

Finest 306

Chapter 306 King Among Flowers

Xu Zhiqing was a remarkably astute woman. After hearing these few words, her heart held a new understanding. Hurriedly, she addressed Lin Wanrong, “What are you standing there for? Hurry up and express your gratitude.”

“Gratitude, for what?” Lin Wanrong responded with astonishment. He had no comprehension of these matters. Being gifted an entire garden with just a word was something he only ever saw in television dramas. It had no relation to him, Lin Wanrong; he had no awareness of such magnanimity.

Seeing Lin Wanrong's cluelessness, Xu Zhiqing was both exasperated and amused. When he was sharp-witted, she felt like biting him; when he was being slow, she wished she could kick him. To sum it up in one sentence: without punishment, he would never learn.

Su Mubai, of course, did not state the obvious. The elderly man in the pavilion, who had taken a liking to Lin Wanrong, had his own reasons. This was not something that he, Su Mubai, could interfere with.

The old man seemed to enjoy Lin Wanrong's pretense of playing smart while being genuinely confused. He didn't explain the situation, but laughed heartily for a while and changed the subject. “Miss Xu, Su Mubai, and Lin Wanrong who's sitting here, I mentioned that I would test you all today, and I'm a man of my word. Those who answer well will be awarded.”

Being the reigning Top Scholar and having been personally tutored by the Emperor, Su Mubai did not fear this test. He respectfully responded, “Please, sir, may you bestow upon us your question.”

After considering for a moment, the old man in the pavilion chuckled and said, “Since we are appreciating flowers in this peony garden today, tell me, among all the flowers here, which one is the king?”

The king of flowers? Lin Wanrong immediately thought of the past, the days by the Qinhuai River with Xian'er. Unable to resist, a smile crept onto his face. He wondered where that vixen An had hidden Xian'er. They had been in the capital for a while now, but he had not seen her yet.

Upon hearing the question, Su Mubai considered for a while before he said, "In my opinion, the king among the flowers is none other than the top-quality 'Drunk Rouge' peony. Its petals are delicate, blooming wide and grand, bearing the demeanor of a nobleman. The color is pure, the symbolism profound, representing our great nation's prosperity and our land's longevity, it is a blessing from heaven. As the saying goes, it uplifts the clear waves of the green water, nourishes the fertile soil, condenses the essence of Mount Tai, and collects the gentleness of beautiful water. Proudly walking from the ancient past, brilliantly adorning the different eras. Leaping forth among the thousands of new plants, competing with a hundred beautiful flowers. Calling upon the Luo River Goddess for company, lowering its branches gracefully."

Listening to this, Lin Wanrong felt the sweat beading on his forehead. He turned to Xiao Yuruo, the Eldest Miss, and said, "Eldest Miss, what is this Top Scholar talking about? I can't understand it! Alas, it seems I'm falling behind again. Could you please translate it?"

Eldest Miss was indeed well-learned. Smiling, she said, "Top Scholar Su is indeed deserving of his reputation. He has quoted from 'The Eulogy of Peony,' praising the nobility and extraordinary origins of 'Drunk Rouge'. In such a short time, he can quote classical texts and articulate his thoughts. The title of Top Scholar is indeed appropriate for him."

So, it was an argumentative essay. Lin Wanrong was inwardly outraged. 'Damn, what kind of game is this? Reading some things I can't understand to fool me, and you can be a Top Scholar? If I write some calculus equations, I'm sure none of you would recognize them. Wouldn't that make me fit to be the Top Scholar's father?'

Upon hearing Su Mubai's speech, everyone nodded in agreement, acknowledging that his scholarly reputation was indeed well-deserved, with the notable exception of Lin San. If he had known that this garden was now his, upon hearing Su Mubai's ancient and classic lines, he would have likely driven him out with a broom long ago.

The elder in the pavilion smiled and said, "Very good, Su Mubai. Your talent is indeed extraordinary. It seems that selecting you as the top scholar was the correct choice. Servant, grant him a seat."

Su Mubai quickly clasped his fists in thanks, a humble expression on his face. When the attendant brought over a cushioned stool, he cautiously perched on the edge of it, an act that could hardly be considered sitting, especially when compared to Lin San's casual sprawl on the ground. Lin Wanrong watched this and chuckled to himself. What was the fun in being so timid as a top scholar? He found his own carefree life far more enjoyable.

"Miss Xu, it's your turn," said the elder, sweeping his gaze over Xu Zhiqing and giving her a slight nod.

Xu Zhiqing curtsied lightly and strolled a few steps in the garden, surveying her surroundings for a while before finally uttering, "The king of this garden – is not a single one."

The crowd in the garden was immediately taken aback. Could it be that in Miss Xu's eyes, not one of these vibrant peonies was worthy? Wasn't her taste a bit too refined?

Su Mubai frowned and queried, "In your opinion, Miss, none of these peonies deserve the title of king of the flowers. So then, which flower could claim such an ability?"

Xu Zhiqing smiled faintly but remained silent, while Lin San enthusiastically gave a thumbs-up, exclaiming, "Well said, well said, I knew Miss Xu would favor this!"

The elder in the pavilion was also puzzled, but he knew of Xu Zhiqing's capabilities. She was a formidable woman who had been on the battlefield and matched wits with foreign tribes, a woman who could certainly hold her own among men. There was certainly more to her words than meets the eye.

"Lin San, it seems you understand Miss Xu's words?" the elder inquired with a certain curiosity.

Lin Wanrong laughed and replied, "Just a wild guess, I'm not sure if I'm correct. Anyway, I'm a man of no learning and limited experience, so there's no harm in guessing blindly."

Xu Zhiqing gave him a slight smile and retorted, "I won't be responsible if you guess wrong."

The elder burst into hearty laughter, his voice indicating great amusement, "You youngsters always love your riddles. If I were twenty years younger, I would join in your game. Lin San, go ahead then, explain to us the meaning of Miss Xu's four-word phrase, 'not a single one.'"

With a mischievous grin, Lin Wanrong said, "Eldest Miss, let's play a word riddle. 'Not a single one'—guess one character. If you guess it right, we will have solved Miss Xu's riddle."

Xiao Yuruo pondered for a moment before bursting into laughter, "I get it now. 'Not a single one' refers to the character 'white'. So Miss Xu, you prefer the white peony! The whitest and most

vibrant of all is the 'Trembling Wind's Beauty' from Luoyang. Sister, you imply that this 'Trembling Wind's Beauty' is the true king of the flowers, isn't that right?"

[TL: The characters for “not a single one” is 实乃百无一一是, read as Shí nǎi bǎi wú yī shì, the third character 百 (bǎi) is similar in the form and pronunciation with the character 白 (bái) meaning “white.”]

Xu Zhiqing nodded and laughed, "Miss Xiao from the Xiao family is truly intelligent." Xiao Yuruo bashfully smiled, and Lin Wanrong mentally added a sentence for her: "Not at all, it's our Lin San who is smart."

Xu Zhiqing cast a glance at Lin Wanrong, a trace of anticipation flickering in her eyes. Though Lin San was always jovial and never serious, he had a knack for pleasant surprises at critical moments. He had just solved a small riddle, catching the essence with ease. His wit and cleverness were remarkable, unlike Top Scholar Su who, failing to comprehend the meaning and overly eager to impress, made himself a laughingstock.

The old man in the pavilion nodded, "Miss Xu, you indeed have your ways. But why did you choose the white peony as the king of flowers?"

Xu Zhiqing paused for a moment before responding, "National beauty fills the morning wine, heavenly fragrance dyes the night clothes. These four characters describe the stunning beauty of peonies around the world. Top Scholar Su is fond of 'Drunk Rouge' because of its festive color, a good omen for the nation. Yet 'Trembling Wind's Beauty' is pure and untarnished, epitomizing the nobility of leading the masses. This principle applies both to flowers and to governance. Those in power should follow the example of the 'Trembling Wind's Beauty', remaining unblemished through trials by fire. Only by avoiding personal desires and ruling impartially can they bring prosperity to the nation. Only then will there be perpetual joy, heavenly blessings, and benevolence showered upon our great citizens."

Xu Zhiqing's words, starting with flowers then applying the lesson to people and nations, carried profound implications. Compared to Su Mubai's sole focus on flowers, her discourse was on another level. Lin Wanrong glanced at Xu Zhiqing, this girl indeed possessed remarkable scholarly talent. Her discourse was well-cited yet easy to understand, far superior to Su Mubai. At least a layman like him could comprehend, she was ambitious and spirited, indeed extraordinary!

The old man in the pavilion sighed, "Miss Xu, if you were not born a woman, you would be destined to inherit your father's position. It's a pity. Although Xu Wei has a son and a daughter, the

son, while brave, lacks strategic intelligence; the daughter is extremely intelligent but unfortunately, a woman. What a shame, such a shame."

The old man's repeated sighs reflected his deep regret. In an era that prioritized men over women, someone as enlightened as Xu Zhiqing was rare, regardless of gender. Few among men could compare.

Lin Wanrong whispered to Eldest Miss, "Is this what they call questions about state policy? Are these the types of questions asked during the examination for the top scholar in the Imperial Court?"

Xiao Yuruo chuckled, "How would I know? I've never sat for the exam. However, questions in the Golden Palace are directly posed by the Emperor. Examples like Miss Xu's, starting with flowers then transitioning to people and politics, are not unheard of, but certainly not common. Given Miss Xu's knowledge, she could easily become a top scholar ten times over."

Lin Wanrong smiled faintly. Even though he disliked the peonies and thought Xu Zhiqing's discourse contained a lot of subjective speculation, her ability to bring these thoughts together was remarkable and deserved his respect.

The crowd in the garden fell silent. After a while, the old man spoke, "Come, offer Miss Xu a seat to the left of Top Scholar Su."

Lin Wanrong didn't understand the last sentence and asked Xiao Yuruo, "Eldest Miss, why should Miss Xu sit on Su Mubai's left?"

At Lin Wanrong's naive question, the Eldest Miss couldn't help but laugh and cry. She didn't want to hit him, didn't want to scold him, but she somehow found herself bewitched by this endearingly foolish man who had stolen her heart.

"Just like arranging a seating order, left is considered superior and esteemed—Lin San, I am going to ask you a very serious question, have you ever read a book?"

Lin Wanrong's face reddened, feeling embarrassed and judged by the Eldest Miss. The ancient traditions were long gone in his previous life, how was he supposed to remember?

Seeing his rare blush, the Eldest Miss laughed and said, "From tomorrow on, I will supervise your studies. You will read Confucius and Mencius in the day and the Book of Songs at night. We will aim for you to earn the Zhuangyuan title in three years."

Reading Confucius and Mencius in the day and the Book of Songs at night? Lin Wanrong chuckled, "That sounds great! The Eldest Miss will need to monitor me day and night. You must do a thorough job, not missing a single time." The Eldest Miss's face turned red, she gave him a glance and the grand dream of earning the Zhuangyuan title was snuffed out by his lewdness.

Xu Zhiqing did not refuse and took her seat to the left of Scholar Su. Su Mubai had long heard of Xu Zhiqing's learning and wisdom. Seeing her gaining the upper hand did not cause him too much embarrassment. After all, Miss Xu was well-known. One defeat to her was excusable. The old master in the pavilion, however, cast a glance at Scholar Su, sighed lightly, his eyes flickering, seemingly lost in thought.

The blind old man standing behind him whispered, "Master, Young Master Su merely lacks experience. A temporary setback isn't a major issue. With more practice, he will be ready for important tasks."

The old master's eyes gleamed with a strange light. "Little Wei, Lin San was recommended by you, yet you're speaking in favour of Su Mubai?"

Little Wei's face remained unchanged. "Master, recommending someone doesn't matter. As long as it benefits our Great Hua, even if it costs my life, I won't hesitate."

The old master's expression changed unpredictably. After a long while, he said, "Little Wei, I know of your loyalty. You lost your sight for me. Had you not risked your life to save me years ago, I fear I wouldn't be in this world anymore. Even Xu Wei and Li Tai do not understand the past. Only you know, you have suffered these years."

Little Wei quickly knelt down, his voice trembling, "Master, I'm terrified. My life was given by you, Master. Even if I were to be smashed to pieces, I would have no regrets."

"Stand up," the old master said indifferently, his gaze drifted into the distance, a sinister glint crossed his face. "That man is treacherous and cunning. He severed my lineage, cut off my descendants. If not for the blood oath I swore in front of my father's deathbed, I would have him taste the pain of having no descendants."

Blind Little Wei stood up, not daring to utter a word. The old master continued, "My father made me swear that I wouldn't harm him during my lifetime. But how would he know the miserable state this beast put me in, that I can't even have an heir? For twenty years, he has run rampant in court while I endured silently. Now the time for retribution has come. If I am forbidden from taking action, can't I use another's hand?"

He slammed his hand onto the table, radiating a chilling aura of murderous intent, his rage uncontrollable as he declared, "I want him to taste the bitterness too. I won't let him off!"

The elderly master started coughing violently in his agitation. Little Wei quickly came forward and offered him a medicinal pill. After the master swallowed the pill with lukewarm water, his coughing significantly subsided. However, an eerie pallor washed over his face. After a moment of contemplation, he sighed, "Since I ascended to this position, in the past twenty years, you're the only one I can talk to. Even Xu Wei and Li Tai, who've been with me for thirty to forty years, gradually fail to understand my thoughts."

He fell silent for a while, looking at the few people in the garden, then suddenly laughed, "This Lin San you recommended, he's good, very good. His scholarship is not profound, but his knowledge is quite extensive and practical. He's a useful talent, no worse than those I painstakingly nurtured myself. He protected our business in Jinling, wiped out the White Lotus in Shandong, and did a great deed without seeking credit. I've remembered all of this. Today, I rewarded him with this garden, which though beautiful, doesn't hold much value—it's like a peach on paper, won't incite jealousy, and saves me from accusations of arbitrary land distribution by those imperial censors at court."

The blind old man knew this wasn't the time for him to speak, so he remained silent. As expected, a glimmer of expectation flashed in the old master's eyes, "If he performs well, I will give him a fair chance. Everyone's opportunity is equal, not a bit more, not a bit less."

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When Lin Wanrong saw that both the Top Scholar Su, and Miss Xu had taken their seats, and the elderly master behind the curtain didn't make a sound, he waited for a while and saw no movement. Just as he was about to ask, he heard the master's voice chuckling, "Lin San, do you intend to remain seated on the ground, or would you like to take a high stool? Now it's your turn. Among all the flowers in this garden, which one is the premier?"

Among the three of them, only Lin San hadn't spoken yet. Many people in the garden, aside from a handful, didn't understand why the master elevated Lin San to such a level. Among the three

debaters, one was the daughter of the Grand Scholar Xu, whose scholarship surpassed even Xu Wei. Another was the newly awarded top scholar whose scholarship need not be mentioned. As for this servant of the Xiao family, Lin San, how important could he be that the master would rank him along with the other two?

Lin Wanrong was also puzzled. The master esteemed him highly, but why did he insist on having him speak when they weren't close?

Seeing his hesitation, the old man chuckled again, "What is it? You don't want to, or you dare not?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "It's not that I don't dare. I'm just afraid that I dare to speak, but someone doesn't dare to listen."

Although he wore a smile, his words were startling. The old man chuckled and whispered to Little Wei behind him, "This young man you recommended, I fear no one will be able to control him in the future."

The blind old man gritted his teeth and said, "If someone could control him, he wouldn't be worth my recommendation to you, Master. Let me ask you, Master, who in this world can control you?"

The old man understood the clever analogy, and with a slight smile, he stopped chatting with Little Wei, instead loudly proclaiming, "Lin San, whatever it is that you believe we might not dare to hear, just say it."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Respected elder, you said you wanted to pick the king from the hundreds of flowers in this garden, didn't you?"

"Indeed," the old man replied.

"So, I can choose any of the plants in this garden?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"Indeed, as long as you can justify your choice, you may select any plant in this garden," the elder replied, his interest piqued.

"This is wonderful," Lin Wanrong replied with a smile. He shook the tuft of foxtail grass in his hand, declaring, "I choose this."

Top Scholar Su nearly tumbled off his stool as he gazed at the fluffy neither-flower nor-grass thing in Lin Wanrong's hand. After a long silence, he finally managed to ask, "Brother Lin, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. This is my choice," Lin Wanrong nodded confidently.

Eldest Miss initially thought he would choose an orchid, considering his familiarity with them. But when he chose the foxtail grass, the most inconspicuous and universally despised plant, she couldn't help but shake her head and laugh. "This rascal, I can never guess what he's thinking."

Xu Zhiqing glanced at Lin Wanrong, a flicker of interest in her eyes. She laughed and told Eldest Miss, "Your man here, he's going to be something. Miss Xiao, let me congratulate you in advance."

"What do you mean by 'something'?" Eldest Miss blushed, both pleased and embarrassed. "If you mean he's going to make a nuisance of himself, you're right. He's a complete scoundrel."

The elder in the pavilion, born to a prestigious family, had always been surrounded by the most exquisite flowers. Today, however, he was intrigued by Lin Wanrong's unremarkable choice. "Lin San, what is this?" he asked.

"This," Lin Wanrong answered with a smile, "is called foxtail grass. These fluffy things you see are its flowers. It's the most ordinary and disliked plant. Isn't it ugly?"

The elder laughed, "So you're selecting this foxtail as the king of flowers? Truly unexpected." The crowd in the garden couldn't help but laugh. How could foxtail compare to the beautiful peonies? Even a fool would know it didn't stand a chance.

Unfazed, Lin Wanrong looked at Xu Zhiqing, who was watching him curiously. What was he up to?

"Peonies bewitch and disturb one's heart, making a whole country crazed, not sparing any expense," Lin Wanrong recited slowly. He plucked a beautiful, pure white Trembling Wind's Beauty flower and sniffed it, saying, "Beautiful, fragrant. Indeed, the beauty and fragrance of a nation. Suddenly, I feel like reciting a poem: 'A bunch of national beauty flowers, ten houses of people's eulogy, each family follows the custom, everyone is confused about the enlightenment.' Top Scholar Su, you are the Zhuangyuan chosen by the Emperor. Can you explain the meaning of this poem to us?"

Su Mubai's face changed; he knew what the poem meant. It depicted people's infatuation with peonies, almost to the point of obsession. It was a satirical poem.

Lin Wanrong sighed, "This peony is truly beautiful, so beautiful that one cannot bear to touch it - but aside from its beauty, what else can it do? It's delicate and easily damaged, requiring meticulous care. A little negligence, and it's gone. Look—" He dropped the beautiful peony onto the ground, lightly stepping on it. The petals shattered into a pitiful mess.

"Brother Lin, what are you doing?" Su Mubai frowned, "We, as flower admirers, should cherish and love flowers. This act of spoiling them is truly sinful."

"Top Scholar Su's words are indeed commendable," Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs up. "You truly cherish, appreciate, and love flowers. However—" his tone took a turn as he burst into laughter. "May I ask you, Top Scholar Su, what flower exactly do you appreciate, what flower do you love —"

Su Mubai seemed to grasp something abruptly, his complexion changing. Lin Wanrong roared with laughter. "Let me answer that for you. What you appreciate is beauty, what you love is national color and heavenly fragrance. But would you appreciate and love this foxtail grass? It would be accurate to say you appreciate and love beauty, but it would be a mistake to say you appreciate and love flowers. Am I right, Top Scholar Su?"

How sharp-tongued. Su Mubai had no retort, while Xu Zhiqing was utterly engrossed in the debate.

"Loving beauty is never wrong, but I must ask: in this world, are there more peonies or more foxtail grasses? All of you coddle that noble peony, loving it, pampering it, but who cares for the countless foxtail grasses? Who cares? Who the hell cares?" Lin Wanrong gave the peony another couple of stomps, yelling furiously.

The Eldest Miss hurriedly gave him a light tug, her beautiful eyes reprimanding him, softly speaking, "Mind your language."

"Ah, my apologies, apologies." Lin Wanrong offered a helpless smile, glancing at Xu Zhiqing. "Miss Xu, the pure, aloof white peony stays unsullied by the world, leading the crowd. It's a good point. But I'd like to ask, who exactly is this white peony leading? The peony, chrysanthemum, or orchid? No, no, they're all leaders too. You're leading us, a bunch of worthless foxtail grass. During prosperous times, it doesn't matter much. But in times of chaos, would you abandon the peony first or the foxtail grass? Miss Xu, can you give me an answer?"

Xu Zhiqing bit her lower lip, unwilling to speak. The people in the pavilion watched Lin Wanrong with gleaming eyes, a faint smile curling on their lips.

"In fact, I don't need your answer." Lin Wanrong spread his hands, shrugged, and smiled. "This foxtail grass is ugly, vulgar. When you see it on the road, you want to crush it. But can you truly kill it?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, threw the little grass onto the ground, and stepped on it hard several times. When he picked it up, the grass was still connected at its root, standing tall and slender. "We, the grassroots, possess the strongest vitality, and we don't need your protection. In times of chaos, a peony can wither overnight, but the grassroots can survive for millennia. Big waves sift sand, and what remains is gold. Who exactly abandoned whom? Do you understand, Miss Xu? To put it bluntly, if a fire burnt down this garden, see who remains. Who is the unburnable phoenix? Who is the true king among flowers? —Miss Xu, do you understand what I'm saying?"

Xu Zhiqing bit her lip, her face reddening. She clenched her small hand, gave him a look, but said nothing.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, waving his hand. "Enough said, enough said. It's less interesting when things are too obvious. Anyway, we all understand. The person in the pavilion, I'm tired from speaking. Could you get me a stool?"

The elderly man in the pavilion gave the blind old man a meaningful look and laughed. "Indeed, he should be granted a seat. Little Wei, in your opinion, should we seat him to the left or the right of Su Mubai?"

"Master, your judgment is wise," Little Wei responded respectfully, his face unchanging.

"Come, grant Lin San a seat, to the left of Miss Xu," the elderly man proclaimed cheerfully with a loud voice. On the stoic face of the blind old man, a hint of a profound smile emerged...

Chapter 307 Her Surname is Xiao

A simple question about who should be the king of flowers had, surprisingly, provoked so much philosophy, even escalating to a discussion of statecraft. While unexpected, it aligned perfectly with the old man in the pavilion's intentions. Regrettably, the scholarly discourse from the reigning top scholar had been not only overshadowed by Xu Zhiqing, but also suppressed by Lin Wanrong. It was quite disappointing.

A smile lingered on Su Mubai's face, but it was strained. His gaze flickered towards Lin Wanrong, lost in contemplation.

Seeing Lin Wanrong take a seat to the left of Xu Zhiqing, the old man glanced at him and chuckled to the blind elder, "Little Wei, would you say that this Lin Wanrong is smart, or is he muddled?"

The blind old man jolted, replying, "This humble servant doesn't understand."

The old man softly smiled, "If we say he's smart, no one would deny it. However, such a smart man seems unable to guess who I am. How would you explain that?" Little Wei's heart lurched, too frightened to speak.

"If he truly doesn't understand, there's nothing to fear. What's worrying is when some people pretend to be confused despite their intelligence - their intentions..." The old man hummed lightly, his smile seeming both genuine and false.

Little Wei hurriedly said, "Master, you see right through everything. I believe Lin Wanrong is not intentionally hiding anything. I had many interactions with him in Jinling. Sometimes, he is extremely intelligent, knowing many unheard and unseen things. However, at times, he's terribly confused, unfamiliar with the bureaucracy, societal norms, and etiquette of our Great Hua. Even I don't understand whether this man is smart or confused."

"Smart or confused?" The old man softly repeated, and then burst into laughter, "This lad is quite interesting indeed. Whether he is smart or confused, it's hard to tell. Nevermind, it's rare to meet such an interesting character. If he understood everything immediately, it would be too boring. Let him continue being confused."

"Your Highness is wise," Little Wei responded reverently, his body breaking out into a cold sweat. His master was unpredictable; his words seemingly meaningful yet possibly meaningless. Nobody could guess what he was thinking. If he had any suspicion towards Lin Wanrong, it would be the end of everything.

"Su Mubai should have learned a lesson this time," the old man glanced at the reserved Top Scholar and sighed, "That's good as well. He won't get complacent just because he is the Zhuangyuan. Let him understand that there are always people better than him, and there's always more to the world."

Seeing the master mentioning Su Mubai again, the blind old man automatically fell silent. As expected, the old man continued, "Little Wei, although Su Mubai has the talent of a Top Scholar, he

lacks experience. Keeping him in the Department of Education will only offer temporary success, not long-term growth. In your opinion, what position should I assign him to?"

Little Wei bowed and said, "This servant doesn't know. Su Mubai's knowledge and insight are rare. Moreover, he was personally mentored by Your Highness. Regardless of where he is placed, he can handle heavy responsibilities. He is a great talent for our country, this servant wouldn't dare to speculate."

The master glanced at him thoughtfully and sighed lightly. He paced around the pavilion, gazing at the leisurely white clouds on the horizon, "Little Wei, don't worry, just speak your mind, I won't blame you. You've been with me for over fifty years. If even you can't speak honestly, then who can be frank with me?"

Little Wei remained silent for a while before he slowly spoke, "In my humble opinion, what our Great Hua needs is not a Top Scholar, but—"

Before he could finish, the elder's expression darkened, and he huffed heavily. The blind old man hurriedly knelt down, thudding onto the ground. "This servant deserves death. I deserve death. Please forgive me, master."

The elder's face changed from gloomy to clear, silent for a long time before finally saying, "I asked you to speak. What crime have you committed? Get up quickly."

Little Wei knew his master very well, he remained kneeling on the ground, daring not to move. Seeing his stubbornness, the elder fell silent again. After a moment, he said, "This Su Mubai needs more training. If I send him to the provinces, I fear he will be corrupted by officialdom. If I leave him in the academia, it will only foster his arrogance. It is indeed a difficult problem."

Although he seemed to be consulting with the blind old man, Little Wei knew like a mirror that this was merely the master's monologue. He must have had everything planned already.

Sure enough, the elder paced for a few steps and spoke in a deep voice, "In a month's time, our Great Hua will be launching a full-scale military operation to fight a decisive battle with the northern nomads. The current court lacks good generals. Even if Li Tai had three heads and six arms, it would be hard for him to hold the fort alone. Su Mubai is not only a Top Scholar but also excels in military strategy and has some achievements. I plan to embed him within the army to gain experience and assist Li Tai, studying military strategy thoroughly. Little Wei, what do you think?"

Little Wei felt a chill in his heart. Indeed, the students personally trained by the master had an innate advantage. Although Su Mubai had suffered a temporary setback in today's state policy discussion, it didn't shake his foundation. In the master's heart, Su Mubai was still the top priority. Sending Su Mubai to the army, supposedly to assist Li Tai, was indeed to accumulate experience, even gradually taking over the military power. The intention was clear.

Seeing Little Wei dared not answer, the elder said, "Don't think I'm being partial. I have just said, opportunities are equal. If this Lin San is willing to join the army and assist Li Tai, I will not treat him unfairly. Whether it's him or Su Mubai, whoever accomplishes great deeds will be the hero. The vast territory of our Great Hua must not fall into the hands of mediocrity."

Join the army? Would this young man be willing to? Little Wei shook his head helplessly. Last time, he had to put in quite an effort to persuade Lin San to befriend Xu Wei and help him eradicate the White Lotus Sect. That was a guaranteed profitable deal with a ten to one return. Now it was about facing the barbarians with real swords and arrows, a world apart from eradicating the White Lotus Sect. Would this young man be willing to go?

The elder looked at a few people in the garden, his gaze falling on Xiao Yuruo. After a long silence, he sighed, listlessly waving his hand, "I'm a bit tired today. Let's call it a day." As soon as he finished speaking, he flicked his sleeve and left the pavilion, his bodyguards quickly surrounding him.

Lin Wanrong sat outside for a while, hearing no movement inside. Gradually growing impatient, he was about to get up when he saw Miss Xu's calm face, looking at him with a radiant smile.

"Miss Xu, although I don't care much, I'm still an unmarried man with a strong sense of shame. Your staring at me tarnishes my reputation, so I ask that you respect yourself," Lin Wanrong said righteously.

Xu Zhiqing bit her lip to suppress her laughter and replied, "You are quite something. You can mock and ridicule me just now, and I didn't even bicker with you. How come I offend you just by looking at you?"

He wasn't offended at all, Lin Wanrong chuckled, about to respond, when suddenly the curtains were lifted, and several small palanquins emerged from the pavilion in a single file, quickly disappearing into the distance. He didn't even catch a glimpse of the elder.

He left already? Lin Wanrong was startled, wondering who this mysterious and hurried person was.

Su Mubai, seeing that the people in the pavilion had departed, hastily made a fist salute to Xu Zhiqing and said, "Miss Xu, I must take my leave." Xu Zhiqing gave a slight nod, and the Top Scholar Su glanced at Lin Wanrong before quickly departing.

"Eldest Miss, do you really not know who this man is?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "He seems quite smitten with the Madam. Perhaps she or you have mentioned him before."

Xiao Yuruo shook her head and replied, "Mother rarely talks to me about matters in the capital. I have no idea who this distinguished person is."

Was he genuinely clueless or just pretending? Xu Zhiqing gave Lin San a puzzled look, then shook her head with a smile, finding him rather peculiar.

"Miss Xu, do you recognize this elder?" Xiao Yuruo asked eagerly, noticing Xu Zhiqing's amused expression.

Xu Zhiqing smiled and nodded, "Yes, I suppose you could say that. Miss Xiao, you've met a distinguished person today."

"A distinguished person?" Xiao Yuruo grabbed Xu Zhiqing, urgently asking, "Sister, what do you mean by a distinguished person? Can you clarify?"

Noticing that Lin San was eavesdropping, Xu Zhiqing gave a restrained smile and said coyly, "A distinguished person is just that - distinguished. I dare not speak of his identity — doesn't your family have a bold one? Let him ask, and he'll know."

Xiao Yuruo blushed, just about to speak when a group of monks of varying ages approached from a distance. The one leading them was draped in a bright red kasaya, with white eyebrows and beard, appearing to be a venerable monk. When the group reached them, the monk bowed, announced his Buddhist name, and said with a smile, "I am monk Huikong, the abbot of this temple. Greetings, kind donors."

"Master Huikong?" Xu Zhiqing quickly put her hands together, solemnly saying, "Disciple Xu Zhiqing pays respect to the master. My father, Xu Wei, once received your guidance in chess and has cherished it all these years. On behalf of my father, I thank you for your kindness."

The venerable monk smiled, "So the little donor is indeed the daughter of Mr. Wenchang? My apologies for the oversight. Those small skills are not worth mentioning, I am flattered that Mr. Wenchang has remembered them. Might I ask, Miss Xu, which one of you is Mr. Lin San?"

'Me?' Lin Wanrong was taken aback. It couldn't be that he had to pay for stepping on the peonies in the garden, right? 'Damn, trying to get money from a tightwad? No way!'

He chuckled and said, "Master monk, you're looking for Lin San? Oh, I saw him leaving just now, probably went to the toilet — Master, what do you need him for? He didn't do anything, I can vouch for him."

The venerable monk looked at him with a faint smile, "That's unfortunate. I came here to deliver a message to him."

A message? Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Could it be a Bodhisattva had sent him a message through a monk? Damn, this was weird.

"Well, Master, who wants to send a message to Lin San? Oh, I'm Lin San's older brother, Lin Er. You can pass the message to me just the same," Lin Wanrong said with a snicker.

The master nodded slightly, "That would suffice. The female donor who wished to pass a message to Mr. Lin goes by the surname Xiao."

"Surname what?" Lin Wanrong felt as if a needle had pricked his behind, causing him to jump up abruptly.

Chapter 308 Peak Surprise

"She said her surname is Xiao," the old monk repeated with a smile.

A sense of urgency overtook Lin Wanrong's heart. Could it be a homonym? He pulled out a pencil from his pocket, sketched a few strokes on his hand, and cautiously asked the master, "Master, is her surname Xiao or is it Xiao

The monk smiled and shook his head, "She did not specify."

His heart cooled when he realized she had not clarified. Doubtful, he asked, "May I ask Master, what does she look like?"

"The female benefactor veiled her face, I couldn't discern her features," replied the old monk. "Moreover, in the eyes of a monk like myself, all living beings are equal. Be they a beautiful lady or a skeleton, they all look the same to me, I truly cannot distinguish between them."

"Both a beauty and a skeleton look the same?" Lin Wanrong chuckled lightly and pointed at Xu Zhiqing, "Master, do you think I'm as good-looking as Miss Xu?"

The old monk chuckled, glanced at both of them, and nodded, "To an outsider, you may seem different, but in my eyes, the two of you are indistinguishable. Even the distinguished guest who just left is no different from you."

The distinguished guest who just left? There seemed to be a hidden message in the old monk's words. Considering his status as the abbot of Grand Prime Minister Temple, it was indeed strange that he had personally delivered the message. Lin Wanrong, having been deceived once before, was naturally cautious. He suppressed his excitement and asked, "May I ask, Master, what did Miss Xiao say?"

The monk nodded, "Miss Xiao said she is waiting for you at the hot spring in the back mountain."

"The back mountain hot spring?" Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but furrow her brows, "Master, as far as I know, the hot springs of Grand Prime Minister Temple are not open to outsiders. How did Miss Xiao get up there?"

"That's true, that's true," Lin Wanrong laughed, admiringly glancing at Miss Xu. If not for her reminder, he would not have thought about these aspects. The high status of the Grand Prime Minister Temple today was largely due to the presence of the hot spring. It maintained a pleasant climate year-round, allowing them to host a flower appreciation event in early spring, attracting countless visitors. If the hot spring were freely open to outsiders, it would surely create chaos.

"Om Amitabha," the old monk uttered a Buddhist phrase and laughed, "Miss Xu is correct. The hot spring in the back mountain is indeed precious and sits atop a steep peak, difficult even for our temple's monks to climb, let alone ordinary visitors. However, the lady holds the seal of an old friend of mine. I must tell you, the hot spring of this temple was first discovered and developed by this old friend. How could I refuse when her descendant sought help here?"

An old friend of the old monk? A man or a woman? Lin Wanrong had more questions, but he saw the old monk speak seriously, "Rest assured, Mr. Lin, my old friend is a righteous person. Since Miss Xiao is her descendant, she will certainly not harm you. I guarantee this on behalf of my position as the abbot of Grand Prime Minister Temple."

'Guarantee? What kind of guarantee is there if my life is at risk?' He was not worried at this moment about a return of the fairy; given the poison in the bee needle, the fairy was likely clinging onto life at this point, far from being able to spend time bathing in hot springs and playing mysterious. Could it really be Qingxuan seeking him out? His heart pounded in his chest, amplifying his confusion.

Remembering the events of that night, the Eldest Miss grew anxious. She tugged at his sleeve, "Are you going again?"

Could he refuse? The old monk said the woman's surname was Xiao. Even if she was not Qingxuan, she certainly knew Qingxuan's whereabouts. Besides, looking at the benevolent face of the old monk, who even Xu Zhiqing respected, he probably had no ill intentions. As long as they meant him no harm, why not go?

Seeing him nod, the Eldest Miss snorted but could not find a reason to dissuade him.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Don't worry, this time I'll be cautious. I won't repeat last time's mistake. Why don't you come with me?"

The Eldest Miss snorted again without answering. Xu Zhiqing, though unaware of what had happened, smiled upon seeing their expressions, "Miss Xiao, there's no need to worry. The old monk is a virtuous sage, skilled in divining human affairs. He said that Miss Xiao bore Lin San no ill will, he won't be wrong. After my mother passed away years ago, my father went to this temple to make merit. The old monk had a conversation with my father, jokingly predicting that my father would encounter another marriage in his later years. At first, my father didn't believe it, but recently he indeed met Aunt Su, didn't he?"

The old monk can tell fortunes? Lin Wanrong hurriedly said, "Old monk, venerable sir, can you really tell fortunes? Are they accurate? Could you look at mine? I want to ask about my career, wealth, love, life, and when I will find Qingxuan. Please, can you clarify?"

Xu Zhiqing chuckled at him. This man was adept at embellishing a situation. One would say one thing, but he could associate it with ten unrelated things.

The old monk stroked his beard, laughing heartily, "Fate is predestined. Who can truly discern the secrets of the universe and divine one's fate? Such superstitions, better not to believe them. Lin San, you just follow your own mind. Do what you want to do, and you will see results. Don't be swayed by others."

The old monk spoke as if presenting a Zen riddle, but anyone could say such words. Lin Wanrong didn't mind, nodding, "In that case, I will go take a look. Can you tell me where the hot springs on the back mountain are?"

The old monk nodded, smiling at a young monk behind him, "Wujing, you can guide Mr. Lin."

Knowing she could not deter him, the Eldest Miss sighed, glancing at him, "Be careful. Don't let it be like last time, falling into someone else's trap."

Lin Wanrong grinned, nodding, thinking to himself, 'What trap? If it hadn't been for you ruining things last time, I would have captured the fairy by now.' But this time, it definitely wasn't the fairy causing trouble. If she really wanted to strike at him, she wouldn't need to go to all this effort. She could just lay an ambush on the road or shoot an arrow, and that would be the end of him.

Naturally, Lin Wanrong wouldn't say such things to the Eldest Miss. Pulling along the young monk called Wujing, he hurried towards the back hill of the Grand Prime Minister Temple. After a few turns, he vanished from sight.

Upon seeing his figure disappear, Eldest Miss stood still for a while, then gave a deep sigh. Xu Zhiqing took her hand and asked, "Miss Xiao, what is he going to do?"

Xiao Yuruo felt a pang in her heart and softly said, "To see his wife?"

"His wife?" Miss Xu furrowed her brows, "He's already married? Why didn't my father mention it?"

"Who knows if he is married or not?" the Eldest Miss said irritably, "He has countless beloved ladies; this scoundrel himself probably lost count. I bet he would need to count on his toes to get the right number."

Xu Zhiqing chuckled, looking at Xiao Yuruo with interest. The Eldest Miss blushed slightly and asked, "Sister, why are you laughing?"

Miss Xu responded seriously, "Miss Xiao, do you trust my words?"

The Eldest Miss nodded softly, "Miss Xu, you are an epitome of learning and knowledge. How can I not believe your words?"

Holding Xiao Yuruo's hand, Xu Zhiqing led her a few steps forward and smilingly said, "Then, I will ask you a few questions, and you will answer me honestly."

The Eldest Miss nodded. Xu Zhiqing looked at her with a slight smile, "Miss Xiao, do you truly like this Lin Wanrong?"

Xiao Yuruo blushed. After hesitating for a while, she finally gathered her courage to nod and softly hummed in affirmation.

Xu Zhiqing gave a slight smile, "Miss Xiao, it is natural for a man and a woman to be attracted to each other. There's no need to be overly shy."

Xiao Yuruo softly hummed, her eyes emitting a tender glow. She quietly said, "That may be so, but this rascal never takes things seriously. He doesn't seek fame or office. I'm afraid it would be hard to convince my mother."

Xu Zhiqing took her hand and, with a smile, said, "Mutual attraction has nothing to do with social status. An Emperor can marry a commoner; a Princess can marry a butcher. Although Lin San spends his days in laughter, with his ability, seeking a position isn't a difficult task. That's not an issue at all. Madame Xiao is astute and certainly wouldn't oppose your affair with him over such a matter."

Hearing Xu Zhiqing's words, the Eldest Miss felt like she'd swallowed a reassurance pill. After thinking it over carefully, she felt that Xu Zhiqing seemed to be holding something back, so she asked, "Sister, do you mean that the difficulty in my relationship with him is not due to status, but something else?"

Xu Zhiqing neither admitted nor denied it, and only smiled, "Miss Xiao, although our acquaintance is not long, I can see that you are a determined woman, steady and firm in dealing with matters, strong-willed, and not one to easily succumb. In other words, you are different from other women; you have the ability to live independently, without relying on a man."

This was indeed true. Since her childhood in commerce, Eldest Miss had developed a strong character. If not for encountering Lin Wanrong, few people would have seen her tender side. Seeing Xu Zhiqing's slightly furrowed brow, Xiao Yuruo urgently said, "Sister, is there a problem with this? Please, enlighten me."

Xu Zhiqing nodded, "Exactly, therein lies the problem. A woman as talented, beautiful, and independent as you is a rare find in this world, so I'm certain you have high standards. If any ordinary man were to meet you, he would undoubtedly devote himself entirely to you, with no spare thoughts for other women. Now, tell me, which woman in this world wouldn't wish for her husband to love her alone, especially a remarkable woman like you? However, Lin San, with his flirtatious nature, has countless women besotted with him. Even if he has you, he still courts others. Does this not bother you?"

Eldest Miss sighed softly, "What can I do if it bothers me? If this scoundrel dares to abandon me, I'd rather die than watch him."

Xu Zhiqing laughed, "Don't talk nonsense. You're still young, and you haven't even begun to explore the depths of love with him. Why bring up death?"

Xiao Yuruo's face colored like autumn leaves, and she said with feigned annoyance, "What love? Sister, are you teasing me again? But what can I do about his flirtatious nature?"

Xu Zhiqing smiled mysteriously, "You must not underestimate yourself. A charming woman like you, if you wish to capture his heart and make him love only you, it's not impossible." She leaned over and whispered in Eldest Miss's ear...

Although it was referred to as the 'back mountain', it was still quite a distance away from Grand Prime Minister Temple. The young monk, Wujing, led him out. Lin Wanrong hurried a few steps to catch up with him and said with a laugh, "Master, you're called Wujing, right?"

The young monk said, "Indeed, I am Wujing."

Lin Wanrong looked him up and down, raised his thumb in admiration and said, "Great physique, handsome face. You are indeed a high-ranking monk. Master Wujing, are you close with Master Huikong?"

Wujing said, "Master Huikong is my teacher. I have always followed him in learning about Buddhism, never leaving his side."

Lin Wanrong grinned, made a bow with his hands, and said, "Congratulations, Master. It seems like Master Huikong is grooming you as his successor." This young monk, who was only sixteen or seventeen, would only become the successor after the death of his teacher, his grand-teacher, and perhaps hundreds of his senior disciples. This was Lin Wanrong's usual ploy to flatter and coax, whether it was effective or not.

Wujing quickly recited a Buddhist mantra and repeatedly said he was not worthy.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Master, there's no need to be modest. Consider this: Master Huikong keeps you by his side all day long. Isn't he grooming you? Have you ever seen him do this with others? I didn't think so."

Having grown up in the temple, the young monk Wujing was pure-minded and easily led astray. Following Lin Wanrong's words, he began to believe that he was indeed being groomed for succession. He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face.

'Am I a bit too naughty?' Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself and continued, "Today, when Miss Xiao went to see Master Huikong, were you there? Ah, I haven't seen Miss Xiao for a long time, I wonder how she's changed? Has she grown taller or shorter, fatter or thinner?"

After some thought, the young monk replied, "The female benefactor was wearing a veil, so I couldn't see her clearly. But from her figure, she must be an extremely beautiful woman."

"Oh, really?" Lin Wanrong asked calmly, "How about her figure? Any distinctive features?"

"Distinctive features?" The novice monk echoed to himself. After some careful reflection, he suddenly clapped his hands in realization and said, "Master Lin, I remember now - she was quite... large."

"Large? What do you mean, large?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

The novice monk gestured at his chest and explained, "Here, she was large here."

Lin Wanrong, following the monk's gesture, glanced down at his own chest, and in an instant, he understood the implication. He was immediately drenched in cold sweat. 'So, this young monk was a lecher, ogling women's chests whenever he could. If it was really my Qingxuan you were peeping at, I'd feed your eyeballs to the dogs. The monk Huikong, what on earth was he teaching his disciples? Was he also the same type?' The very thought made him shudder. 'May Buddha bless me.'

"Master Lin, what's wrong?" The novice monk saw his fierce expression and hurriedly asked.

"Oh, nothing. Tell me, young monk, do you stare at the chest of female patrons every day?" Lin Wanrong asked, his eyes gleaming with malice while his smile remained.

A blush spread across the novice monk's face, and he hurriedly chanted, "No, no, I never peek at women. My master always said that women and skeletons are indistinguishable. When I see a woman, it's as if I'm looking at a skeleton, Ah, Amitabha, a skeleton."

Lin Wanrong found this amusing. This young monk, at the tender age of sixteen or seventeen, was at the age when an interest in women was quite natural. 'But if you dared to disrespect my Qingxuan, whether you're a monk or a boar, I'll castrate you a hundred times over.'

The novice monk dared not utter another word and hurriedly led Lin Wanrong on. After a short time, they arrived at the half-mountain cliff. The hot spring at the back mountain was located at the peak. The terrain was steep and difficult to climb.

The novice monk put his hands together, recited a mantra and said, "Master Lin, Miss Xiao is at the peak. I can't accompany you the rest of the way. Please, ascend on your own."

Lin Wanrong looked up and saw that the only path to the peak was a narrow, rough-hewn stairway that wound its way along the mountainside. The stairs were very steep, only wide enough for one person. If someone were to block this path, no one would be able to reach the summit.

As soon as the novice monk had finished speaking, he left in a hurry. Lin Wanrong thought for a moment. If it were a fairy coming to take revenge, she wouldn't need to invite him to the top of this hot spring mountain. And if it were Qingxuan, why would she go around so many twists and turns? After much consideration, he couldn't figure out who it might be. He carefully checked all the treasures on his body and, after confirming everything was in order, he slowly ascended the narrow path.

The path was treacherously narrow and winding, at times forcing him to cling to the rock face to climb up, and at others, threading through gaps in the stone walls. He had to be careful to avoid any potential ambushes. The strenuous climb took nearly an hour before he finally reached the peak.

At the entrance to the peak, a large natural rock was deeply embedded in the earth. Lin Wanrong pushed with both hands, pulling himself up onto the rock. His body was somewhat fatigued, so he simply sat down on the rock.

The sun was already setting, and as he sat on the peak, he had a panoramic view of the distant mountains overlapping each other, with clouds bathed in colorful sunset hues. It was a scene of unparalleled tranquility, which filled his heart with contentment.

However, he hadn't come for the view. Remembering that the mysterious Miss Xiao was waiting for him, he quickly became anxious. Stealthily, he stuck his head out from behind the rock and surveyed the surroundings.

The mountaintop was expansive, with rocky cliffs towering on all sides, their peculiar shapes looming. The only exception was the center of the peak, which featured a large pool. A spring bubbled, spurting out hot steam, and the rushing hot spring enveloped the surroundings in a thin mist. It was neither bright nor dark, filled with mystery.

On this mountaintop, apart from rocks and hot springs, there was no sight of human figures. Lin Wanrong examined the area more carefully, but it was still quiet. A sudden thought struck him - had the old monk deceived him?

As this thought crossed his mind, a soft noise arose. The water in the pool rippled and parted, and from it emerged an exquisite figure. Long, beautiful hair was casually flipped, casting droplets of

water that carried a warm vapor into the air. The mist swirled and rolled away, creating the image of a beautiful white lotus blooming in the afterglow of the sunset...

Chapter 309 I Beg You to Conquer Her

The woman was clad in a thin, one-piece garment as delicate as cicada wings. Over this, she wore a thin veil, her lotus arms and jade legs, voluptuous chest and raised hips, and the curvaceous silhouette of her body being utterly enchanting. Her skin was as smooth as silk, seeming as if it would drip water at any moment. Her face was as clean as jade, adorned with a touch of light blush, her eyes were radiant, brimming with shyness like a virgin, yet also seeming seductive like a young wife. As she moved, her long and powerful legs gently swayed, exuding an air of sensuality and myriad charm.

Damn it, Lin Wanrong's eyes were glued to the woman, his heart itching with desire. As a master herself, how could she maintain such a wonderful figure? How was this not blatantly driving him mad?

The woman glanced towards the large stone in Lin Wanrong's direction, her light veil covering her body, obscuring yet highlighting her crystal-clear chest and jade legs. Her eyes were filled with a playful glint, and her long eyelashes fluttered slightly. She chuckled, "Little brother, since you're here, why hide? Are you scared that your Sister will eat you up?"

"It's not that I'm afraid you'll eat me, but rather, I'm afraid I'll eat you," Lin Wanrong emerged from behind the stone and chuckled, "Sister, your figure, your skin, it's absolutely unparalleled. How do you maintain yourself? Can I have a feel?"

An Biru moved lightly, a bewitching smile on her face. She reproached in a delicate voice, "You little rascal, always trying to take advantage of me. I am here bathing and changing clothes, how could you sneak in here, don't you know about propriety between men and women?"

'Damn it, it was clear she knew I was coming and deliberately undressed and bathed, posing in this half-hidden seductive manner to entice me. Does she think I'm unaware?'

He laughed heartily, moving two steps closer, his gaze sweeping intensely over An Biru. She feigned surprise, retreated hastily, and held her chest like a frightened bunny. The voluptuous breasts formed an enticing cleavage that dazzled the eyes. She trembled slightly, her slender and powerful legs squeezed together, creating an alluring triangle. Her beautiful eyes reflected fear and despair, showing a pitiful and frail demeanor.

Seductive fox. A flame rose in Lin Wanrong's heart. This flirtatious woman wasn't scared at all. Clearly, she wanted to trigger a man's violent tendencies, wishing for him to ravage and torment her.

He snickered and reached out to pull An Biru. However, she twisted her hips and evaded him with a charming laugh, a light smile in her eyes. Her red lips parted slightly, and she said flirtatiously, "Little rascal, what are you trying to do, take advantage of me? Don't forget, I am Xian'er's master." 'Master? Is there a Master who dresses like this? Is there a mentor who seduces her disciple's husband? Do you think I'm naive, facing such a captivating beauty? If I didn't feel anything, I might need to consider visiting the urologist.'

He swallowed hard and chuckled, "Trying to play both the whore and the saint — Sister, your shamelessness is quite reminiscent of my past self. No wonder I find myself more and more in sync with you, turns out we are of the same kind."

An Biru suddenly stopped evading and stood still, looking at him without moving.

Lin Wanrong's hands, which had been randomly reaching out, were about to grab her chest. Noticing her dazed expression, he also paused, abruptly halting his movements. His hands were only inches away from her bosom, and he could even feel the faint warmth emanating from her smooth skin.

Damn, this was testing his self-control. His gaze lingered on her chest for a moment before he feigned surprise. "Oh, sister, what are you doing? Why did you stop moving? You almost made me touch you by accident."

A peculiar blush crept onto An Biru's face. She looked at him and spoke softly, "Little brother, were you speaking truthfully just now?"

"Which words?" Lin Wanrong feigned confusion, widening his innocent eyes.

"You do love to play dumb," An Biru gently touched his forehead with a slender finger and smiled faintly. "What did you say about me earlier? Something about both something and the saint?" Her hum was soft, yet her gaze was fixed on him.

"Oh, that... I was just joking. How could you possibly be what I said? You are much more beautiful. I was just talking nonsense. Don't take it seriously, and even if you do, you can't blame me." He shamelessly laughed it off.

"When you are told to stop, you blabber nonsense. When you are asked to talk, you lose your courage. Is this all you have to offer?" An Biru asked with a slight smile, pushing her chest forward, causing Lin Wanrong to hurriedly retract his hands.

An Biru chuckled, glancing at him in a way that felt like a display of her power, her eyes twinkling with amusement, seemingly mocking this lustful yet cowardly fellow.

Damn it, he was the one trying to have it both ways, he thought disdainfully. What difference did it make if she was Xian'er's master? Wasn't she just a lonely woman? What harm would come from him, a man as voracious as a wolf or tiger, touching her? He wouldn't lose anything, and even Buddha wouldn't blame him.

As he justified his actions, he was about to reach out again, but An Biru swiftly stepped back, giving him no chance. She chuckled, "Actually, I think you're absolutely right. Who in this world doesn't wear a facade? Even those with lofty statuses like Emperor and Prince Cheng, aren't they all gentlemen on the outside and debauchers in private? Why can't I do what others do? I want to be both a saint and—" Her face turned a deep shade of red, and she couldn't finish her sentence.

"And what?" Lin Wanrong asked teasingly.

"A whore!" An Biru blurted out softly, her expression a mix of shy and playful. Despite her unrestrained behavior and disregard for minor details, she was still a woman of unrivaled beauty. As she uttered those two words, she felt both embarrassed and somewhat liberated. Her cheeks flushed red, her eyes glistening as she shot him a glance. Her eyes seemed to be veiled by a thin layer of mist, an expression of shyness that was captivatingly charming.

Seeing her seductive and shy appearance, Lin Wanrong felt a tingle in his heart. Damn, hearing a beauty utter coarse words was truly satisfying. However, it would be a waste for a charming woman like An Biru to become a whore. It would be better for her to become his own personal enchantress. That proposal didn't sound bad at all.

An itch was gnawing at him from within, yet unknowingly, he had grasped her hand. "Sister," he started, "I understand your thoughts. The world is filled with countless personas, yet very few embody simplicity, kindness, and sincerity. Even though you are unconventional, attracting controversy everywhere you go, I can understand your state of mind."

An Biru gave him a glance, her eyes foggy. She then shrugged off his devilish grip, laughing charmingly, "You're just trying to take advantage of me, aren't you? You sound so grand, I'd be a fool to believe you."

'This foxy woman,' Lin Wanrong thought, silently irritated. 'Why couldn't you be a little less clever? I finally held your small hand, and in the blink of an eye, you've shrugged me off. But on second thought, Sister An's hand is soft and tender, like freshly squeezed milk, no less exquisite than Xian'er. If one day, I could hold Xian'er in my left hand and this foxy spirit in my right... Oh, the taste of that would be so intoxicating.'

As he daydreamed, An Biru had already moved far from him, her face a cryptic smile. The thin veil she wore was lifted by the breeze, revealing her snowy skin and slender, jade-white thighs. Lin Wanrong coughed awkwardly, "Alright, Sister, let's talk business. Is the so-called Miss Xiao you? You called me here, for what? You can't be here just to bathe and change into new clothes for me to see, can you?"

"Do you think I'm that casual?" An Biru shot him a charming glance, cheeks flushing. "I was waiting for you here, and when you didn't show up for a long time, the jade-like spring water of this blue pond was tempting, so I went down to play in the water. I didn't expect a rogue to intentionally hide behind the rock and peep while I was bathing. Instead of settling the score with you, you blamed me first. You are an ungrateful little scoundrel."

This enchantress had spoken at length, yet avoided the key issue. He had never outwitted Sister An in their verbal jousts. Helpless, Lin Wanrong laughed, "Sister, let's not bring up the bathing. We both know what happened. My mistake was being born with bright, expressive eyes. Yours was having a beauty that rivals a fairy's, and a devilishly captivating figure. We are both to blame, let's not mock each other." He chuckled, "What I'm talking about is another matter. The masked woman who lured me here by posing as Miss Xiao, that was you, right? Why would you come up with such a plan? I'm utterly baffled."

As if she hadn't heard him, An Biru slowly sat down by the hot spring, stretching out her long legs, gently stirring the warm lake water. She was massaging her damp hair, her movements delicate and natural, exuding beauty. Yet she seemed oblivious to his words, ignoring him completely.

"Hey, Sister, I'm talking to you. Show some respect," Lin Wanrong admitted defeat to this enchantress. Before her, his wits seemed useless. He couldn't beat her, nor out-talk her. He remembered how he used to have the upper hand with all the other women he encountered. Now, he finally met one he couldn't handle, one who could even handle him. There was a peculiar taste to that, he realized.

"If I hadn't employed such means, would you have come?" An Biru said faintly, her voice sounding like a wronged woman hidden deep within a boudoir. "That night, you treated me so poorly, and yet you've so casually wiped it all away? You can be flippant, but why did you abandon me as soon as Miss Xiao arrived? These days, you haven't even asked about me. Is taking advantage of An Biru something you can do freely? If I didn't employ these tactics to find you, would you have sought me out yourself? You truly are incorrigible."

She seemed to be half-accusing and half-complaining. Anyone listening might think Lin Wanrong was heartless and disloyal, but he himself knew that it was far from the truth. If there was any complaint, it belonged to Xian'er or the Eldest Miss, but certainly not this bewitching woman. With every step he took, he seemed to be within her control. To say he had abandoned her was a huge joke. How could he abandon something he had never possessed?

"Master Sister, do you know Qingxuan?" Lin Wanrong, tired of her chatter, interrupted her to ask directly.

An Biru's eyes sparkled mysteriously as she smiled. "Qingxuan? Who is Qingxuan? I don't know her."

Lin Wanrong hummed, took a few slow steps, and said with a stiff face, "Miss An, let's not beat around the bush. Today, you used Qingxuan's name to call me here. What is the reason? How do you know Qingxuan?"

"You tactless blockhead," An Biru murmured reproachfully. A captivating smile appeared on her face. "So, her name is Qingxuan? I only knew her surname was Xiao. Xiao Qingxuan, hmm, not a bad name, very poetic."

Hearing her say Qingxuan's name, Lin Wanrong felt a sudden urgency. He grabbed An Biru's arm. "You know Qingxuan? Where is she? Tell me!"

An Biru frowned, her voice coquettish, "You rascal, that hurts."

Lin Wanrong quickly let go of her smooth arm, asking anxiously, "Sister, have you really seen Qingxuan? Where is she?"

An Biru shook her head. "Why are you so impatient, you little rascal? I came to see you out of kindness, and this is how you treat me?"

This enchantress was clearly playing games with him. Lin Wanrong felt anxious but knew he couldn't rush her. Seeing his anxiety, An Biru finally spoke. "I don't know this Qingxuan of yours, nor do I know where she is. But I do know her identity."

"Her identity?" Lin Wanrong felt his heart skip a beat. Could An Biru know that Qingxuan was a princess? She had close relations with Prince Cheng and might know some inside information.

"Sister, is Qingxuan a princess?" Lin Wanrong lowered his voice and asked mysteriously.

"A princess?" An Biru shook her head. "I don't know about that. But Xian'er...never mind, let's not talk about this." An Biru quickly changed the subject. "So this Xiao Qingxuan is truly your wife?"

Qingxuan isn't a princess? Seeing An Biru's confusion, Lin Wanrong felt perplexed. "Qingxuan is my wife, witnessed by heaven and earth, and matched by the green pines. We are deeply in love, our affections tangled and intense. In Jinling, we already vowed to grow old together."

"Commitment till death?" An Biru chuckled softly, casting him a glance full of mystery. "She made such a pledge with you? The disciple of Fairy Ning and you have pledged a lifelong commitment? That's genuinely amusing."

"What's so amusing? Who is this Fairy Ning? Sister, don't tease me any further. If there's something, just say it outright." Lin Wanrong hurriedly said. He was reminded of the fairy who was poisoned that night. Could it be that she was Fairy Ning?

"Even if I tease you, what can you do? When it comes to other women, you get so worked up. You heartless little thing." Seeing the veins on Lin Wanrong's forehead throb, An Biru giggled, "Don't worry. I initially heard from Xian'er about this Miss Xiao. Turns out, she's Xian'er's senior sister. After some inquiries, and questioning Xian'er, I found out that this Miss Xiao is the one you fancy."

Xian'er's senior sister? Recalling what An Biru had mentioned that night, he suddenly realized, "No wonder Xian'er harbored such animosity towards Qingxuan. It turns out Qingxuan's master is the senior sister whom you've been resenting."

An Biru nodded, giving him a look, and laughed, "At least you're not entirely stupid. I have been enemies with my senior sister for a lifetime. Naturally, Xian'er wouldn't be fond of your beloved Qingxuan. Now, the situation is clear. It's your choice, Xian'er or Qingxuan."

The situation was indeed challenging. He initially thought Xian'er was merely jealous. His plan was to find Qingxuan and persuade Xian'er to get along with her. He had no idea that there were so many complications. Jealousy aside, the grudges between their masters made peaceful coexistence impossible. Moreover, there was An Biru stirring up trouble.

Thinking of An Biru, he recalled the fairy who was poisoned that day. Judging by her tone when she mentioned Qingxuan, she must be Qingxuan's master, that is, the Fairy Ning in An Biru's words. Damn it, things were getting more complicated. Having injured Fairy Ning, he would have a lot of explaining to do if Qingxuan started blaming him.

He thought hard but it was incredibly perplexing. The problem between Xian'er and Qingxuan was already a big issue, and behind them stood two incredibly beautiful women; one a seductive fox, and the other a sacred fairy no one dared to defile. 'I must be incredibly lucky, not only do I have two lovely wives, but I also got two formidable masters, one by marriage and the other as a bonus. Is there anyone more badass in this world?'

"Can I choose both?" He said shamelessly, "Sister An, you know as well as I do, Qingxuan and I share mutual affection, and my love for Xian'er is undeniable. I can't bear to leave either of them."

"Both?" An Biru snorted disdainfully, "You wish! Xian'er is a beauty that could ruin nations. It's already your enormous luck that she permits you to take another concubine. And yet, you dream of taking my enemy's disciple into your house. You must be having a good dream."

'Making her a concubine? We haven't even had the official ceremony yet, and you've already decided on everyone's status. Xian'er is the wife, Eldest Miss and Qiaoqiao are concubines?' Lin Wanrong snorted, thinking to himself, 'If you dare to provoke me, I'll marry them all as my main wives. And I'll spike you, this cunning vixen, with aphrodisiacs, making you a concubine to serve my wives. I'll let you taste the life of a concubine.'

Seeing his disgruntled face, An Biru's eyes twinkled and she said softly, "Well, there's room for negotiation about this matter—"

"How to negotiate?" Lin Wanrong asked.

"As I told you before, my White Lotus sect was destroyed by your hand. I lost the foundation to continue my fight with my senior sister, so I need you—" She glanced at Lin Wanrong, covering her lips with a light laugh.

"To pay off gambling debts with my body?" Lin Wanrong asked in horror.

"You wish." An Biru looked at him with amusement. "Still the same sentence: I will regain my lost dream through you. I want you to defeat her, to make her admit her defeat wholeheartedly."

"No need for that," Lin Wanrong nonchalantly waved his hand, laughing. "When it comes to defeating that fairy-like woman, I've already done that."

"You did? How did you do it?" An Biru was surprised.

Lin Wanrong recounted the events of that day. At first, An Biru was stunned, but then she broke into peals of laughter, bending over until her waist was almost at a right angle.

Her sheer gown was as thin as a cicada's wing. As she bent over, her jade-like legs tightened, and her bosom heaved, revealing a deep cleavage. Her skin was smooth, tender, and enticing, while her long, full thighs were glossy and supple. If she were to clamp them together, my, oh my... This enchantress was indeed naive, wearing such scant clothing. His eyes glowed with lust as he inspected her from top to bottom. The sight of such a tempting beauty made even Sister An blush and step back from him quickly.

"Such big... and smooth... Ah, Sister An, is this Fairy Ning the one I encountered? Does this count as defeating her?" He removed his gaze from the enchantress's chest, asking earnestly.

"With such appearance and demeanor, who else in the world could it be? Of course, it's my fairy-like senior sister," An Biru laughed. "She probably never dreamed that she, undefeated in the martial world, would fall victim to your devious schemes. Little brother, you're indeed capable. However, you've underestimated my senior sister. She's the most intelligent and talented person under the heavens, not someone to be easily defeated. A mere poison needle, what harm could it do to her?"

"So, she can't die?" Lin Wanrong asked with concern.

"What do you think?" An Biru countered. "If a mere poison needle could trouble her, would she still be the universally renowned and respected Fairy Ning?"

He didn't care about her status as a fairy. As long as she was not dead, that was all that mattered. It was a relief to know he wouldn't need to explain her death to Qingxuan. Wiping the cold sweat from his forehead, he quickly laughed, "That's good, that's good. If she had died, how would I have explained it to my wife, Qingxuan?"

An Biru smiled at him and gently brushed the hair by her ear, "So you see, our goals are aligned. Little brother, you won't reject me now, will you? If you manage to accomplish this task, I will persuade Xian'er and Xiao Qingxuan to reconcile, allowing you to enjoy the pleasures of the world."

"Well, I don't have much objection, especially since you don't know where Qingxuan is. But, I've seen the Fairy's martial arts with my own eyes. Defeating her is not going to be easy. With my current skills, I might need a month or two of training to beat her. Alas, what a headache!" Lin Wanrong exaggerated shamelessly.

An Biru shook her head with a wry smile. Even with ten years of practice, his crude skills wouldn't match hers. She smiled and said, "It's not only about martial arts. Any way in which you can make her willingly submit would be acceptable. But, she must be sincerely convinced. I want this noble fairy to see that I, An Biru, am stronger than her."

She smiled charmingly, a strange gleam flashing in her eyes, "I've paved the way for you. The rest is up to you—conquer her, defeat her, little brother. Use whatever means you have at your disposal."

Chapter 310 Military Exercise on the Battlefield

"The road has been paved? How exactly was it paved?" Lin Wanrong asked in confusion.

An Biru gave him a glance, laughed softly, and said, "You're smart at times, yet muddled at others. Why would I stick my neck out today if not for you?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, his eyes wandering over her figure, "Sister, are you talking about your affair with Prince Cheng? He's your sweetheart, isn't he? How does this relate to paving the way for me?"

An Biru giggled, shot him a coquettish glance, and chided, "Indeed, he is my sweetheart. Little Brother, could it be that you're jealous?"

Jealous, maybe not, but he did feel a touch of discomfort. Seeing a ripe peach being picked by an old monkey, if he felt no frustration, could he even be considered a man?

It seemed that An Biru had seen through his thoughts. A blush crossed her face, a teasing twinkle in her eyes as she chuckled, "Oh, you are indeed jealous. Little Brother, rest assured, while Prince Cheng does covet me, I, An Biru, have roamed for many years and met more men than the number of hairs on your body. How could I let someone take advantage of me so easily? Moreover, the men in this world are mostly fickle and ungrateful. Which of them could be worthy of being my sweetheart?"

Her face was filled with pride; she didn't seem to regard any man in the world. That said, given her beauty, intellect, and demeanor, there were indeed very few men in the world who were worthy of her.

Lin Wanrong chuckled. While there were cases of a jaybird matched with a wolf in this world, there were also plenty of cases of fine flowers wedded to cow dung. With such a high opinion of herself, it was natural she hadn't found a suitable suitor.

"Little Brother, after you crossed paths with Prince Cheng in the peach garden today, discerning people naturally took note. Moreover, you took the credit for annihilating the White Lotus Sect—" An Biru shot a glance at Lin Wanrong, her eyes revealing a trace of resentment, "You are talented and fearless of the powerful, which will certainly make people like Xu Wei value you even more. Your opportunity is about to arrive. The closer you get to the court, the closer you get to my senior sister. My public appearance in front of Prince Cheng will only make her more alert. And you, not only are you Prince Cheng's arch-nemesis, but also a candidate highly recommended by Xu Wei—little rascal, do you understand now?"

So, this vixen had calculated long ago that he would cooperate with her and arranged everything so perfectly. Lin Wanrong laughed, "As you say, but don't forget, the fairy is still wounded by my hand, how could I make peace with her? I'm afraid this plot won't work."

An Biru giggled, her full chest and perky rear subtly trembling. Her curvaceous figure drew an enticing line that made one's heart pound and eyes dazzle.

"Little Brother, you don't know much about these so-called righteous people. My senior sister is regarded as a fairy from heaven, worshiped by thousands, admired by tens of thousands, always advocating for the welfare of the common people and justice in the world. How could she disregard

the greater good she has devoted her life to over a petty personal grudge? Wouldn't that make her a laughingstock, tarnishing her reputation? She would never do such a face-losing thing. Even if she's utterly unwilling, as long as you prove your worth, she will have to stand by your side. For the so-called justice and credibility, she'd rather sacrifice others' happiness to maintain her dignity. Compared to this, what do your trivial issues count for?"

"That's true," Lin Wanrong mused, considering An Biru's cunning and free-spirited demeanor. He could imagine what kind of person Fairy Ning, her complete opposite, would be. He was slightly convinced and replied with a laugh, "Let's hope things go as you predict."

"Not only that," An Biru flashed a mischievous smile, "Prince Cheng is already plotting to kill you, and he has personally asked me to handle it. Think about it - what would my Senior Sister do when she finds out that I am openly committing atrocities and killing innocents? Given her 'boundless compassion', what do you think she would do?" Her light veil fluttered, revealing her alluring figure.

"Sister, you look great in this dress. Do you have anything with even less fabric?" Lin Wanrong replied with a smirk. Seeing An Biru slightly smile and a silver glint appearing in her hand, he quickly turned serious, "If Fairy Ning knows you are doing wrong, she will naturally try to stop you. Wait a moment, does this mean she has to protect me even though I injured her?"

"Basically, that's the case. But of course, it depends on your skills," An Biru smiled faintly.

Upon connecting the dots, he realized that An Biru had already planned to publicly appear with Prince Cheng. The cunning of this vixen was not to be underestimated.

"Although I have arranged everything, the charm of my Senior Sister is well-known. Who among men can resist her words, her frowns and smiles? I am still worried that you might betray us. Hence," she paused, a blush coloring her cheeks, her eyes sparkling. She gently licked her lips, an enchanting smile playing on her face, "Now you understand why I dressed this way today, right? You are quite lucky, you naughty boy."

"So, you dressed this way to test me because you're afraid I'll fall for Fairy Ning's beauty trap? If I knew, I would have been bolder, even bolder. How did I do in your test, Sister?" Lin Wanrong said, laughing.

An Biru chuckled, "You did alright. You should know, though, that I haven't even used all my skills yet. Even if I had, they would only be external temptations. My Senior Sister, on the other hand,

possesses the real internal allure. Without uttering a word, a smile or frown from her can captivate a man's soul. When that happens and she takes advantage of you, don't say I didn't warn you."

While talking, An Biru lightly stepped to the side of the pool and fetched a clean robe. She draped it over her body, concealing her snow-white skin, yet her enticing figure was still evident. She exuded a different kind of allure.

'Damn it, this vixen. I wonder if she has other sisters. It would be wonderful if she dressed like this every day to test me.' With these thoughts, he sighed inwardly, his eyes gleaming with desire.

An Biru tied up her hair, fixed her hairpin and laughed, "That's it for today. It's getting late, and I should leave. If you return home any later, the big beast Xiao in your house will stir."

"The big beast Xiao?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback, then laughed, "Sister, are you leaving already? Sigh, I was hoping to play with you in this spring-filled pool. Why are you leaving so soon?"

"A fellow with a thief's mind but lacking a thief's guts." An Biru softly stated, defining his character. She stood by the large stone, a slight smile gracing her lips. "I won't linger with you any longer. If I stay any longer, I fear I won't be able to leave. So, little brother, wait for me to 'assassinate' you—" With a light tap of her foot, she gracefully took off like a honking goose in flight. Her long skirt swaying lightly, her hair fluttering, she descended and soon disappeared from sight. An Biru had left with such determination, showing no hint of regret. Standing on the cliff, Lin Wanrong stared at the setting sun, a strange feeling welled up in his heart. His relationship with Qingxuan had drawn him into the issues involving An Biru and Fairy Ning, now it was tying him with Prince Cheng and the royal court, which was far from his original plans. Romantic relations had stirred up factional disputes and state affairs, this path was indeed hard to navigate.

When he returned home, the big beast Xiao wasn't there. After inquiring with Madam Song, he learned that Miss Xu had invited the Eldest Miss over for a chat, and they were going to stay at the Xu's residence for the night. This was the first time the Eldest Miss had not returned home for the night since he had known her. Facing the quiet and empty courtyard, he felt a bit lonely. He was used to the Eldest Miss's nagging presence, and he felt somewhat uncomfortable without her around. Recalling the nickname the big beast Xiao, that An Biru had given the Eldest Miss, he felt both amused and warm. Having a strong-willed wife might not be a misfortune after all.

Without the Eldest Miss, he woke up rather early the next day. Sister Song was secretly surprised to see him voluntarily helping in the shop; it seemed that with the Eldest Miss gone, this Lin San had become conscientious. After he had busied himself for a while, he began to wonder when An Biru would come to play the assassination game. Suddenly, he heard a burst of laughter outside. "Young Master Lin, Young Master Lin—"

Rushing out the door, Lin Wanrong saw Hu Bugui, along with Du Xiuyuan, Li Sheng, and even Li Tai's legitimate grandson Li Wuling. They had all come for a visit on horseback. Xu Zhen held the reins of an extra horse, but it was unclear for whom it was intended.

Lin Wanrong greeted them with a smile. "Brother Hu, Brother Du, how did you find time to come here? Please, come inside and sit down. Huan'er, bring tea—go to the Eldest Miss's room and bring last year's new tea. These gentlemen are my sworn brothers; we can't neglect them."

The visitors dismounted. Li Wuling saw Lin Wanrong commanding the scene, hardly acting like a servant. His eyes twinkled, and he chuckled, "Lin San, you're living such a comfortable life at the Xiao residence, even freely entering the Eldest Miss's boudoir. No wonder you didn't want to go to war."

Du Xiuyuan and the others burst into crude laughter. Lin Wanrong chuckled, thinking that he truly didn't consider himself an outsider. When he eventually married both Miss Xiao into his family, the Xiao estate would become the dowry of the Xiao sisters, and the Xiao family would have to change their surname to Lin.

Hu Bugui, a lewd smile on his face, grabbed Lin Wanrong's hand. "General Lin, there's no time for tea. Hurry, follow me—" He barely finished speaking before he pulled Lin Wanrong and started heading out.

Startled, Lin Wanrong asked, "Brother Hu, what is this all about?"

Du Xiuyuan followed, a mysterious smile on his face. "You'll find out soon enough."

Several of them teamed up, nudging him onto the spare horse. Lin Wanrong chuckled, realizing that these rascals had planned to seek him out all along.

Seeing him mount the fine horse, Li Wuling issued a loud command. The small white steed beneath him dashed forward, stirring a cloud of dust as bystanders on both sides of the street swiftly dodged.

"Typical bullies!" Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and spurred his horse to catch up, the rest following closely behind him.

They galloped out of the city gate, traveling over ten miles when they began to hear the clashing of swords in the distance. Lin Wanrong strained his neck to see what was ahead, only to find dust billowing and the shouts of battle echoing. He had no idea what was transpiring.

After another few miles, the sounds of combat grew louder and more intense. Li Wuling's face was lit with excitement, he urged his horse faster, vanishing in a rush.

"General Lin, look!" Hu Bugui, who had been following behind Lin Wanrong, pushed his horse forward to ride alongside him and pointed towards the scene ahead, smiling.

Following his direction, Lin Wanrong saw a vast battlefield extending beyond his sight. On the battlefield, dust swirled around countless soldiers wielding various weapons. They were divided into different formations according to their roles, engaging in intense combat.

Nearest to them were the infantry, directed by a commander waving a small flag, instructing the soldiers to form different formations according to his flag signals, ranging from long spear lines to circular defense. The dust kicked up by tens of thousands of swiftly moving soldiers colored half of the sky yellow. These soldiers, strong and agile, bore an aggressive look on their faces; their practiced maneuvers clearly showing them to be well-trained and formidable. The formations became increasingly complex, and eventually evolved into segmented encirclement and annihilation tactics that made Lin Wanrong's eyes dizzy.

Further away were the cavalry units, with tens of thousands of warhorses neighing in unison. The thunderous clapping of hooves struck the ground like deep spring thunder, shaking the earth and deafening the ears. They were divided into groups of a thousand, practicing mounted combat against wooden figures tied to the ground. They used various weapons to target the vitals of these straw figures.

Farthest away was a mix of infantry and cavalry units, roughly tens of thousands strong. The infantry soldiers were in the front, carrying ladders and fire arrows, charging towards the mock city walls erected on the field - they were practicing siege warfare.

In the center of the attacking force was a raised platform on which a young, armored general stood, commanding with fervor and confidence. Due to the dust-filled battlefield, Lin Wanrong could not

make out his face. The attacking soldiers, screaming war cries, set up the ladders, rushing to climb them and storm the city walls. On top of the walls, a few silhouettes stood, watching the live-action drills with great interest.

"General Lin, what do you think?" Du Xiuyuan's face was flush with excitement as he spoke loudly.

Lin Wanrong smiled slightly. "Brother Du, is this the legendary battlefield drill? It's indeed majestic and awe-inspiring."

Du Xiuyuan nodded, "Indeed, it's the military exercises on the sand field. I've been in the army for many years, yet I've never seen an exercise of such a large scale. These are the elite troops of our Great Hua, who will be our main force in resisting the northern nomads in the future. With such momentum, if Great Hua doesn't win, there would be no justice in the world."

Du Xiuyuan's words had Li Sheng and Xu Zhen nodding continuously. To see Du Xiuyuan, usually so calm, this excited, the exercise of these tens of thousands of troops was indeed impactful.

Lin Wanrong remained silent. Although he had never fought the northern nomads, from the novels and TV shows he had watched in his past life, the northern nomads were not easy to deal with. Exercises weren't real battles. No matter how great the momentum or how many tricks were shown now, they were just fancy moves, nice to look at but not necessarily practical. The battlefield was ever-changing, and a moment's shift could decide the victory or defeat of a battle. If such a large-scale exercise could predict the outcome of a war, then what was the point of fighting?

Hu Bugui, upon witnessing this spectacular scene, wore a smile on his face, but he was not as excited as Du Xiuyuan. He had fought against the northern nomads in the north, experienced their ferocity and cruelty, and due to the involvement in the White Lotus sect issue, he returned to Shandong to lead the troops, naturally having the most authority to speak.

Lin Wanrong laughed and glanced at him, "Brother Hu, what do you think of this exercise?"

Hu Bugui nodded, "The soldiers are strong and the horses are healthy. They can fight against the northern nomads."

Lin Wanrong gave a faint smile. Old Hu's words were quite diplomatic, probably to avoid disheartening these soldiers. With such a grand scene, they barely had the capacity to fight against the northern nomads, indicating the formidable combat power of the northern nomads.

Xu Zhen, being young and barely twenty, felt somewhat disheartened and unconvinced, "General Hu, are the northern nomads as strong as you say? These are our Great Hua's elite troops, and they can only 'fight' against the northern nomads?"

Although Hu Bugui was usually careless, he paid extreme attention to the morale of his men. Seeing Xu Zhen's dissatisfied expression, he sighed deeply, patted his shoulder, and said, "Little Xu, I had the same thoughts as you before I encountered the northern nomads. But facts speak louder than words, and currently, our Great Hua soldiers are indeed slightly inferior compared to the northern nomads."

Du Xiuyuan and others were also veterans, but they had never encountered the northern nomads. Although they had heard of the brutality and ferocity of the northern nomads, seeing the worry on the usually fearless Hu Bugui's face made them somewhat uneasy.

Lin Wanrong carefully observed their expressions, smiling slightly, "Brother Hu is right. The northern nomads are nomads, their lives depend on horses, their physiques are sturdy, and they have no fixed abode. Long-term migration not only hones their horsemanship but also enhances their sense of crisis, which is why they are formidable and fearless. Our Great Hua soldiers have been complacent for years, it's natural to suffer occasional defeats at the beginning of the war. As the saying goes, 'born from worry, die from comfort', as the war unfolds, our Great Hua soldiers will learn from their humiliation, gradually hone themselves, become increasingly tough, and in a few days, they will be able to ride horses, shoot arrows, and kill the northern nomads just like them. Think about it, our Great Hua has stood for a thousand years, and we have encountered humiliation more than a hundred times. Have we ever been afraid of anyone? Brothers, don't underestimate yourselves."

General Lin was usually quite jovial, but when it came to serious matters, his words were always reasoned and convincing. Hu Bugui secretly gave him a thumbs-up. The same words, if uttered from Old Hu's mouth, would have shaken the morale of the troops, but from General Lin, they inspired everyone.

All of them were soldiers who had fought under General Lin's command. They knew his capabilities well and regained some of their confidence after hearing him speak, revealing faint smiles on their faces.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Brother Hu, Brother Du, did you come to me today just to watch this military exercise?"

Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan looked at each other, nodding simultaneously, and cast their hopeful eyes on Lin Wanrong.

From their expressions, Lin Wanrong easily guessed their intentions. He smiled slightly, "Let's not discuss other things for now. The three of you and Xu Zhen, you are all heads of thousands and tens of thousands under General Li Tai's command. Why didn't you participate in this military drill?"

Hu Bugui replied, "General Lin, you might not know that before our army officially set off, we had training sessions daily on the drill field. Today is the first military drill of the spring. The Emperor and all the Princes and Ministers have come to watch. Originally, we were all supposed to participate, but the Emperor sent someone to assist General Li Tai some days ago. Today's drill was held to test the abilities of this assistant. The selection of the soldiers and horses was all done by him, and Old General Li didn't interfere. The result—" Hu Bugui's face turned slightly embarrassed, hesitating to continue.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "So, you weren't chosen?"

A blush spread across Hu Bugui's face. He knelt down on one knee and thumped his chest in salute, Du Xiuyuan and the others also followed suit, kneeling and shouting together, "We were foolish and brought disgrace to you, General. Please punish us."

Lin Wanrong was surprised and hurriedly helped them up, "Brothers, please get up. What are you doing?"

After they stood up, Hu Bugui sighed, "General Lin, you've been away from the army for a few days and might not be aware. A few days ago, when the assisting general was selecting officers for the drill, he gathered us, the commanders of thousands and tens of thousands, and held an examination."

"An examination?" Lin Wanrong was surprised, "There are exams in the army? This is the first time I've heard of it."

Hu Bugui replied frustratedly, "Isn't it? I, Old Hu, have held a blade all my life, how could I possibly handle a brush? As a result, after the examination, among us brothers, only Brother Du passed. But when Brother Du saw that we were disqualified, he got angry and confronted the assisting general. And guess what, he was also disqualified." As he said this, he looked gratefully at Du Xiuyuan. Although they usually squabbled when they met, they were men of honor and camaraderie when it mattered.

"What the hell is this nonsense?" Lin Wanrong was also furious. "The skills of my generals were forged in battle, what the hell does that have to do with examinations?" He knew better than anyone the capabilities of his subordinates, all of which were earned through real blood and sweat, none of them were fake.

He let out a heavy humph, "Xu Zhen, tell me, what kind of examination was it? Whose damn idea was this?"

Xu Zhen hastily bowed, "In response to the general, it was an examination on military strategies."

Military strategies? Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Damn, who the hell would understand this stuff? If he were asked to take such an examination, he would surely fail. Moreover, the battlefield situation changes in the blink of an eye, no matter how strong one's knowledge of military strategies, it wouldn't compare to the rapid changes in the actual battle.

Du Xiuyuan gave a bitter smile, "This examination was based strictly on the textbook. Brother Hu and the others come from a background of leading troops and answered based on their own experiences, which greatly deviated from the content of the military strategy books, and so they were deemed unqualified."

'That's bullshit!' Lin Wanrong snorted, "Where did this assisting general come from? Exam, exam, exam, even brought the exam into the barracks. Did he pass the imperial examination to get his position?"