

## Finest 451

### Chapter 451 The New General

Removed from the tent? Whom was Miss Xu referring to? Lin Wanrong looked around and noticed that everyone's gaze had settled on him. Their eyes held various emotions: some sympathetic, others taking pleasure in his misfortune. A young general in his thirties looked at him, wearing a faint smile but saying nothing.

"Uh, Miss Xu, you're not talking about me, are you?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, acting as though it didn't concern him.

Xu Zhiqing lowered her eyelids, speaking softly, "Commander, everyone in this tent is a trusted leader of our army fighting against the nomads. All are reliable except for this newcomer. He doesn't wear a waist knife, nor does he don armor. He has neither an official role nor a symbolic one in our army. Since we are discussing crucial strategies against the enemy, for the sake of secrecy, it's best to ask irrelevant people to leave."

Miss Xu's words left Lin Wanrong speechless. At the moment, he was merely in a ceremonial position granted by the court. Although he had some prestige within the army, he had no official title. Saying he was irrelevant was indeed accurate.

General Li Tai laughed heartily, "I understand what Zhi'er means. But how can we ignore a talent like Lin San? I've already petitioned the Emperor to appoint him as the vanguard of the right-wing of our army, commanding infantry, cavalry, and artillery battalions—a total of over sixty thousand men. Does anyone have objections?"

The words of Li Tai caught everyone in the tent by surprise. Lin San had indeed won victories in Shandong, but could his battle against the White Lotus sect be compared to fighting the fierce and cunning nomads? Lin San may have been adept at quelling rebels, but he had no experience in dealing with the nomads. Was it appropriate to grant him the position of the right-wing vanguard so quickly?

"Commander, I think this matter needs further discussion," the young general hesitated before speaking, "Although Lord Lin has a reputation and has distinguished himself in Shandong, the Turks are not the White Lotus sect. Their brutality and cunning are incomparable. The right-wing is the sharp blade of our army; it must be capable of advancing and defending. One has to thoroughly understand the nomads' tactics. In this regard, Lord Lin lacks experience. I suggest appointing him

as the deputy adviser general of the right-wing vanguard first. Promotions can come later, based on his battlefield achievements."

The young general had a point. While Lin San's efforts in defeating the White Lotus might seem like great achievements to outsiders, to these border commanders who had long battled against the nomads, it was trivial.

Lin Wanrong felt like spitting blood. Last time in Shandong, Xu Wei had offered him an adviser general role, and now, this gentleman wanted to add 'deputy' to it. 'Adviser without rank produces no sound even when farting,' he thought. Whether he served as the right-wing vanguard mattered little, but they shouldn't think he was here to be a freeloader. Fortunately, he was easygoing by nature, used to people's cold shoulders. He chuckled twice and didn't take it to heart.

Most generals in the tent agreed with the young general's opinion. Li Tai looked at a red-faced stout man on his left, "Zuo Qiu, you're the commander of the left-wing army. What do you think?"

Zuo Qiu was a burly man in his forties, seasoned and mature. Upon hearing Li Tai call out his name, he firmly clenched his fist in a salute and said, "I've followed the General for many years, and his judgement has never been wrong. Brother Lin must truly possess extraordinary abilities for the General to hold him in such high regard. However, what Brother Zongcai says also has merit. Brother Lin is young and has been appointed as the Commander of the right-wing vanguard. If he doesn't demonstrate some real talent, not only will it make it difficult for the brothers and the General, but Brother Lin himself may also feel uneasy, affecting his ability to lead effectively in battle. In the army, words are of little use; what counts is true ability. I'm a straightforward man from Lu, so pardon my bluntness." He saluted Lin Wanrong with a genuinely cheerful expression.

Zuo Qiu was indeed straightforward, and Lin Wanrong, who was adept at scheming, found this trait likable. He grasped Zuo Qiu's hand and burst into laughter, "What are you talking about, Brother Zuo? There's nothing to forgive. Since I'm standing here, my life is in the hands of everyone present. If straightforward words like yours can choke me up, then I might as well drown myself."

Lin Wanrong was certainly cunning, a man who changed his tune depending on the situation. Xu Zhiqing's beautiful face flushed as she muttered a curse under her breath.

The crowd broke into hearty laughter. Although Lin Wanrong's words were crude, they resonated with the sensibilities of the military leaders. In the oppressive atmosphere of the army, such coarse language acted as a welcome seasoning. Observing that the new General Lin was so congenial, they began to warm to him, feeling a sense of closeness.

Li Tai chuckled and turned to Xu Zhiqing, "Zhi'er, you are the chief strategist for my army of hundreds of thousands. What's your opinion on this new Commander of the right-wing vanguard?"

Miss Xu slightly raised her eyebrows and glanced at Lin Wanrong. "This newcomer indeed lacks experience in fighting against the nomads, but I've heard he's quite clever in small ways. With the army's imminent departure and the vanguard position for the right-wing still unconfirmed, where else can we find such a candidate? We might as well make do with him—"

"General, Miss Xu," General Zongcai interrupted Xu Zhiqing, suddenly straightening his posture and saluting, "I, Zongcai, boldly volunteer to lead the right-wing vanguard army and fight the enemy. I request the General and Miss Xu to grant this."

Xu Zhiqing gave a soft 'Oh' and glanced at Lin San, choosing to remain silent.

So that was it. Lin Wanrong finally understood. This General named Yu Zongcai had grand ambitions and aimed to replace Lin San as the Commander of the right-wing vanguard. Zongcai was young but had a commanding presence; however, Lin Wanrong wondered about his actual abilities. 'I hope he's not all show and no substance,' Lin Wanrong thought, smiling wryly. At the moment, while his appointment was under discussion, he felt the most relaxed because his expectations weren't high to begin with.

Li Tai, a lifelong warrior, clearly understood the reluctance people had towards Lin San. Although he could use his authority to force the appointment, that would be unfair to both the men and Lin San.

"Zongcai, you come from a family of generals and currently serve as the Deputy Commander of the right-wing army. You are outstanding both in martial skills and military strategy. I did indeed consider you for the position of the right-wing vanguard," Li Tai nodded and smiled. He then turned to Lin Wanrong, "As for Lin San, he's skilled in leading troops, commands the loyalty of his soldiers, and is extraordinarily cunning. Both of you have your merits, and it puts me in a difficult position."

He pondered for a moment, then smiled at Xu Zhiqing. "In that case, Zhi'er, why don't you come up with a question to test these two? Let everyone here judge who answers best, and let him be the vanguard of the right-wing."

The method seemed fair, a competition based on merit, judged by all. The generals nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps we should skip it," Lin Wanrong humbly chuckled. "Military leadership isn't really my forte, and I've never aspired to be the vanguard of the right-wing. Back when I was in Shandong, I led supply troops. Coming up north this time, give me a few squad leaders, and I would be content."

The crowd burst into laughter. But a few perceptive individuals caught a different undertone. Lin San had fought against the White Lotus Sect using vulnerable, old, and infirm soldiers responsible for guarding supplies, a triumph far from ordinary. What seemed like a casual remark was a wake-up call to the crowd. Zuo Qiu looked at him appreciatively.

"What are you declining for? If you don't have confidence in yourself, how can others entrust their lives to you?" Xu Zhiqing huffed softly, though it was unclear whom the comment was for. Li Tai shot her a tigerish glance, and she lowered her head, her face flushing.

"Zhi'er, have you thought of a way to test them?" Li Tai inquired with a smile.

Miss Xu pondered briefly before slowly nodding. "I wouldn't call it a test. I've had some questions about battlefield exercises these past few days and wish to discuss them with the generals here. Marshal Li, Elder Brother Yu, and all other elders, as well as the new general, please come with me."

"The new general?" "What kind of title is that?" Lin Wanrong couldn't help but smile wryly. "This Miss Xu is intentionally making things difficult for me."

Seeing him trailing sullenly behind the crowd, Li Tai lagged a few steps and patted his shoulder. "Lin San, what's going on with Zhi'er? Weren't you two getting along well when you went to Shandong?"

"Old General, be careful with your words. I am a married man," Lin Wanrong said with a sly smile.

Infuriated, Li Tai slapped him on the head. "What nonsense! Whether you're married or not has nothing to do with Zhi'er. Let me remind you, she's my own daughter. If you dare bully her, I'll dismantle you in the military camp."

The old general looked dignified and intimidating, his face etched with the ravages of time, but he radiated an indomitable spirit. Lin Wanrong genuinely respected him. The slaps made him feel

oddy close to the man. "Old General, there's something I want to discuss with you about Li Wuling —"

"That young man roped you into speaking for him?" Li Tai chuckled, yet his eyes glimmered with hope and pride.

"Not to speak on his behalf," Lin Wanrong answered seriously. "I'm just wondering, what kind of Li Wuling do we all hope to see—a Duke of Peace, or a legendary general for the ages? Old General, have you ever considered it?"

Li Tai's eyes flickered; the question seemed to pierce his soul. He paused before letting out a bitter laugh. "That boy sure knows how to pick a negotiator. You're truly unparalleled in that aspect. If you can convince Zhi'er, let him go; I can't control him anymore."

Li Tai took a few more steps, then abruptly halted, his expression suddenly turning old and worn. "Lin San, you must train him well—even if he dies in battle, he cannot disgrace the Li family name."

Li Tai's silhouette gradually receded into the distance, leaving Lin Wanrong in a daze. It suddenly dawned on him that he had taken on a hot potato. If nothing went wrong with young Li, it would be fine; but if something did, given Li Tai's generations-long reputation for loyalty and virtue, he, Lin Wanrong, would be universally condemned, his lifetime's reputation ruined in an instant. "Damn it, I've been had by this brat," he cursed under his breath.

Catching up to Xu Zhiqing and the others, he found that the generals had already halted, standing atop a makeshift tower, gazing downward. Far off, plumes of dust rolled in the wind, and the battle between infantry and cavalry was fiercely intense. Leading the cavalry was none other than Xu Zhen, commanding roughly five thousand men. Their horse hooves thundered, and their momentum was immense.

The infantry on defense comprised several units. Although they had initially adopted similarly orderly formations, they were thrown into disarray when Xu Zhen's cavalry charged. Only one unit maintained its formation and engaged Xu Zhen's cavalry in intense combat. Everyone could see clearly that this lone steadfast unit was led by Du Xiuyuan. Both Xu Zhen and Du Xiuyuan were trained by Lin Wanrong, leaving everyone astounded.

"Ladies and gentlemen, observe," sighed Xu Zhiqing. "I've drilled this infantry formation countless times. Every soldier has committed it to heart and trained rigorously. Yet the real-world efficacy leaves much to be desired."

Yu Zongcai scrutinized the scene for a long while before cautiously speaking, "Miss Xu, our brothers are well-versed in these battle formations. Their positioning and steps are impeccable. However, when they try to change formations and move, they seem to lose coordination, giving the enemy cavalry an opportunity."

"You are absolutely correct, Elder Brother Yu," Xu Zhiqing nodded approvingly. Yu Zongcai's face lit up with joy, and he stole a quick glance at Xu Zhiqing before pretending to look away casually.

"And what about you, the new general? What's your opinion?" Xu Zhiqing broke the silence and addressed Lin San in an indifferent tone. Everyone knew that the real test had begun.

Lin Wanrong knew next to nothing about infantry formation changes; he had been watching for quite some time but could only discern one issue. He suddenly chuckled, "Miss Xu, we have a field full of infantry and cavalry. Why are we not practicing siege warfare with ladders?"

Upon hearing this, everyone was stunned, even Li Tai was left speechless. How ignorant could this Lin San be? Fighting against the nomads involved endless plains and deserts; where were the cities to attack? Training infantry and cavalry was specific to combating the Turkic people; what was the point of practicing siege warfare?

Frustrated and annoyed, Xu Zhiqing wished she could kick Lin San off the ramparts. She hesitated, ultimately refraining from doing so.

With Xu Zhiqing glaring at him, Yu Zongcai gleefully said, "General Lin probably has never been to the frontier. Beyond the Great Wall lies an endless expanse of deserts and plains. The Turks are nomadic, born on horseback. Where are the cities for us to attack?"

"So, we're not going to practice siege warfare just because there are no cities to take?" Lin Wanrong laughed. "Miss Xu, don't you think something is missing from your formation?"

Lin Wanrong was generally truthful when it came to serious matters, which made Xu Zhiqing take pause. "What's missing?" she asked.

"You've practiced formations with hundreds and thousands of men, but you're missing something crucial—coordination and trust," Lin Wanrong said with a slight smile. "General Li, please summon Du Xiuyuan and bring twenty more men."

"Coordination and trust?" The words were simple enough, and the generals pondered. Lin Wanrong's earlier mention of siege practice suddenly seemed to make sense.

"Reporting to the General, reporting to Lin Wanrong," Du Xiuyuan arrived, his face covered in dust but his expression thrilled. A dozen men, all veterans from Shandong under Lin Wanrong, trailed behind him.

"Old Du, have you guys been practicing the team-building training I taught you?" Lin Wanrong inquired with a smile.

"Of course," Du Xiuyuan hurriedly nodded, "the brothers love your team-building exercises the most during practice."

"Good," Lin Wanrong grinned. "Then set up a cloud ladder and let our brothers see."

Cloud ladder? Team-building? Everyone was confused. Du Xiuyuan had come empty-handed; where would a cloud ladder come from?

"At once!" Du Xiuyuan promptly commanded. "Set up the ladder!"

Quicker than words, a dozen men ran to the base of the tower. Two men formed each unit, hands clasped together as they crouched. Another sprinted and stepped onto their wrists. Two units closed in, one on top of the other, creating a human pyramid. At a fierce shout, the men raised their arms, and the man at the apex seemed to soar, almost reaching the makeshift wall.

So this was the cloud ladder. Astonishment filled the faces of the generals. Such coordination, like building a tower where each man willingly became a brick, would surely lead to success in formation exercises.

Xu Zhiqing glanced at Lin Wanrong, who remained impassive, neither speaking nor smiling, as if this were a common occurrence.

Du Xiuyuan nodded, then shouted, "Prepare to fall!"

An astonishing sight unfolded. The soldier at the top of the pyramid fell backward without hesitation, soaring through the air. Before anyone could shout in alarm, eight men from the rear rushed up and extended their arms to form a bridge, catching their plummeting comrade. The next layer followed suit, and they rotated, each trusting their lives to their companions.

"Excellent team-building, excellent cloud ladder!" The generals were speechless. To place one's life in the hands of a comrade was the highest level of trust. How Lin Wanrong had conceived such an idea was beyond them, but it was brilliant.

"Brother Lin, that was impressive!" Zuo Qiu slapped Lin Wanrong's shoulder, his eyes filled with admiration.

"It's nothing, just a little trick," Lin Wanrong chuckled. His serious demeanor from moments ago vanished in the blink of an eye.

"Always the show-off," Miss Xu huffed, turning her head away. Her pretty face flushed, her eyelids drooping, and her eyes emanating an inexplicable warmth.

## Chapter 452 So, You Like Lin San

Li Tai nodded slightly, glanced at his generals, and chuckled, "Zhiqing's question can serve as a test for all of us. Any opinions? Let it be known that the appointment for the vanguard of the right-wing will be decided by collective judgment."

The people present were all seasoned war veterans. The performances of Lin San and Yu Zongcai had already made it clear who excelled. Setting aside other matters, Lin San's innovative training methods alone constituted a significant breakthrough. Thinking back on his military achievements in Shandong, the disdain that many initially held for him began to dissolve. At the very least, he was no fool.

"Commander," Zuo Qiu, who held Li Tai's utmost trust, began, stepping forward with a fist salute and a hearty laugh. "Both Yu Zongcai and Lin San have shown keen insights into the training issues raised by Adviser Xu. Yet Lin San went a step further, diagnosing the issue and offering a solution. I believe he deserves extra credit. With your permission, I'd like to adopt this expanded training method in my left-wing army. This would not only enhance trust and coordination among our soldiers but also consolidate our forces effectively in battle."



Zuo Qiu was the vanguard for the left wing and was one of the few influential figures in Li Tai's army. His words, therefore, reflected the majority's opinion. Yu Zongcai, a bit disappointed by the endorsement of Lin San, shifted his hopeful gaze to Xu Zhiqing.

Miss Xu nodded, "Brother Zuo is quite right. This new training method is groundbreaking and highly targeted. I think it would be beneficial to implement it throughout the army. Given this, it's only reasonable that Lin San should get the position. But Brother Yu, don't be discouraged. You're also incredibly insightful and capable, certainly worthy of great responsibilities."

Yu Zongcai's face initially displayed disappointment, but upon hearing Miss Xu's praise, he was overjoyed. Quickly, he thanked Xu Zhiqing, "I'm grateful for your guidance, Miss Xu. I'll strive to serve the Empire valiantly and live up to the high expectations you and the Marshal have set for me."

"Lin San, what are your thoughts on the suggestions made by Zhiqing and Zuo Qiu? Can this training method be implemented across the army?" Li Tai stroked his beard and smiled, pleased with the harmonious discussions among his subordinates. However, when his eyes met Lin San's, he noticed a furrowed brow as if something weighed on his mind.

"The expanded training method can indeed be implemented," Lin Wanrong nodded, his expression serious. "But both Brother Zuo and Miss Xu mustn't put the cart before the horse. The army should primarily focus on formations and tactics. This expanded training should only be a supplementary approach, incorporated within those primary tasks. It shouldn't take precedence."

This young man knows how to handle favor without becoming arrogant, Li Tai thought, nodding approvingly. The room's atmosphere was imbued with a newfound respect for him.

Lin Wanrong was generous with his knowledge, laying out the training methods he was familiar with. Many of its novel features left the room agog.

While training troops in Shandong, Lin Wanrong had always stood apart from the rest. He didn't put on airs but engaged with his men like brothers, joking and laughing with them. Yet when it came to battle, he never showed cowardice. He was also extremely protective of his subordinates. His famed outburst at the banks of Weishan Lake had already made him a legend among the troops. Soldiers respected him wholeheartedly and enjoyed being around him—willing even to lay down their lives for him.

Lin Wanrong was aware of his limitations. He had no expertise in conventional military strategies, so he entrusted those responsibilities to Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan, focusing only on general coordination and directional guidance.

His candid sharing of his experiences, even highlighting his shortcomings, won him nods of approval from the assembled generals. Zuo Qiu grinned, grabbing Lin Wanrong's arm, "I like your character, straightforward like mine. I'd trust you with my life on the battlefield."

Lin Wanrong was moved, "Brother Zuo, you really understand me. People see my deceptive exterior but not my sincere heart."

Xu Zhiqing chuckled quietly at Lin San's 'straightforwardness,' fully aware of his character. This was his strategic manipulation of emotions to compensate for his lack of initial prestige.

Li Tai patted him on the shoulder, "Understanding the bigger picture and using men wisely is more critical for a commander than knowing specific strategies. Your ability to choose competent officers like Hu Bugui, Du Xiuyuan, and others and make them willingly serve you is commendable. You shall command the right flank, as most of your troops are your old subordinates from Shandong. Lin San, your orders—"

Lin Wanrong quickly bowed, "I obey."

Li Tai's voice boomed, "Starting this moment, you will be the vanguard of our right flank against the Turkic troops. Prepare provisions and supervise the training. In six days, we move."

Six days? Lin Wanrong was startled. He was worried about how his news would affect Eldest Miss and others at home. Would they cry?

Xu Zhiqing nudged him abruptly. Realizing his lapse, Lin Wanrong quickly responded, "I obey."

The army's decisions were irreversible, and Lin Wanrong received congratulations from all, even the slightly resentful Yu Zongcai.

After the generals dispersed, Li Tai, scrutinizing Lin Wanrong from top to bottom, asked, "Now that you're my right flank's vanguard, have you sorted things out at home?"

Lin Wanrong hesitated, "I'll need a few more days." He was calculating how to break the news to his loved ones. Going to war was no joke, and he could only imagine the emotional toll it would take on them.

Li Tai showed no surprise, nodding, "By His Majesty's grace, you are permitted to remain outside the camp for a few days. There are matters he wishes for you to attend to. The troops on the right flank are mostly your old subordinates from Shandong. This saves us the trouble of introductions. Use the journey north to integrate well with them. For now, take care of the tasks assigned by His Majesty."

Serving His Majesty? How audacious of him to say so when he still has Eldest Miss in his custody! Lin Wanrong snorted, his face full of disdain.

When he left Li Tai's tent, night had already fallen. The thought of heading north into the unknown territory, where life and death hang in the balance, weighed heavily on his mind. He looked up, his gaze settling on Thousand-Forsake Peak in the distance, enveloped by clouds and mist. What could the fairy be doing at this time? Did she know he was about to go to war?

He sighed silently, mounted his temporarily tethered horse, and galloped toward the city. After traveling a few miles, he came upon a carriage moving at a leisurely pace, its curtains drawn so that he couldn't see inside.

Just as he was about to pass, he heard a loud "woof" emanate from the carriage. It sounded like no ordinary dog—certainly something on the scale of the Second Miss' Mighty General.

'What kind of times are these? Everyone has a large dog.' Lin Wanrong, who had more than a few unclear tales involving dogs, felt the hairs on his body stand up at the sound. As he was about to spur his horse to flee, a soft female voice came from inside the carriage, "Lin San, don't bark."

'I didn't bark,' Lin Wanrong felt wronged and was about to retort when another bout of barking erupted from inside. The female voice spoke again, "If you bark again, I'll throw you off the carriage and make you walk."

Realizing who it was, Lin Wanrong reined his horse to a stop and turned to the carriage, smiling, "Is that Advisor Xu speaking?"

Silence filled the carriage, even the ferocious dog that had barked seemed to quiet down. Lin Wanrong chuckled darkly, "If you don't speak, I'll take it as a yes. Advisor Xu, you probably don't recognize me. I'm Lin San, a new recruit who just joined the camp today. Marshal Li has kindly appointed me as the vanguard of the right flank. I look forward to your guidance."

After waiting for a moment without a response, Lin Wanrong was about to leave when the curtain suddenly lifted. Xu Zhiqing's voice came out coldly, "So what if it's me? What do you intend to do by stopping my carriage at this dark hour?"

The evening had deepened, and Miss Xu looked icy, her eyelashes trembling slightly. She sat majestically inside the carriage, her gaze fixed on him, not uttering a word. Beside her crouched a menacing dog, its eyes glowing mysteriously, its red tongue sticking out.

Who stopped whose carriage? That's still up for debate. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "So it really was Advisor Xu speaking just now. No wonder it sounded so familiar. Ah, who is this beside you—"

"This is a fierce dog I'm raising," Xu Zhiqing spoke indifferently, "I'm currently teaching him to speak human language. It seems he disturbed General Lin just now."

"Teaching him to speak human language?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback, claspng his fists and bowing repeatedly. "Advisor Xu is indeed knowledgeable and creative, even capable of thinking of such an idea. Ah, this canine friend of yours is quite handsome—two eyes, a mouth, a nose, and four legs. No wonder Miss Xu is inseparable from him, even bringing him along in military campaigns."

Xu Zhiqing gave a cold laugh and patted the head of the dog beside her, whom she called "Lin San." "I keep him close to me to teach him the ways of humans, to know good from bad. So he doesn't end up like some—ungrateful and disloyal."

"Ah, well-trained," Lin Wanrong nodded solemnly. "You must be very fond of this dog to put in so much effort."

Xu Zhiqing's face turned slightly red with irritation. She clenched her teeth and hummed, "So what if I like him? At least a dog can understand human speech and is loyal. Better than some people whose hearts are worse than a dog's and have skin thicker than a wall!"

Clearly, the young lady harbored deep resentment. Lin Wanrong didn't mind her indirect insults and chuckled, "You have a point, Miss Xu. Your affection for this canine friend is justified. By the way, what's his name?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong's sneaky grin and smug demeanor, Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but become even more agitated. "His name is identical to yours, Lin San!"

"Lin San? What a good name!" Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up, a mysterious smile flitting across his eyes. He nodded as if realizing something significant, "I understand now, I finally understand."

"Understand what?" For some reason, his smile angered her even more. Especially when she thought about how he might be flirting with other women in the same manner.

"What I understand is a very important matter," Lin Wanrong chuckled, "that the one you like is Lin San."

"You, you, you shameless!" Xu Zhiqing was both shocked and embarrassed. Her eyes began to well up with tears. Her face turned red, then white. Abruptly, she lashed her whip on the horse's back. Startled, the horse pulled the carriage forward at a great speed, causing "Lin San" inside to burst into a series of woofing sounds that didn't cease for a while.

After a considerable distance, the speed of the carriage finally slowed down. Xu Zhiqing covered her burning cheeks, her heart in turmoil. Reflecting on their conversation, she realized that she had been outwitted by that scoundrel from the start, falling into his traps one after another—she was simply too emotionally flustered to see it.

"'The one you like is Lin San'—'The one you like is Lin San'—" The rascal's words kept echoing in her ears, making her both embarrassed and oddly expectant. She hesitated for a moment, finally gritting her teeth and reaching out to lift the curtain, sneaking a peek behind her.

The road was empty, not a trace of that rogue to be found—had he not bothered to catch up?

"I was wrong about you, you despicable creature!" Xu Zhiqing was overcome with both sorrow and indignation. She raised her hand and slapped it on the head of "Lin San," who was disoriented from the bumpy ride. "Lin San" let out a pitiful woof, looking utterly wronged.

Teasing the young lady felt so refreshing. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, preparing to mount his horse and give chase. But just as he was about to swing his leg over the saddle, a sudden tension gripped his heart. His leg tensed up as if responding to some unseen signal.

The land near the forest was eerily quiet—no passersby, no signs of animals. Only the occasional snorts of his war horse broke the silence. A suffocating atmosphere filled the air, making the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Someone is trying to kill me!" Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead as his heart pounded uncontrollably in his chest.

## Chapter 453 Tying the Red Thread Again

The shadows of the trees swayed, their outlines indistinct, and in the silence emanated a terrifying aura of death. Before Lin Wanrong had time to react, a sudden change occurred. A dense barrage of arrows buzzed out from the forest, carrying a dim, cold light. With tremendous force, the arrows reached him almost instantly.

Lin Wanrong leapt into the air, performing several rolls on the ground just in time to evade the shower of arrows. The horse he had been riding wasn't as lucky—it let out a piercing neigh as countless arrows punctured its body. It collapsed, dark blood gushing out.

Just as Lin Wanrong was about to move, dozens of black figures burst from the woods on either side, their movements swift. The steel knives in their hands glinted with a terrifying white light, accompanied by a sharp, cutting wind, as they lunged at him in unison. These assassins were clad in black and wore masks. Their movements were agile, their attacks ferocious. They attacked from every direction, giving him no room to escape.

‘Damn it, let's see how you handle my bee stingers,’ Lin Wanrong thought. Just as he was about to activate the mechanism of his bee-stinger weapon, another change occurred. A clear, resounding howl echoed from the forest. Another set of figures leapt out, their movements even more agile. These newcomers said nothing. In just a few moves, they had already positioned themselves in front of Lin Wanrong, unsheathing their long swords. Amidst the cacophony of clashing blades, they successfully blocked the approaching black-clad men, and a fierce fight ensued.

‘What's going on?’ Lin Wanrong was puzzled but dared not act recklessly. His finger remained poised over the bee-stinger mechanism, ready to act at the slightest provocation. The two groups of fighters clashed intensely. The later arrivals were dressed in casual blue attire, their faces uncovered, but their moves were skillful and experienced. They managed to keep the black-clad assassins away from Lin Wanrong, gaining the upper hand. Every now and then, a muffled groan or scream could be heard from the black-clad men, clearly at a disadvantage.

However, these assassins were extremely fierce. Despite being impaled by multiple swords, they fought on fearlessly, attacking recklessly and engaging the blue-clothed men in a deadlock.

Another long howl resonated from the forest, followed by a man's clear voice, "Brothers, quickly dispose of these bastards and protect Lord Lin!"

"At once!" As the words fell, more figures in blue dashed from the forest. Their long swords and sabers moved like lightning, weaving through the battleground like dragons. In an instant, several more black-clad assassins fell.

Recognizing the voice, Lin Wanrong looked towards the forest and saw a burly man in blue charging forward, his sword felling multiple enemies in the blink of an eye.

"Gao Qiu, Brother Gao!" Lin Wanrong shouted in joy, waving his hand.

"Sir, be careful—" Just as Gao Qiu yelled out, another change took place. From the retreating line of assassins, two figures suddenly launched into the air, their bodies moving like lightning, heading straight for Lin Wanrong.

Emboldened by Gao Qiu's support, Lin Wanrong was about to fire his hand-held gun when he noticed something strange about the airborne assassins. Somehow, it was as if their acupoints had been struck, draining them of their energy. They thudded to the ground. Gao Qiu quickly leapt forward to shield him, wiping the cold sweat off his forehead, and gasping, "That was close, too close. Brothers, quickly finish off these scum!"

These two attackers were the ringleaders. Once they were taken down, the formation of the men in black became instantly disordered. Yet, they fought more recklessly, wielding their blades as if they had lost all fear of death, completely exposing themselves to lethal strikes.

"These are well-trained suicide warriors," Gao Qiu observed with a chill in his heart. With a wave of his hand, his men ceased holding back. Swords rose and fell, cutting the attackers in half at the waist.

Lin Wanrong hurriedly grabbed his sleeve and said, "Brother Gao, leave a couple of them alive."

Gao Qiu shook his head solemnly. "Brother Lin, you don't understand. These men are brainwashed suicide warriors, trained by whoever is behind this. They've ingested substances that erase their reasoning but heighten their aggression. Even if we capture them, they'd be useless."

Lin Wanrong had heard of such suicide warriors before and was not willing to let it go. "Is there really no one clear-headed among them? How would they know if they killed the wrong person? There must be one or two who are in their right minds!"

Gao Qiu nodded and smiled. "You're quite sharp, Brother Lin. To carry out such an assassination strategy, there must be one or two leaders who are clear-headed. Otherwise, they wouldn't even know if they had killed the wrong person."

Lin Wanrong looked at the two men who had tried to assassinate him and finally understood. He gave Gao Qiu a thumbs-up, saying, "Brother Gao, you're so knowledgeable and experienced. I owe you my life today."

Gao Qiu shook his head and laughed. "Rest assured, Brother Lin, with us by your side, nobody will harm even a single hair on your head. The Emperor himself assigned us to secretly protect you ever since you returned from Shandong. These men are the Emperor's personal guards. Their skills go without saying."

"So that's the case!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, both surprised and delighted. "Why didn't you say so sooner? If I'd known you guys were here, what would I have to fear? We've fought our way from Hangzhou and Jinling all the way to the capital!"

Gao Qiu burst into laughter, recalling Lin Wanrong's various exploits on the journey back from Hangzhou. "It was the Emperor's decree to follow you secretly. I dare not go against the imperial order. As soon as you left today, I sensed something was wrong and prepared in advance. I'm sorry if you were startled."

Lin Wanrong, now feeling secure, chuckled. "Brother Gao, you're wrong. I'm a man; I only impregnate, I don't get startled. By the way, who are these assassins? Why do they want to kill me?"

Gao Qiu shook his head solemnly. "I don't know. General Li Tai's army is about to set out, and the situation in the capital is very strange. Since you descended from the mountain, unfamiliar faces have appeared both inside and outside your residence, as well as around the shops of the Xiao family. Their target is undoubtedly you. I've secretly added more guards, especially around you. But Brother Lin, you mustn't let your guard down. Whoever can train such an elite force of suicide warriors should not be underestimated."

"What am I afraid of? You guys are the Emperor's personal guards. How powerful can the enemy be compared to the Emperor?" Lin Wanrong said with a slight smile.



Gao Qiu chuckled and nodded, admiring Lin Wanrong's unshakeable demeanor. Lin Wanrong then pulled out a stack of silver notes from his pocket and, without even looking, shoved them into Gao Qiu's hands. "Brother Gao, take this and buy some tea for your men."

The first note alone was worth five hundred taels; the entire stack must have been worth thousands. Gao Qiu was startled and quickly pushed the notes back. "What are you doing? Do you look down on me, Gao Qiu? I serve the Emperor and my life belongs to the court. Even if we hadn't been through life-and-death situations together, I couldn't accept your money."

When they were suppressing bandits in Shandong, Gao Qiu had always been at Lin Wanrong's side. Their friendship was indeed deep. Lin Wanrong laughed, "You misunderstand, Brother Gao. I wouldn't give you money like this. If you needed money, you could take it directly from my house. This money is for your men. They have been guarding my family diligently, day and night. They are following imperial orders, true, but they've also done me a great favor. They risk their lives for a living; life isn't easy for them. If I don't return this favor, not only would it make things difficult for you, but I would also feel guilty. Please pass this on to them. I entrust my family and the Xiao family to their care."

Lin Wanrong was no ordinary man; he understood that the Emperor could be great, but the people who did the actual work were these guards. If any harm came to the women in his household, he would be devastated. Spending some money to ensure their well-being was entirely worth it.

Gao Qiu was also clever and quickly understood Lin Wanrong's intent. He stopped refusing, pocketed the silver notes, and gave Lin Wanrong a thumbs-up. "Brother, I admire you. No wonder you can lead an army and make everyone willing to die for you! Rest assured, I'll handle this perfectly."

"You're too kind, too kind," Lin Wanrong said slyly, casting his gaze at the unconscious assassins on the ground. "Brother Gao, can we wake them up?"

Gao Qiu agreed and walked over to the unconscious men. After examining them and patting them a few times, they still didn't wake up. Gao Qiu looked uncomfortable and cleared his throat awkwardly.

Lin Wanrong asked curiously, "Brother Gao, what's going on? Are they dead?"

Gao Qiu's face reddened. "They're not dead. But I can't remove the concealed weapons from their bodies. Wait a moment; let me get some cold water to try."

Can't remove the concealed weapons? That was strange. Weren't those hidden weapons fired by Gao Qiu to save him? Noticing Gao Qiu's embarrassed expression, Lin Wanrong chose not to dwell on it and simply smiled it off.

The masks of the two assassins had already been removed. Lin Wanrong slowly walked up to them. Both men were in their thirties, robust and strong. One was thin, and the other slightly overweight. Their faces were grim, their expressions fierce. Each held a steel needle in his hand; the needles gleamed with a bluish light, clearly coated with some sort of poison.

Lin Wanrong shuddered at the thought of the earlier situation. 'Had Gao Qiu not intervened, if I had been careless enough to get pricked, I'd have been doomed.'

He hastily retreated two steps, and Gao Qiu removed the steel needles. With a casual flick, he shot one of the needles into a nearby leaf. Almost immediately, black smoke rolled off the leaf, which disappeared into a puff of thick smoke.

"Is this what they call 'corpse-dissolving liquid'?" Lin Wanrong asked through gritted teeth.

Gao Qiu solemnly nodded. "It's known as 'corpse-dissolving powder,' also called 'bone-dissolving powder.' It's created from the most poisonous substances in the world—seven-step snakes, deadly scorpions, flying centipedes—further refined with aqua regia. It's very difficult to produce. If these assassins had more of it, they would've used it earlier, and we would've been at a significant disadvantage."

"Damn it," Lin Wanrong hissed, kicking one of the unconscious assassins hard. "Soon you will taste the bone-dissolving powder."

A servant brought a bucket of clear water. Without hesitation, Gao Qiu picked up the bucket and splashed it over the slightly overweight assassin's face and body. The chill of the spring air instantly shook him awake. Before he could fully comprehend his surroundings, a flash of white appeared before his eyes—a sharp, gleaming short sword, which cut off several of his eyelashes.

Even though he was a hardened criminal, he couldn't help but break into a cold sweat. Clenching his teeth, he remained silent. Through the gaps in the blade, he stealthily looked at the cold face before

him. Lin Wanrong was casually rubbing the short sword across his eyes, making him shudder from the icy sensation.

With a swoosh, Lin Wanrong thrust the sword horizontally. The assassin's eyelashes were cleanly cut in half. The man's eyes widened in terror, daring not to move.

"What a great sword," Lin Wanrong sighed, slowly standing up. "Gao Qiu, cut off this bastard's tongue."

"Sir, aren't you going to interrogate him?" Gao Qiu, having collaborated with Lin Wanrong many times, asked spontaneously.

"What use is interrogating these worthless men? I already know who's behind this," Lin Wanrong said, his smile tinged with malice. "His Highness sure has a lot of free time lately, remembering even me—"

The assassin's face remained expressionless, but a glimmer of panic flitted through his eyes. Lin Wanrong continued, "His tongue is useless. Cut it off and let him communicate with his master in sign language."

"As you wish," Gao Qiu responded, pinching open the assassin's jaw. He extended his short sword, ready to insert it into the man's mouth.

The assassin's eyes widened in panic, and he began to twist and turn. Gao Qiu hesitated for a moment and said, "Sir, it seems like he has something to say."

"Don't speak!" Lin Wanrong shouted angrily, "Even if you do, I won't listen. Gao Qiu, you've wasted enough time; punish him by severing his everything from top to bottom."

Gao Qiu acknowledged the command. His men turned the assassin onto his back on the ground, legs spread wide. Grasping his short sword with both hands, Gao Qiu chuckled ominously and thrust downwards.

"Ahh—" The assassin screamed, letting out a sharp yell, "The prince will not let you go! He will avenge me—"

After a moment of screaming, he felt no pain below. Lifting his head, he saw Gao Qiu standing beside Lin Wanrong, both of them stroking their chins and smirking, radiating smugness.

"Brother Lin, following you has taught me many tactics," Gao Qiu sincerely said. When it came to psychological warfare, no one could outmatch Lin San.

"Nonsense, nonsense," Lin Wanrong replied with a cunning smile. "I've learned much from you as well. For instance, that stroke you just made was incredibly precise, skimming just the edge, more accurate than a circumcision. I'm deeply impressed."

Listening to their self-congratulatory banter, the assassin finally realized he'd been played. But it was too late for regrets; he'd already exposed everything with his earlier shouts. His face turned ashen, and he fell silent.

"There's no need to actually do it this time. Do you really think you're worthy of being a martyr?" Lin Wanrong disdainfully kicked the assassin and casually waved a hand, "Cut off whatever you can from him. Let some of our new recruits practice. Use dull blades; if one cut doesn't do it, make it two or three. We rarely have a live subject to practice on—"

The assassin, usually fearless of death, found himself completely disarmed by Lin Wanrong's tactics. He had blurted out things he should never have disclosed. Feeling utterly defeated, he shouted, "You dare? Even as a ghost, I won't forgive you!"

"Not forgive me?" Lin Wanrong burst into hearty laughter. "Hearing that from you is hilarious. You've killed so many people for your prince. How many times have you heard this line? Just accept it. Proceed—"

At Lin Wanrong's harsh command, four or five guards rushed forward. The assassin's face changed dramatically, and before he could speak, he felt a sharp pain in his leg. One impatient guard had already stabbed him there. "Ah—," he screamed, finally realizing that they weren't joking. Seeing the fresh blood flowing profusely from his leg, he felt as if he was falling apart.

Lin Wanrong waved his hand, signaling his men to stop. He calmly said, "What's your name? Oh, if you don't want to say, I don't mind. My men are eager to continue."

"Zheng Qiulei," the assassin replied, too weak to resist any longer.

Lin Wanrong hummed an acknowledgment without even lifting his eyebrows, "How many years have you been with the prince?"

"Twenty-one years!"

"Twenty-one years?" Lin Wanrong nodded, "That's a long time. No wonder the prince trusts you so much to entrust you with such an important task. And you dare to betray him? Don't deny it; all my men heard you. Ah, I can only wonder how heartbroken the prince will be when he hears of this tragedy!"

Lin Wanrong shook his head continuously, his expression tinged with pity for Prince Cheng. Gao Qiu, standing off to the side, couldn't help but chuckle silently. Lin Wanrong had a knack for this sort of thing; he would first place a metaphorical "bedpan" over your head so that any rebuttal would be akin to soiling one's own pants. It was a futile endeavor.

"Damn it, have I fallen into your trap?" Zheng Qiulei was on the verge of cursing out loud but held back when he saw the sly smile in Lin Wanrong's eyes.

"Brother Zheng, how many mistresses does Prince Cheng have?" Lin Wanrong abruptly changed the subject, grinning as he asked.

Zheng Qiulei was taken aback for a moment. "That's not a secret, right? Prince Cheng has one principal wife, ten concubines, and roughly twenty or so lesser consorts."

"What a waste," Lin Wanrong commented, swallowing hard. He turned to Gao Qiu and smiled, "Brother Gao, how many wives does the Emperor have?"

Gao Qiu spoke earnestly, "His Majesty is wise and valorous, and he loves his people. From the time he was a prince until now, including the Empress, he hasn't had more than ten consorts."

"Indeed, a ruler who loves his people as if they were his children. Yet our Prince Cheng loves beautiful women as if they were his children," Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs-up, then turned to the assassin with a sinister grin. "There's another thing. I've heard that in Prince Cheng's household, there's a hidden dragon trapped in water and a golden dragon ever ready to fly into the sky. Whether you admit it or not, I've seen them myself when I was at his residence."

"Damn it, you've exposed everything. What's the point of my even answering?" Zheng Qiulei felt utterly aggrieved and could only nod.

"Hey, scribe, you know what to record, right?" Lin Wanrong gave a sly laugh. "Brother Zheng, let's talk about something serious. Why does Prince Cheng want to kill me?"

Zheng Qiulei gritted his teeth. "I don't know. You must have provoked him."

Lin Wanrong gave a cold laugh. "At this point, Brother Zheng, what do you have to hide? You know Prince Cheng better than anyone. Consider your words just now. If they were to get out, do you think Prince Cheng would let you off? I'll remind you: when I first arrived in the capital, a mysterious woman tried to assassinate me on Prince Cheng's orders. On my way back from Shandong, I was ambushed—ring any bells?"

Lin Wanrong had clearly set his sights on toppling Prince Cheng. All he needed was a testimony. Zheng Qiulei sighed in resignation; he had no other options left.

Under Lin Wanrong's gentle prodding, he listed a litany of crimes—ranging from Prince Cheng's assassination of the former Emperor and the massacre of his brothers to his collusion with foreign enemies and assassination plots against high-ranking officials. With Lin Wanrong narrating these "facts," Prince Cheng was painted as nothing less than a traitor.

'What Brother Lin is doing involves highly critical matters. If this goes wrong, our Great Hua Empire will be thrown into chaos,' Gao Qiu listened, hardly daring to breathe. He cautiously pulled Lin Wanrong aside, "Brother Lin, even if you unearth all of this, will the Emperor believe you? Can he? This is no trivial matter; you might not get the mutton and instead stink up the place."

"Thank you for the reminder, Brother Gao," Lin Wanrong grinned ear to ear. "Whether he believes it or not is the Emperor's affair; he'll know what to do. But there is one small favor I'd like to ask of you."

He whispered a few words into Gao Qiu's ear, leaving him visibly pale and trembling. "You want me to spread rumors about Prince Cheng?"

"Who says they're rumors? They might very well be true. You saw the assassination attempt yourself," Lin Wanrong said, his expression hardening. "At this point, it's either his life or mine. Find some trustworthy and loyal people, put up some large posters, or get some gossip going in tea houses. Trust me, people will be interested. Let's make sure that everyone in the capital knows

about Prince Cheng's atrocities, so he has nowhere to hide. As for the Emperor, don't worry. Would I dare to do this without his consent? He told you to protect me; have you thought about who it is I need protection from?"

Gao Qiu was speechless. He understood what Lin Wanrong meant: this was a ploy to force Prince Cheng's hand. "Will this really work?" he cautiously inquired.

"There's no reason it shouldn't," Lin Wanrong responded, a glint in his eyes. "I am Princess Chuyun's husband, and Prince Cheng chose this night to move against me. If I'm not mistaken, the Emperor must be making moves against him, rendering his position untenable. So let's go big; before our troops head north, let's remove this thorn in our side. Then our soldiers can focus solely on fighting the Turks. To be a bit selfish, as long as he's alive, I can't be at ease with my property and wife left in the capital."

With conviction shining in his eyes, Lin Wanrong gave Gao Qiu a hearty slap on the shoulder. Considering Lord Lin was the Emperor's son-in-law, and universally known for the Emperor's favor towards him, Gao Qiu clenched his teeth and said, "Fine. It's settled then. It seems I, too, have a score to settle with Prince Cheng."

After their clandestine discussion, there was no need to question the would-be assassin, Zheng Qiulei, any further. Obtaining his confession would suffice.

"Let's get his thumbprint on this," Lin Wanrong grinned. "Brother Gao, read the confession to old Zheng here. We are following procedures, no torture to extract a confession. All of you are witnesses for me!"

Gao Qiu eloquently read out the confession, detailing how Zheng Qiulei, having enjoyed the Emperor's grace since childhood, was coerced by Prince Cheng—using the lives of his family as leverage—to assassinate Lin Wanrong, the most loyal and capable servant of the empire.

Seeing Gao Qiu's piercing gaze fixated on his thumb, as if ready to cut it off to imprint the confession, Zheng Qiulei felt utterly defeated. With no other option, he reluctantly pressed his thumb onto the paper, his face ashen.

Turning to the remaining unconscious assassin, Lin Wanrong snorted. "Let's leave this one for the Emperor to interrogate personally. Brother Gao, find some reliable men to deliver both the confession and these two to the palace tonight. And then leak the news that the Emperor is interrogating assassins overnight, one of whom, named Zheng Qiulei, has been serving his master for twenty-one years—"

'That's a brutal move,' Gao Qiu sighed internally, nodding repeatedly. He gathered a team of guards, loaded the two men into a carriage, and sent them to the palace under the cover of darkness.

Lin Wanrong knelt beside his fallen warhorse, heaving a deep sigh. Gao Qiu, who had also experienced the battlefield, knew the bond between a man and his horse. He stood silently by Lin's side, saying nothing.

Lin Wanrong stood up, gazing into the distance where the moonlight shimmered like water against the bleak night sky. Miss Xu's carriage had long since disappeared into the distance. Thinking of the teasing banter that had just transpired, he felt a mixture of emotions. This time, she was probably even more irritated with him.

Riding into the city with Gao Qiu, it was already late, and there were few people on the streets. Lin Wanrong, lost in his thoughts, spurred his horse to a gallop. As he reached a bend in the road, he saw a palanquin moving slowly ahead. He paid it no mind, intending to ride past, when the curtain of the palanquin lifted. A woman peeked out, her eyes brimming with tears. "Lin, Lin San—"

"Whoa!" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, pulling hard on the reins. He could hardly believe his ears. Who was calling him?

"Lin San—" The woman, seeing him in a daze, felt both joy and sorrow. She softly called his name again, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Lin Wanrong turned his head and saw the forlorn face of Xiao Yuruo. Her skin was like porcelain, cheeks slightly flushed, and two trails of tears flowed down. She looked poignantly beautiful in the cold night air.

"Eldest Miss, you're back?!" Overjoyed, Lin Wanrong leapt off his horse and rushed to the palanquin, taking her small hand into his. He noticed she looked more haggard than before, yet her proud demeanor was unchanged. Looking into her tearful eyes and thinking of their shared past, Lin Wanrong suddenly felt choked up, unable to say a word.

Tears fell like rain from Xiao Yuruo's eyes, yet she spoke with a smile. "You fool, what has stunned you? It's rare to see you so dumbfounded. Aren't you usually as sweet-talking as if you've swallowed honey?"



Wiping the corner of his eyes, Lin Wanrong laughed. "Eldest Miss hasn't been home, so I've gone without honey for days. Where have you returned from?"

"I don't know," Xiao Yuruo said softly. "The day the Emperor came with a decree, I was taken away by a palace maid and placed in a garden within the palace. Every day, officials from the Weaving Department discussed various matters with me—mostly about fabrics and textiles. They never let me leave."

Lin Wanrong gritted his teeth, filled with loathing. "That decree was a trap set by the Emperor. Eldest Miss, you must not believe it. Do you think I could be such a person?"

"Do I not know your character?" Eldest Miss shook her head and gave a bitter smile, her face flushing. "If you were a truly committed man, it would be fine. That would save us women from a lot of heartache. Unfortunately, you are the kind of man who wouldn't commit to one woman at the cost of others."

Her words hit home, but Lin Wanrong wasn't ashamed. He was rather pleased. "Exactly, exactly. You know me so well, Eldest Miss."

His giddy laughter was just as before, unchanged. She thought back to when they first met in Jinling; he and her cousin Guo had returned from some mischief. She had wanted to slap him then, and he had that fearless look, unafraid of anything.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Eldest Miss smiled through her tears, dusting off his clothes. "Where have you been gallivanting this time? You look as if you've rolled in mud. As punishment, you must wash these clothes clean first thing tomorrow morning. Otherwise, I'll dock your salary."

Listening to Eldest Miss speak in that familiar tone, Lin Wanrong felt as if a weight had lifted off his shoulders, his entire being filled with delight. With a grin, he said, "Eldest Miss, there's a question I've always wanted to ask you!"

Xiao Yuruo responded softly, "What question? Go ahead and ask."

"Do you remember our bet in Jinling about washing clothes?" Lin Wanrong chuckled. "I've always wanted to know who actually washed my clothes that time."

"It wasn't me who washed them," Xiao Yuruo said, her face blushing as she quickly lowered her head.

"Oh," Lin Wanrong sighed, his face falling. "No wonder they were so—"

"So what?" Eldest Miss lifted her head, her expression keen.

"So unclean," Lin Wanrong grinned cheekily. Before he could finish, her tiny fists pummeled him like the wind. "What nonsense are you spouting? How were they unclean? I washed them five times!"

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, seizing her small hand and pulling her out of the palanquin. Eldest Miss was both shy and frustrated, kicking at him with her small feet. Her face flushed, she was breathless and seemingly devoid of strength. Their interaction was reminiscent of their bickering days in the Jinling residence—a mix of sour and sweet emotions, overwhelmingly warm.

"What's this?" Lin Wanrong noticed a bright red strand wrapped around her constantly moving ankle.

"Nothing!" Her face turned even redder as she hastily jumped back into the palanquin, preparing to instruct the bearers to move on. Just then, Lin Wanrong also squeezed in, sitting beside her.

"What are you doing? No fooling around!" Xiao Yuruo's heart raced, her chest heaving and her voice trembling.

Lin Wanrong lifted her ankle gently, revealing smooth, flawless skin under her loose gown, as exquisite as a piece of fine jade. A bright red thread was tightly wound around her dainty ankle. At the spot where the thread had been joined, someone had intricately woven it into a pair of beautiful butterflies, poised as if to take flight.

Lin Wanrong felt a surge of emotion. Memories of their time on West Lake, the wrongly tied red thread, Xian'er's sword cutting it, Eldest Miss's heartbreak—all etched deeply in his heart, never to be erased.

Touching her smooth ankle, he asked softly, "Have you been wearing this red thread all along?"

"Absolutely not," she turned her head away, her face flushed. "I tied this myself; it's not from that time."

"Was it really a mistake that time?" Lin Wanrong gently began to untie the loose end of the thread. "Let's try again and see if it's still a mistake this time."

He tied one end of the red thread tightly around Eldest Miss's dainty ankle, while the other end he held up in front of her, grinning. "Eldest Miss, pay close attention. We still don't know whether it's tied correctly or wrongly this time—"

As he bent down to wrap the thread around his ankle, Eldest Miss's face flushed a deep red. She whispered, "Wrong, wrong!"

"Wrong?" Lin Wanrong froze in confusion.

Seeing his bewildered expression, Eldest Miss couldn't help but giggle. Her tender, white finger lightly touched his forehead. "When did you become such a fool?" She lowered her head, not daring to look into his eyes, yet her voice carried a trembling warmth. "I'm a woman, so the thread should be tied to my right ankle. You're a man; it should be tied to your left ankle—you silly man!"

Lin Wanrong's face lit up in sudden realization. "Ah, how could I have been so confused? It seems I'm getting rusty from not flirting for a few days."

"Thank you for enlightening me, Eldest Miss," Lin Wanrong grinned as he securely tied the red thread around his own ankle. The two of them were squished tightly together, the snugly tied thread pulling them even closer, making it difficult to part.

"Lin San—" Eldest Miss felt a tremor in her heart, her face flushed rosy pink. She slowly leaned her head against his shoulder. Both tears and smiles came to her face at the same time.

Taking a satisfied sigh, Lin Wanrong smirked, "Heh heh, it's tied tightly this time. I'd like to see who can cut it now—" His words were cut short as a flash of shimmering white light accompanied by a whooshing sound moved swiftly toward their ankles.

'Am I seeing things?' Lin Wanrong exclaimed, quickly pivoting his body to shield Xiao Yuruo. A red thread remained tightly bound around both of their ankles. The two looked into each other's eyes; Eldest Miss's gaze was soft as water, and she nestled unmoving in his arms.

Turning his head, Lin Wanrong saw an enchanting woman standing before him, sword in hand. Her eyebrows were like willow leaves in spring, and her eyes as calm as autumn waters. Her tiny, red lips slightly opened and closed as she breathed rapidly. Her face alternated between red and white, clearly quite angry. She was dressed in a pale red robe, looking travel-worn as if she had rushed here from a great distance.

"Xian'er?!" Lin Wanrong was elated. He leapt out of the sedan chair and was about to dash forward when he felt his feet being hindered. Looking down, he noticed the red thread binding him and Eldest Miss together, rendering them unable to move. Qin Xian'er stared at the tightly bound thread, bit her red lips, hummed and said nothing.

"Xian'er, what are you doing here? When did you come back?" Lin Wanrong gave a couple of awkward laughs. His face flushed with embarrassment. 'This girl Xian'er seems to have a grudge against Eldest Miss. Last time, she cut the red thread with her sword, leaving Eldest Miss devastated. Almost the same thing happened again; thankfully, I was quick-witted.'

Qin Xian'er did not respond to his words. She looked Xiao Yuruo up and down, sneering, "Isn't this the Eldest Miss of the Xiao family? What are you doing tying up my husband with that red thread? Didn't you drive him out of the Xiao residence the day he returned from Shandong?"

Xiao Yuruo's pretty face flushed, and she clung tightly to Lin Wanrong's sleeve, softly saying, "Miss Qin, what are you talking about? When did I ever drive him away? He came back that day with some questionable women. I merely advised him. On the other hand, since when did you marry him, to be calling him 'my husband' so liberally?"

"You wouldn't know, then," Qin Xian'er took a step forward, grasping Lin Wanrong's hand and declared loudly, "We wandered together at Weishan Lake; we were alone on a boat during sunset. My master personally acted as our matchmaker. I have already married him and we are a loving couple. There's no need for you to know."

Xiao Yuruo studied her from head to toe, shaking her head lightly and smiling, "A loving couple? I doubt it. Miss Qin, your eyebrows are not dispersed and your hair is not styled like a married woman's. Where is this 'loving couple' you speak of?"

Lin Wanrong glanced at her with delight; Eldest Miss knew quite a bit. Noticing the intensity of his gaze, Xiao Yuruo's face flushed. She lowered her head and softly said, "What are you looking at? My mother taught me this."

'Madam knows all this? How surprising!' Lin Wanrong chuckled heartily, his gaze roaming over Xiao Yuruo as if trying to see something. Eldest Miss felt her heart pound and her face heat up; she lightly spat in disdain and ignored him.

Xiao Yuruo's words hit the nail on the head, pointing out precisely what Qin Xian'er was anxious about. Seeing Eldest Miss's expressive eyes and her unspeakable emotions, Xian'er hummed and quickly shifted her eyes. She softly and seductively said, "My husband, what does it mean to be a wife? Isn't it enough that I sleep next to you every night and let you take liberties?"

In terms of feistiness, ten Xiao Yuruos were no match for Qin Xian'er. Hearing Miss Qin's words, Eldest Miss felt a wave of shock and her face flushed hotly. She hurriedly covered her face and turned away, inwardly cursing, 'What a pair of adulterers.'

Qin Xian'er's voice was as melodious as a nightingale, and even though she was visibly travel-worn, her radiant beauty remained impossible to hide. Her face was flushed, and her full chest and hips stood prominently, exuding a sense of pride.

Lin Wanrong swallowed hard. Truly, a disciple trained by the vixen An had a unique charm, even her seductiveness was enchanting.

"My husband," Qin Xian'er tenderly gripped Lin Wanrong's large hand, looking down demurely, "When will you make me a woman? I don't want to be a laughingstock."

'Damn it, this is life-threatening!' Lin Wanrong's heart pounded wildly as he hurriedly patted his chest. He glanced at the Eldest Miss, her face shy and bashful, then at Qin Xian'er whose face was flushed with a coquettish smile. His feelings were a mix of joy and astonishment, and for a moment, he didn't know what to do.

Seeing him remain silent, both women also fell silent. Each avoided eye contact, neither willing to concede.

The night was deep, and the streets were empty. A cold wind blew, making Lin Wanrong shiver slightly. He chuckled, "It's getting late. Let's go home and continue this discussion. Eldest Miss, may I ride in your sedan chair?"

The red thread of fate still bound their feet, making it hard for either to refuse. Xiao Yuruo blushed slightly, hummed in agreement, and moved over to make room for him.

Seeing that he was really about to ride in the sedan, Qin Xian'er hastily gripped his hand, as if to speak. Lin Wanrong gave her little hand a squeeze and said teasingly, "Don't worry, the sedan is spacious; we can all sit together."

He climbed into the sedan and sat next to Xiao Yuruo. The touch of their skin created a warm, soft sensation that sent heat through him. Unable to resist, he took the Eldest Miss's hand. Xiao Yuruo gave him a sweet smile and was about to speak when Qin Xian'er also squeezed into the sedan. She sat beside Lin San on the other side, her arms tightly wrapped around his arm, her full chest pressed against him, highly provocative.

"What are you doing?" The Eldest Miss's face changed, a mix of embarrassment and annoyance.

Qin Xian'er retorted, "I should be asking you that. What are you planning, sitting so close to my husband?"

"Let's go, let's go!" Seeing the atmosphere turning sour, Lin Wanrong hastily commanded. The sedan swayed as it started moving. Both women glanced at him and huffed, turning their heads away.

The sedan was neither large nor small. Lin Wanrong sat in the middle, sandwiched between the two women—one gentle, the other flirtatious, yet both remained silent.

"Eldest Miss, how have you been these past days in the palace?" He softly asked, holding and gently stroking her hand.

"Fine," Xiao Yuruo replied indifferently.

Realizing his attempt at conversation fell flat, Lin Wanrong then turned to Miss Qin and said, "Xian'er, have you returned from Sichuan? How is Sister An?"

"She's better than me," Qin Xian'er's brows furrowed, as if she was about to cry.

The hardest thing in the world to reconcile is jealousy. Far from being a man who enjoys the company of two beautiful women, Lin Wanrong felt as if he were in prison. He sighed lightly, "Eldest Miss, Xian'er, do you think I had ulterior motives asking you both to sit in this sedan?"

The Eldest Miss rolled her eyes at him, snorting dismissively, as if saying, 'as if I don't know what you're thinking.' Xian'er, however, was more obedient and softly said, "My husband, I am your wife, so any 'ulterior motives' you may have toward me are to be expected."

At those words, Lin Wanrong rolled his eyes, clearly exasperated.

"Do you really think I'm that kind of person?" Lin Wanrong chuckled a few times. His expression gradually turned serious. "Even if I wanted to take advantage of you, I wouldn't have the time or effort to do so. In a few days, we'll have to part ways."

"My husband, what are you saying? Where are you going?" Qin Xian'er was shocked and hurriedly clung to his clothing. Xiao Yuruo also tensed up, casting him a side-glance while unconsciously gripping his hand tightly.

"I am going to a place far, far away. I don't even know if I'll be able to return." Lin Wanrong looked at Xiao Yuruo with a bitter smile, "Eldest Miss, from now on, the affairs of the Xiao family will rely on you."

"You—what are you saying?" Xiao Yuruo paled, and tears welled up in her eyes. "You're leaving our family? No, I won't allow it."

"Whether you allow it or not is no longer important." Lin Wanrong's face turned exceedingly solemn as he held Qin Xian'er tightly. "There's something I must tell you, Xian'er. Actually, you have a sister named Qingxuan—"

"I know, I know," Qin Xian'er hastily covered his mouth, her voice filled with grievance. "My father told me. But I can't accept it. Her master bullied my master. We even fought in Jinling. She even wanted to snatch you away from me. Tell me, where does she act like a sister? I won't acknowledge her!"

Lin Wanrong broke into a sweat; this girl had a stubborn streak. Quarreling about who would snatch who—weren't they all family?

"If you don't want to acknowledge her, then don't." Lin Wanrong sighed, "Qingxuan is my wife, and so are you. I'll simply separate you two—one staying in Jinling, and the other in the capital. I'll commute between the two cities on a fine horse, would that work?"

Eldest Miss pinched his hand and hummed, lowering her eyes in a blend of melancholy and bitterness. Seizing the moment when Qin Xian'er was lost in thought, Lin Wanrong whispered into her ear, "Eldest Miss, you might not be aware that something significant has happened at home while you were away."

"What significant thing?" Xiao Yuruo looked desolate, apparently uninterested.

"It's not much, just that both young ladies have been betrothed." Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly.

"What?" Eldest Miss was alarmed, gripping his hand tightly, "How could mother do this? To whom have they been betrothed? You fool, why didn't you stop her?"

"I wanted to, but I was afraid that Eldest Miss would not be pleased," Lin Wanrong grinned, "Because Madam has betrothed you both to this humble self—"

"Don't say—" Eldest Miss's face turned crimson. She hurriedly covered his mouth, too embarrassed to lift her head.

"Yuruo, would you be willing to be my wife?" Lin Wanrong sneaked a kiss on Eldest Miss's soft hand, causing her heart to tremble. Hearing his marriage proposal, she felt a whirlwind of emotions—joy, panic, and confusion—and didn't know how to respond.

Qin Xian'er pondered for a moment, leaning gently against his shoulder. "My husband, my enmity with that person surnamed Xiao dates back to our masters. You've seen how miserable our lives have been as I wandered the ends of the earth with my master. All of that was because of her master. If I were to acknowledge her, what about my master? How could I repay the kindness of her raising me?"

Lin Wanrong shook his head and smiled, thinking of the old grudge between Sister An and Fairy Ning. He had promised An Biru that he would help her defeat Ning Yuxi. Now that he and Fairy Sister were intimately close, had he already "avenged" Sister An?



"My husband, my husband—" Qin Xian'er's tender calls woke Lin Wanrong from his reverie. Seeing her charming face, he smiled slightly, "Xian'er, if I were to fulfill your master's wish, would you still resent Qingxuan and Fairy Ning?"

Xian'er thought for a moment and snorted, "But she stole you away from me. How should that account be settled?"

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and lightly scraped her small nose, "What nonsense are you talking about? Where have I gone? Am I not sitting right here?"

"But your heart has flown away," Qin Xian'er pouted and hummed. Seeing Xiao Yuruo listening attentively, she felt a pang of jealousy. "Also, this Eldest Miss Xiao wants to steal you away too."

"Don't talk nonsense—" Xiao Yuruo's face flushed red, and she was about to retort when she saw Lin San smiling. Her heart melted, her body weakened, and she couldn't say another word.

"Fight over me then, go ahead and fight." Lin Wanrong sighed, "There are only a few days left, you might as well go ahead and fight over me."

"Where are you going?" Xiao Yuruo couldn't contain herself any longer. Lifting her head to gaze intently at him, her eyes filled with tears, the deep affection within them impossible to hide.

Lin Wanrong smiled faintly, glancing at both of them, "I have joined General Li Tai's army. In five or six days, I will be heading to the northern frontier to have a decisive battle with the Turkic people. Whether I live or die, only heaven knows."

Eldest Miss was stunned, looking at the Lin San before her. He seemed a stranger yet irresistibly familiar, leaving her heart trembling with a complex, indescribable emotion. She muttered to herself, "Is it true? Are you really leaving?"

"My husband, don't be afraid. I will go with you. We'll be together in life and death!" Qin Xian'er gently caressed his cheek, her voice soft.

"What would you do there?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Why do men go to battle? It's to protect women. You stay home and behave. Stop quarreling with Eldest Miss and the others; that would be the greatest support for me."

Tears filled Qin Xian'er's eyes. She bit her red lips, pondering for a while, then broke into a smile, "Eldest Miss Xiao, when have I ever had a conflict with you?"

With this smile, teardrops glistening in her eyes, she appeared alluring and coquettish. Even Xiao Yuruo was stunned. Xian'er grabbed the Eldest Miss's hand, tears streaming down her face, "Eldest Miss Xiao, for my husband's sake, I am willing to do anything. Would you feel the same?"

Xiao Yuruo was different from Qin Xian'er in temperament—naturally reserved. Hearing her tender plea, although her heart was willing, her face flushed with shyness, and she couldn't bring herself to speak.

Qin Xian'er slightly smiled and slowly leaned against Lin Wanrong's chest, listening to the strong beat of his heart. Her eyes were half-closed, her expression serene and incomparably gentle.

Eldest Miss watched them, feeling a secret admiration. Although Miss Qin had a fiery temperament, she dared to love and hate, fearless in the face of life and death. For the man she loved, she could endure any humiliation. Indeed, she was a woman unlike any other.

After a moment of thought, Eldest Miss gently bit her silver teeth, her delicate body trembling ever so slightly. Silently, she slowly pressed her cheek against Lin San's chest.

"I am also willing to do anything," Eldest Miss murmured to herself. Seeing Qin Xian'er's flirtatious smile from close range, her face flushed. The sound of her own heartbeat was so loud, she could hear it herself.

#### Chapter 455 A Beautiful Misunderstanding

Before they even reached the entrance to the Xiao family residence, the joyful voice of Xiao Yushuang echoed in the distance, "Sister, sister—"

Eldest Miss lifted the curtain of the palanquin, only to see Xiao Yushuang, with her little hand holding up her long skirt and a face glowing with joy, sprinting towards her. Xiao Yuruo stepped out of the palanquin just in time to catch Yushuang, who threw herself into her arms, tears of joy in her eyes, "Sister, you're finally back. Mother and I have been so worried."

Gazing at her sister's beautiful face and the deep concern in her eyes, Eldest Miss felt her own eyes moisten. She softly spoke, "Silly girl, I was just in the palace discussing some matters with the female officers of the Weaving Bureau. What's there to worry about? How is Mother's health?"

Xiao Yushuang responded with a slight hum, "A few days ago, when you and Lin San both disappeared, Mother fell seriously ill. Her condition only improved a little yesterday when Lin San returned. She's busy in the back right now, and I haven't yet told her you're back. Just wait until she sees you; she'll be so overjoyed."

As Yushuang spoke softly with a lovable face, Xiao Yuruo affectionately pinched her little nose, feeling extremely happy.

"Ah, who are you?" The curtain was lifted again, and a stunningly beautiful woman emerged, her cheeks flushed and her eyes tender, breathtakingly beautiful.

Remembering the intimate moments they had shared inside the palanquin, Eldest Miss felt her cheeks flush, unsure how to introduce this young lady.

Qin Xian'er was no stranger to Xiao Yushuang. The day when the White Lotus sect attacked the Xiao family, it was Yushuang who had thrown herself in front of Lin Wanrong, something Qin Xian'er remembered vividly. Thinking about the past, her heart felt a little sour, but she bore no ill will toward this faithful girl. She took a step forward and took Yushuang's hand, giggling, "Little sister, although you don't know me, I've admired you for a long time. Back in Jinling, I heard of your name, so beautiful and gentle, so kind and compassionate; you've captivated my husband."

Xiao Yushuang quickly hid behind Eldest Miss, blushing, "Don't speak nonsense, sister. I've never met your husband, so how could I have done anything disgraceful. Besides, I also have, have—" She was, after all, only seventeen, and there were things she couldn't articulate, so she hid behind her sister, her face flushed.

"Do you mean, a sweetheart?" Remembering how she almost had killed this little girl in a fit of jealousy, Qin Xian'er felt a bit guilty. She laughed, "So if you have a sweetheart, you can't tempt my husband? Little sister, let me tell you a secret: my husband would be more than happy to be tempted by you."

"You, you're talking nonsense." In terms of audacity, Xiao Yushuang was no match for Qin Xian'er. Hearing her "slander," Yushuang's eyes welled up, and she cried out, "I have only ever liked the scoundrel from our family; I won't give a glance to anyone else."

Hearing this, Qin Xian'er giggled, but felt a twinge of emotion. What man could bear to harm such a straightforward and lovable girl?

"Yushuang, stop being silly," said Eldest Miss, holding her sister's hand. She softly introduced, "You haven't met this young lady yet. She's well-known throughout Jinling, her surname is Qin, first name Xian'er—"

"Qin Xian'er? You're the Qin Xian'er from Miaoyu Pavilion?" Xiao Yushuang was taken aback, her eyes widening as she looked Qin Xian'er up and down. After a long pause, she sighed, "You are indeed as stunning as they say. No wonder that scoundrel visits you so often. Sister, how did you come to be with Miss Qin?"

Eldest Miss bowed her head in embarrassed silence, unsure how to respond. Qin Xian'er took her hand and gave a slight smile, "Sister Yushuang, from now on, Eldest Miss is not just your sister; she is mine as well. Right, sister Xiao?"

Xiao Yushuang glanced at the blushing Eldest Miss and then at the smiling, enchanting Qin Xian'er. Seeming to understand, her face turned equally red. She softly said, "It must be the doing of that scoundrel. Where could he have gone off to now?"

"Are you talking about me?" Lin Wanrong emerged from the sedan, yawning. He stretched comfortably and chuckled, "It's been a while since I've felt this relaxed. Eldest Miss, have you finished discussing your matters? Shall we go inside?"

This guy was the most carefree and unbothered of them all. Eldest Miss shot him a disdainful look and spat, "Dream on. What would we have to discuss with you? Xian'er, Yushuang, let's go inside. Leave this rascal out here to entertain himself."

Relationships sure developed quickly; in the blink of an eye, Xian'er had become a 'sister.' Lin Wanrong chuckled lecherously. However, he watched as the three women held hands and walked away, not sparing him a second glance. Even the usually sweet and gentle Xian'er ignored him, following the other two inside.

"Si De, close the door," Eldest Miss instructed as she stepped inside the shop.

"What about Brother San? He's still outside," Si De cautiously asked.

Eldest Miss huffed dismissively without looking back, "This scoundrel is resourceful enough. Let him climb over the wall if he has to. Now close the door."

Si De stuck his tongue out at Brother San, and with a loud bang, shut the door, nearly smashing Lin Wanrong's nose in the process.

'This girl, was she angry just because I touched Xian'er a bit during the ride? If I wanted to touch you, and you act coy, can you blame me?' Lin Wanrong touched his sore nose, thought about knocking but hesitated and lowered his hand.

The door was shut tight, and no sound could be heard from inside. He wondered what those three women were up to. It seems that 'too many cooks spoil the broth.' Is this the price for trying to have the best of both worlds? Lin Wanrong chuckled awkwardly and hesitated outside the door, unable to think of a good solution.

"Brother Lin, are you alright?" Gao Qiu suddenly appeared like a shadow, patting Lin Wanrong on the shoulder and startling him.

"Brother Gao, could you please make some noise next time you appear? I'm not that brave; can't take too many shocks," Lin Wanrong took a deep breath, patting his chest, still shaken.

Gao Qiu laughed heartily, "Brother Lin, you jest. Given your exploits, who in the world would dare say Lin San lacks courage? I'd say that person is asking for trouble."

"Hmm, that makes sense." Flattered by Gao Qiu's compliment, Lin Wanrong beamed from ear to ear.

Gao Qiu glanced cautiously around him before speaking. "Brother Lin, did the princess give you any trouble just now? I wanted to help, but she is the Emperor's favored Princess Nishang. I can't afford to cross her."

'Damn it, some help you are.' If Miss Qin had severed the red thread earlier, Eldest Miss would never be happy for the rest of her life.

"Do you not know of my capabilities? I can handle even a princess," Lin Wanrong chuckled, patting Gao Qiu on the shoulder and glancing at the courtyard wall. "Brother Gao, with your skills, climbing over this wall should be a piece of cake, right?"

Gao Qiu nodded proudly. "Of course. With my skills, scaling tall buildings is as easy as walking on flat ground. Even if this wall were ten times higher, I could still scale it."

Elated, Lin Wanrong quickly grabbed his sleeve. "That's perfect, then. Brother Gao, get me over there quickly. My wives are all waiting for me inside to consummate our marriage."

Gao Qiu furrowed his brows, looking troubled. "Brother Lin, it's not that I don't want to help. There are laws in the country and rules in our line of work. We martial artists have our own small circles, and we can't use our strength to bully the common folk. I could easily vault over this wall, but as a man of honor, how could I trespass into a civilian's home?"

Listening, Lin Wanrong blinked rapidly. So much ceremony and pride over just hopping a wall—my skin must really be too thin.

"But—" Gao Qiu suddenly shifted his tone—"if someone else helps you, then that's not my business. Wait here a moment."

Gao Qiu clapped his hands twice, and from a dark corner, two men ran over, carrying a long ladder between them.

After ensuring the ladder was securely propped against the wall, Gao Qiu nodded with satisfaction. "Use this. It's safe and convenient, far better than showing off martial arts, and it doesn't break any rules. Even if you're committing burglary, it has nothing to do with me. Please—"

Lin Wanrong was flabbergasted. 'What is shamelessness? Compared to Brother Gao, I am downright virtuous.'

"Brother Gao is indeed a man of honor and righteousness. I am impressed," Lin Wanrong saluted before climbing up the ladder and over the wall. He found himself in the back garden of the Xiao family home, a garden full of blooming flowers under the soft moonlight. The delicate scent filled the air, a sight and smell to lift anyone's spirits. Gao Qiu and his men had already removed the ladder, disappearing silently into the night.

Choosing a spot where the wall was slightly lower, Lin Wanrong scanned his surroundings and found no one in sight. Pleased, he leapt down into the flowerbed.

'So I'm in. Now to sneak into Eldest Miss's room and see what she can do about it.' Lin Wanrong chuckled lecherously, pleased with his plan. Just as he was about to move, a woman's voice suddenly rang out behind him, "Thief! Someone come quick—"

Amidst a shriek, a wooden stick whooshed through the air, aimed at Lin Wanrong's back. In the distance, the wailing barks of a dog filled the air.

The sudden noise was like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, causing Lin Wanrong's hair to stand on end. Caught off guard, the stick squarely hit his back. Even though the force from the attacking woman was weak, it still stung painfully.

Angry, Lin Wanrong swiftly turned around. Without even taking a good look at the woman's face, he roughly pushed her against the wall. One hand was on her soft chest, the other over her mouth, and his knee pushed apart her delicate, silky legs. "What are you screaming about? Look, look who I am!"

The moonlight was dim; at first glance, he couldn't see her face clearly. What he did feel under his hand was soft and supple, as comforting as touching milk yet incredibly elastic. The woman's legs were silky smooth, like the finest silk. Pressing against her felt like touching luxurious satin, which could slip away at any moment. "When did the Xiao family get someone with such a good figure? How did I not know?" Lin Wanrong was confused but still caressed her chest gently.

"Mmm, mmm—" The woman seemed to recognize his face. Struggling even more frantically, her legs kicked out at him.

"What are you—" Lin Wanrong was already annoyed by the pain on his back. He looked up to shout, but the moment he saw her face, his jaw dropped.

"What are you doing, you shameless thief—" Seeing him stunned, the woman, flushed with both shame and anger, had already thrown etiquette to the wind. Her open palm reached for his cheek.

Startled by the pain, Lin Wanrong yelped and quickly jumped back. "Don't hit, don't hit! It's a misunderstanding, a pure misunderstanding! I didn't see clearly!"

"You asked for it!" The woman didn't care for his explanations. Her tears flowed like rain as she lunged at him, punching and kicking in a fit of madness.

"God, what a mess. I really am down on my luck," Lin Wanrong muttered to himself. Dodging left and right, he didn't dare to fight back. Just then, a fearsome dog, as imposing as a warrior, lunged at him.

"General Zhenyuan, bite him! Kill him!" The woman cried softly, her eyes aflame with fury.

Lin Wanrong leapt back, shouting, "Don't bite! Anyone who bites me is asking for trouble!"

As if the dog named General Zhenyuan would listen to him. Eyes reddening upon seeing his enemy, the dog let out a growl, its fangs bared, and sprang at him.

Gardens, a ferocious dog, Lin San; how similar the situation was to the one with the Second Miss. Lin Wanrong's mind momentarily drifted. It was only when he saw those gaping jaws near his face that he snapped back to reality. With a high-pitched scream, he dodged out of the way.

His speed and strength had improved enormously since then; dodging was incredibly swift. Unable to catch him, General Zhenyuan grew even more agitated, barking and howling as he gave chase. The spectacle of a man and a dog running and chasing in the garden was indeed a sight to behold.

The commotion in the back courtyard had long alerted the rooms at the front. Faint sounds of footsteps and voices could be heard. The woman hesitated for a moment, glancing at General Zhenyuan in hot pursuit and the scattering Lin San, then down at her disheveled clothing. With tears streaming down her face, she suddenly let out a sob and covered her face as she walked away.

As soon as the woman left, General Zhenyuan lost his fighting spirit. He squatted down, tongue hanging out, panting heavily.

"What's the matter, why did you stop chasing?" Lin Wanrong leaned against a pillar, feeling a surge of delight as he observed the pitiable state of the ferocious dog and heard his own pounding heart. This scene was a reenactment of the past, only the leading lady had changed.

There lay a hoe in the corner, covered with soil. Lin Wanrong had taken a hit from it just moments ago. Beside it was a bucket of fresh water and a few newly planted peonies standing upright in the garden, their planting interrupted midway. These flowers had been sent from Jinling by Fubo, and Lin Wanrong had personally overseen their transplantation. Their petals were beautiful and in full bloom.



Seeing General Zhenyuan still squatting in place without any movement, Lin Wanrong slowly walked to the wall and looked at the blooming peonies. He sighed softly, "Beautiful flowers they may be, but they too require regular watering, otherwise they'll wilt."

After straightening the flowers and filling the soil, he watered them with the bucket of fresh water. Only after inspecting them from all angles did Lin Wanrong nod satisfactorily, clapping the soil off his hands as he stood up.

The sound of hurried footsteps grew closer. A maid named Huan'er was carrying a lantern, illuminating Eldest Miss's charming face, soft and radiant as jade. Seeing Lin San grinning at her, Xiao Yuruo was taken aback, a mixture of shyness and delight crossing her face as she glanced at him, "What are you doing here?"

"How could I not be here?" Lin Wanrong sighed, "Someone wouldn't let me in, so I had to climb over the wall. I almost broke a leg doing it."

The maid Huan'er looked him up and down, and then burst into giggles, "Brother San, how did you become so foolish? The front gate was only closed, not locked. Even General Zhenyuan could have pushed it open easily. Why didn't you try? Our Eldest Miss cares so much for you, yet you don't understand her feelings."

So the door could have been pushed open? Seriously? Lin Wanrong was dumbfounded. Ah, the pitfalls of empiricism!

"Chatty little maid," Eldest Miss's face turned red. She walked over to him, looking at him with a smile, her eyes full of tenderness. "You fool, what are you trying to prove, climbing your own home's wall? Even if you couldn't get in, a few soft words would have sufficed. Who would actually keep you out?"

"I see," Lin Wanrong smirked, "Then I'll stand outside your room tonight, saying a hundred soft words to see if you'll let me in."

"Shameless," Eldest Miss lightly huffed, her heart pounding, her face flushed to her ears.

In his memory, it seemed that a long time had passed since he last experienced such a tender moment with Eldest Miss. On this quiet night, with the moonlight veiled in mist, the two were alone and face to face, enveloped in a romantic warmth. Lin Wanrong held her small hand, gently rubbing it, forgetting even the pain on his back.

"Eh, what happened to your face?" Just as Eldest Miss was deeply absorbed in emotion, she noticed the vivid red finger marks on his face and was instantly shocked. "And what are these marks on your back? Who was so merciless to you? What happened earlier?"

Xiao Yuruo's expression turned anxious, her heart both rushed and pained. She pulled him into her embrace, her small hands gently massaging the wounds on his back, unable to hold back her tears.

Inhaling the captivating scent of Eldest Miss and feeling the pulse of her tenderness, Lin Wanrong nestled his head against her soft bosom, puffing a breath of air onto the curve there. "It's nothing, just a beautiful misunderstanding. Considering the severity of my injuries, Eldest Miss, may I make a not-so-improper request?"