows of flowers creating a dizzying spectacle.

Everyone entering the garden gasped in amazement and was full of praise for the peonies. However, Lin Wanrong didn't share the excitement. These peonies, although incredibly beautiful, were also very delicate and required careful nurturing. As Lin Wanrong put it, other than being visually appealing, they had little else to offer.

"You're so contrarian," the Eldest Miss chuckled at his sullen face. "Everyone else adores these peonies, but you keep your distance."

"Sigh, that's just the way unique people are," Lin Wanrong replied. He picked up a piece of foxtail grass from the ground, blew on the fluffy head, put it in his mouth, and gave it a light chew. "Even this foxtail grass is better than the peonies."

Miss Xu was about to say something when laughter echoed from the pavilion, "Mubai, have the people I asked you to invite arrived?" The voice was aged and familiar, though its origin eluded her.

Su Mubai quickly saluted, "All the gentlemen and ladies have arrived as requested."

Seeing Su Mubai, a recent imperial examination champion, show such respect, Lin Wanrong asked Xu Zhiqing, "Miss Xu, you seem to know everything from heaven to earth. Do you know the identity of the person in the pavilion?"

Xu Zhiqing laughed, "I don't work at court, how could I know everyone? If you're so curious, why not go and lift the curtain to see for yourself?" Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes as if to say, 'forget I asked.'

The person inside the pavilion seemed to be sizing everyone up and sighed, "Miss Xiao, come closer so I can see you."

Xiao Yuruo hesitated. She didn't know who this person was, and why he was singling her out. She cast a helpless glance at Lin Wanrong. He pondered quickly - this person was obviously of high status, and his intentions for calling Miss Xiao over were unknown.

Seeing the pleading look in her eyes, he grinned, "Don't be scared, I'm here." Without worrying about the opinions of others, he led her toward the pavilion.

Su Mubai hastily blocked their way, "Brother Lin, this elder specifically requested Miss Xiao alone."

‘A summons, really? Why would my wife be summoned by him?’ Lin Wanrong, holding a foxtail grass, swayed it lightly and laughed, "A summons? I didn't hear that. Miss Xiao and I are always together."

Xiao Yuruo was moved, tightly holding his hand. However, the elder in the pavilion laughed, "If he wants to come, let him. Lin San, come with Miss Xiao."

‘Damn, am I that famous?’ Even this big shot knows my name. Lin Wanrong squeezed Miss Xiao's hand, whispering, "See, he knows us? Could it be that you secretly asked him to mediate for us? Ah, you're too eager."

"Stop it." Xiao Yuruo chided him lightly. His soothing words did calm her a bit, and she walked forward with him.

When they were not far from the pavilion, they were stopped and couldn't advance any further. Xiao Yuruo stood there feeling uneasy, as though the man's gaze was solid, seemingly penetrating the curtain and constantly examining her.

As they stood waiting, Lin Wanrong was rather displeased. He was about to speak when a sigh came from behind the curtain, "She really looks just like her, as if carved from the same mold."

What did he mean? Who did Miss Xiao resemble? Couldn't be Madam Xiao, could it? Could the person hiding inside be her old flame? Lin Wanrong narrowed his gaze, trying to get a glimpse of the man behind the curtain, but he couldn't discern his face.

Miss Xiao was puzzled. After a long silence, the man asked, "Miss Xiao, how is your mother doing?"

So he was an old flame after all. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself. Considering Madam Xiao's charm, she must have had quite the past.

Xiao Yuruo bowed upon the mention of her mother, "My mother is well. May I ask, who are you—"

The man let out a long sigh and said, "I am an old acquaintance of Miss Guo from twenty years ago. After so many years of absence, I did not expect that her daughter has grown into such a beautiful and elegant lady."

Eldest Miss Xiao, unsure of his relationship with her mother, did not dare to speak. Suddenly, the man loudly commanded, "Servant, bring a seat for Miss Xiao."

In the blink of an eye, a burly attendant hurriedly brought over a brocaded stool and respectfully placed it behind Xiao Yuruo.

The Eldest Miss glanced around and noticed everyone, whether it was Xu Zhiqing or Su Mubai, they were all standing with bowed heads, only she had been granted a seat. Her heart fluttered with unease, and she hastily said, "Esteemed elder—"

The man chuckled, "If I tell you to sit, you sit. As a descendant of an old friend, you need not observe such formalities."

"Elder, I am also a descendant of your old friend—their family. Could you also grant me a seat? To be frank, this flower viewing is quite tiring." Lin Wanrong chuckled and brazenly asked.

Upon hearing his words, Su Mubai felt a chill run down his spine. This man truly dared to say anything. Was he not afraid for his life?

The man in the pavilion laughed, "What does your tiredness from flower viewing have to do with me? If you wish to sit, you should prove your worth. Today, Miss Xu, Top Scholar Su, and you, Lin San, are all present. I shall put you to the test. Answer well, and I'll reward you with a seat."

"I object—" Before the man could finish, Lin Wanrong had already loudly interjected.

Su Mubai glanced at Lin Wanrong, watching his arrogant and reckless demeanor. He couldn't help but wipe the sweat from his forehead. What kind of a person was this who feared nothing? When it came to ignorance, shamelessness, and fearlessness, he conceded that he was no match for Lin San.

When Xu Zhiqing heard the man in the pavilion calling her Miss Xu, she felt familiar yet puzzled, as she didn't recall such an elder. Upon hearing Lin San's objection, she felt like laughing. Wherever this man was, there wouldn't be any dullness.

"What do you object to?" The man in the pavilion, amused, responded. Accustomed to his high status, people usually trembled in his presence. Today, after exchanging a few words with this lad, it

reminded him of his own youthful bravado, causing him to feel quite exhilarated. Seeing Lin San interrupt his words, he didn't feel any resentment. Instead, he found it rather interesting, so he asked.

"Elder, what do you want to test us on? Actually, there's no need. My butt—oh, I mean, my posterior, is my own. If I want to sit, why would I need your permission?" Lin Wanrong chuckled and without waiting for a response, he simply sat down on the grass.

Everyone in the garden was dumbstruck, whether it was Ye Yuchuan, Su Mubai, or Xu Zhiqing, none knew how to describe this Lin San. When it came to disregarding propriety, not knowing when to give up, if Lin San claimed the second place, no one would dare to claim the first.

The man in the pavilion also paused, and after a while, he burst out laughing. "You kid, your audacity is truly... something else! Forget it, forget it. When it comes to skewed logic, there's nobody in this world who can beat you. However, in my presence, no one dares to sit casually on the ground—"

If not on the ground, where else would one sit? Lin Wanrong wondered, unless he was expected to sit on the man.

The man pondered for a moment and laughed, "I am well aware of all the things you've done in Jinling and Shandong. It would be really inappropriate if I didn't give you anything. Well, since you sat on the ground in this garden, the garden of the Grand Prime Minister's Temple, I will give it to you."

Lin Wanrong was befuddled by his words, but Su Mubai was utterly shocked. As soon as this elder opened his mouth, the back garden of the Grand Prime Minister's Temple was set to be named as Lin.