

## Finest 161

### Chapter 161 The Battle of Literature and Martial Arts (Part 2)

"How did you know?" Tao Dongcheng was taken aback, but then he regained his composure and said with disdain, "Even if you do know about these foreign goods, you're just guessing blindly. Come on, tell me the name and origin of this item."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Even if you do have this item, I'm afraid you don't have much of it. I wonder which foreigner you got it from." He then turned to Xu Wei and said, "Minister Xu, for the sake of fairness, I would like to request that Young Master Tao write down both the name and origin of this item and hand it over to you for safekeeping before I make my guess. Just to prevent any possible disputes about its identity after I guess it correctly."

Xu Wei nodded and said, "Indeed, that's the fair way to do this. Young Master Tao, please write it down. Let me remind you in advance, this mysterious object might not be unknown to others. Young Master Tao, don't try to deceive me with a fake name."

Xu Wei, experienced and wise, spoke sternly. Even if Tao Dongcheng intended to cheat, he didn't have the courage. Xu Wei was renowned for being the most learned scholar in the land, and it was possible he could recognize this item. Tao Dongcheng, fearing his reproach, followed Xu Wei's instructions and wrote down a line of small characters on a piece of paper.

Xu Wei nodded slightly, and said to Lin Wanrong, "Now, you may tell us what this object is."

Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "This object, in the language of the Westerners, is called 'diamond.' In ancient Greek, it means 'unconquerable,' and in Arabic, it signifies 'the hardest.' Translated into our Great Hua language, it is called a diamond. In the eyes of the Westerners, diamonds are filled with mystery, legend, and romance. Some say it's a fragment of a fallen star, while others believe it's a crystallized tear of the gods. In fact, diamonds are not from the sky, but rather from the earth. They are natural diamonds, polished to perfection, possessing extreme hardness. Gentlemen, please observe."

As he spoke, he walked over to Tao Dongcheng, took the small diamond from the box. Tao Dongcheng was startled, "What are you doing?"

Lin Wanrong gave a smug smile, "Relax, I'm just going to do a simple experiment."

He took a small bottle of perfume from his pocket, saying, "Gentlemen, this is a glass bottle." He lightly scratched the glass bottle with the diamond, and a deep mark appeared on the bottle, while the diamond remained undamaged.

The crowd gasped in amazement. This diamond was not only sharp and hard, but also stunningly beautiful. It was indeed a rare treasure.

Lin Wanrong laughed and placed the diamond back in the box, "As you all have witnessed, the hardness of this diamond is evident. In fact, this diamond in the hand of Young Master Tao, having undergone only the most basic polishing, is of the poorest quality in terms of color, hardness, and craftsmanship. It is, indeed, a reject from the Westerners after their diamond processing."

"Nonsense!" Tao Dongcheng exclaimed in anger, "This diamond was carefully chosen by me. How could it be a reject?"

Lin Wanrong merely uttered an "Oh," inwardly relieved that the Great Hua language still translated 'diamond' as 'diamond'.

Lin Wanrong gave a faint smile, "Although Young Master Tao has this small, inferior diamond, I fear he doesn't quite understand how to appraise it. The selection of a diamond primarily depends on color, density, luster, and refractivity. Judging from these four aspects, the one in your hand is indeed a poor choice, calling it a second-grade product isn't an exaggeration. A real diamond is hard, pure, and brilliant; it withstands the test of time, with its value enduring forever. The Westerners associate the invincible diamond with enduring love, making it the best gift to express affection. Its hardness symbolizes the everlasting, unbreakable affection between a man and a woman; its spectrum of colors symbolizes the rich and splendid love between them; and its pure transparency symbolizes selfless love. The metaphor is profound."

All the people present were businessmen, possessing a strong curiosity about new things. Although they didn't understand ancient Greek, Arabic, or the languages of the West that Lin Wanrong mentioned, his explanations deeply penetrated their hearts. They found his description of the diamond so comprehensible and logical, that they believed Lin Wanrong couldn't possibly be lying. Even Tao Wanying was somewhat captivated, thinking, if what Lin Wanrong said was true, wouldn't diamonds be every woman's favorite?

Eldest Miss Xiao stared blankly at Lin Wanrong, thinking to herself, this cunning man truly knew this object and could describe it as if it was a treasured possession in his home. She wondered how much more he was capable of.

Xu Wei, the most learned scholar in the land, had encountered Westerners in his youth but had never heard of this diamond. After hearing Lin Wanrong's explanation, he couldn't help nodding. The world was vast, and there were countless things yet to be known. This Lin Wanrong indeed had wide-ranging knowledge.

The most disgruntled was Tao Dongcheng. He grunted and said, "Lin Wanrong, don't get carried away. Even if you guessed the name correctly, you didn't reveal its origin, so you haven't won yet." His words, however, admitted that the name had been guessed correctly. Upon hearing this, Eldest Miss Xiao's heart was relieved.

Lin Wanrong smiled and said, "Don't worry, Young Master Tao. I haven't talked about its origin yet."

Everyone's ears perked up, ready to hear Lin Wanrong reveal the origin.

"As for the origin of this diamond, the 'Book of Songs' says, 'The stones from other mountains can be used to polish jade.' This 'stone from other mountains,' I believe, refers to the diamond. This suggests that our ancestors had discovered diamonds within our vast China long ago," Lin Wanrong explained with a smile. Everyone present had heard of the famous quote from the 'Book of Songs', and upon careful reflection, they realized it did mean just that.

"However, this inferior diamond in Young Master Tao's hand came from the West. The earliest diamonds in the world were found in India, and later, a large number of them were produced in the Amazon Basin in South America. Later, many diamond mines were discovered in South Africa. The Westerners, with their strong military power, used aggressive tactics to seize these diamonds. After processing, they shipped them around the world. The diamond in Young Master Tao's hand comes from the West, and its origin is likely one of the three places I mentioned."

Laughing, Lin Wanrong said to Tao Dongcheng, "Young Master Tao, may I borrow this diamond again?"

Tao Dongcheng, hating the situation yet unable to refute, could only grunt in annoyance.

Lin Wanrong raised the diamond above his head and laughed, "Please take a look, everyone. The edges of this diamond are all neatly cut at right angles. Sister Liu, you're an expert in jewelry processing, can you tell us how this came about?"

Liu Yue'e took a close look at the diamond and replied seriously, "My Liu family has been crafting jade for generations, yet we could never cut it so neatly. From what I see, this must not be the result of manual cutting."

Lin Wanrong extended his thumb and said, "An expert is indeed an expert, hitting the nail on the head with a single phrase. This diamond was indeed cut by a machine to be this neat."

Everyone immediately began whispering among themselves. If even Liu Yue'e, an expert in crafting jade and gemstones, couldn't achieve such a result, how exquisite must the machine be?

Xu Wei exclaimed in surprise, "Little brother Lin, is this truly the work of Westerners? I too have met a Westerner years ago, but I never heard of them having such skills."

With a sigh, Lin Wanrong replied, "Mr. Xu, everything changes with time, we shouldn't judge things with old perspectives. Judging from the cutting of this diamond, the mechanical craftsmanship of the Westerners currently surpasses that of our Great Hua. But we have countless skilled craftsmen in Great Hua. With more effort, we'll catch up soon. We shouldn't belittle ourselves."

Xu Wei nodded in agreement. Lin Wanrong continued, "Why did I say that this diamond in Young Master Tao's hand is inferior? Besides the factors of color, brightness, and hardness that I previously mentioned for appraisal, another important point is the cutting. A real diamond is extremely valuable; it should be finely carved and carefully polished, and would never have such straightforward edges. Only the cut-offs, the inferior ones, would be like this."

Everyone agreed with Lin Wanrong's logical and insightful explanation. Xu Wei was greatly comforted and turned to Tao Dongcheng, "Young Master Tao, are you satisfied with Lin Wanrong's answer?"

Tao Dongcheng's face was pale. His knowledge about the diamond was indeed limited. After Lin Wanrong's explanation, even he felt speechless. Gritting his teeth, he said to Xu Wei, "Minister Xu, I acquired this diamond last month in Haian, from two Westerners who drifted ashore. I have no idea where they came from."

"Did these Westerners have blonde hair and blue eyes, with pale skin?" Xu Wei asked.

"Indeed, they do. I brought them with me to Hangzhou this time, intending to hand them over to you. They are downstairs now. There are several countries in the West, and I don't know which one they are from. If Lin Wanrong can figure it out, I will willingly admit defeat," Tao Dongcheng said.

In a hurry, Xu Wei waved his hand and ordered, "Bring up the Westerners."

Shortly, two soldiers brought up two disheveled Westerners who looked fatigued and sly. They were tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes, their faces pale and their eyes hollow. Their clothes were tattered, indicating they had been through a lot.

Among the people present, although they had heard of the reputation of Westerners, most of them were seeing them for the first time, causing many to exclaim in astonishment.

The Western language was vastly different from the Great Hua language, and there was no interpreter present. Xu Wei glanced at Lin Wanrong and said, "Little brother Lin, what should we do?"

Xu Wei now felt that Lin Wanrong was truly unfathomable. This Lin San seemed to know quite a lot. Since he could explain the history and origin of the diamond so clearly, perhaps he also had a way to deal with these Westerners.

However, it was Eldest Miss' first time seeing Westerners. Unable to help herself, she grabbed Lin Wanrong's sleeve and said, "Lin San, I didn't expect Westerners to be so ugly."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and replied, "Indeed, they are not as beautiful as Miss."

"Annoying!" Eldest Miss Xiao glared at him, revealing her playful side.

Lin Wanrong walked up to the Westerners, and they began chatting excitedly in a rapid-fire manner. No one in the hall could understand their language, but Xu Wei was overjoyed. Lin San could actually understand the Western language a talented individual, indeed!

As they continued speaking, everyone was surprised to see one of the Westerners take out a diamond about half the size of a little finger, offering it respectfully to Lin Wanrong.

The diamond was incredibly clear and transparent, shimmering with a dazzling brilliance under the sunlight. It was resplendent and magnificent, almost too dazzling to look at directly. Compared to Tao Dongcheng's inferior piece, this diamond was like the difference between a firefly and the bright moon, worlds apart.

Everyone was dumbfounded. The women in the hall felt their hearts race. How could such a large diamond not capture their attention?

Lin Wanrong accepted the diamond and turned around, grinning. "I've found out. This man's name is Tavernier, hailing from France. He travels between India and Europe, specializing in the diamond business. Due to a fierce storm at sea, their ship lost its way and unknowingly drifted to our Huaxia." (Note: Tavernier, a Frenchman, known as the "Father of Diamonds.")

[TL: From Wikipedia, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier was a 17th-century French gem merchant and traveler. Tavernier, a private individual and merchant traveling at his own expense, covered, by his own account, 60,000 leagues in making six voyages to Persia and India between the years 1630 and 1668.]

Xu Wei was both surprised and delighted. He looked at Tao Dongcheng and said, "Young Master Tao, do you have anything else to say?"

This victory seemed within Tao Dongcheng's grasp, but Lin Wanrong had shattered it completely. How could Tao Dongcheng not be angry? His face turned pale, and through gritted teeth, he said, "In this match, I've lost."

"Lin San!" Eldest Miss Xiao exclaimed, joyfully grabbing onto Lin Wanrong's sleeve, tears and smiles mixing on her face.

Lin Wanrong laughed, saying, "I told you earlier, I am the second most talented person in the world."

Eldest Miss Xiao covered her mouth, a mix of sadness and joy in her expression, softly crying out, "You boastful person."

Having lost in the first round, the second round would be a battle of martial skills. There was no room for further mistakes. Tao Dongcheng called someone over and whispered to him, a hint of malice gleaming in his eyes. The person beside him exuded an aura of profound martial arts skill. A single glance was enough to recognize that he was an absolute master in martial arts.

Damn it, this kid probably thinks I want to compete with them in martial arts and wants to harm me, Lin Wanrong thought, seeing through their intentions.

Eldest Miss Xiao said, "Lin San, for this round of martial skills, it's our turn to set the challenge. Have you thought of something? What kind of challenge should we propose?"

Lin Wanrong was dumbfounded. "Miss, shouldn't it be you who comes up with the challenge?"

Eldest Miss Xiao blushed for a moment. With a man supporting her in front, she seemed to have become somewhat complacent. Her face reddened as she said, "You answered the literary challenge well, so for the martial skills round, you come up with an idea."

This girl thinks I can come up with an idea just like that? Lin Wanrong smiled wryly, giving her a glance. "Miss, do you believe in me or not?"

Asking such foolish questions. Eldest Miss Xiao, annoyed, glared at him and said, "I don't like what you're saying."

Now this little girl is getting angry. Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Alright, let's say I asked the wrong question. Just listen to me later. I'll tell you what to do. Don't be afraid, understood?"

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded. "I'm not afraid. You can tell me."

Lin Wanrong stood up, saluted Xu Wei, and smiled. "Minister Xu, for this round of martial skills, Miss Xiao will represent the Xiao family in the competition."

As soon as these words were spoken, everyone was shocked. It was a martial arts competition, yet it was the delicate and tender Miss Xiao who would participate. Where did Lin San's fiery spirit go?

## Chapter 162 The Battle of Literature and Martial Arts (Part 3)

Miss Xiao was also startled, but she remembered the words Lin San had just said, and her rapidly beating heart gradually calmed down. She could only helplessly give him a glance and thought to

herself, You didn't even tell me in advance. Being with this wicked man, I'm afraid I won't be bullied to death, but I might be scared to death.

She snorted but noticed that Lin Wanrong still held the large diamond gifted by the Westerner in his hand. A trace of envy flashed in Miss Xiao's eyes, instantly dismissing her previous thoughts. She softly asked Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, what did you say to that Westerner? Why did he give you such a beautiful diamond?"

Lin Wanrong smiled mysteriously. "It's a secret," he replied.

Miss Xiao turned her head and snorted. A secret? Was it really that remarkable? She wasn't interested!

Miss Xiao participating in the contest was unexpected. After watching the battle of literature, everyone thought they would witness a fierce physical confrontation, but it turned out to be Miss Xiao from the Xiao family stepping onto the stage.

This unexpected move disrupted Tao Dongcheng's plan. Sending Miss Xiao to the front instead of Lin San meant that their previous strategy against him was in vain. They were forcing Tao Dongcheng to participate in the martial arts contest. Tao Wanying absolutely could not take the stage. If the scene of two women fighting each other spread, it would completely ruin Tao Wanying's reputation. How could she ever get married after that? But this Lin San seemed to have ulterior motives and didn't even care about Miss Xiao's reputation?

"In that case, let this foolish brother accompany the wise sister for some amusement," Tao Dongcheng smirked.

Miss Xiao's face turned red, and she angrily exclaimed, "Shameless!"

Lin Wanrong, however, remained composed. He had foreseen that Tao Dongcheng would personally take the stage. He sneered a few times, too lazy to engage in a verbal dispute with this guy named Tao.

The martial arts challenge was proposed by the Xiao family, leaving everyone puzzled, wondering what kind of martial arts method the Xiao family would employ to defeat Young Master Tao.

Xu Wei asked, "Lin San, what kind of challenge did you propose for the martial arts contest?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "My challenge is also very simple, with a straightforward and understandable name: 'Washing Hands in an Oil Pan.'"

"Washing Hands in an Oil Pan?" The name sounded terrifying. Initially, everyone regretted missing out on a fight, but upon hearing this topic, it seemed more interesting and thrilling than a mindless brawl, especially with the delicate and charming Miss Xiao participating.

Seeing the horrified expression on Tao Dongcheng's face, Lin Wanrong smirked. Damn it, this little guy thinks he's good at ambushes? I'm the ancestor of this game.

Xu Wei exclaimed in surprise, "Washing Hands in an Oil Pan? But Miss Xiao is a woman. How can she do it?"

Lin Wanrong smiled, "That's precisely to make Young Master Tao accept it wholeheartedly. Tao Dongcheng, do you dare?"

Tao Dongcheng's face turned pale. Washing hands in an oil pan was no joke. After washing once in the pan, that hand would be useless.

However, Lin Wanrong didn't wait for Tao Dongcheng's answer. He turned directly to Xu Wei and said, "Minister Xu, please instruct the inn to prepare some firewood and cooking oil and get a large pot ready. Oh, I'll go personally. Wait a moment, I'll be right back."

Xu Wei asked Tao Dongcheng, "Young Master Tao, do you have any objections?" Tao Dongcheng's face looked unpleasant, and he glared fiercely at Lin Wanrong without saying a word.

Lin Wanrong went downstairs to have the inn prepare. After a while, several staff members came up carrying a large oil pan filled with cooking oil, faintly scented with vinegar. A few others brought a basin and a stove.

This was going to be a serious affair, and the people in the hall immediately started discussing. Xu Wei glanced at Lin Wanrong and Miss Xiao. This Lin San was elusive, and they had no idea what he was up to. Everyone in the hall felt that Lin San had some trick up his sleeve, but they couldn't figure out what it was. This piqued their curiosity even more.

Lin Wanrong directed the staff to set up the stove and oil pan, and everyone focused their attention on their actions.

Lin Wanrong smiled slightly and said, "To ensure the fairness of this contest, I invite Minister Xu to light the fire."

Xu Wei nodded and took a torch from one of the staff members, tossing it beneath the stove. There was straw hidden below, and as soon as it caught fire, the flames roared to life.

"Please have Minister Xu test the oil," Lin Wanrong said.

Xu Wei took a small spoon from one of the staff members and scooped out a spoonful of oil. With everyone's eyes fixed on him, he poured the oil onto the fire. The flames instantly surged, proving that there was indeed oil in the pan.

Lin Wanrong took a few pieces of limescale and tossed them into the pan.

Under the gaze of the onlookers, the sparks ignited, and the oil pan began to boil.

Everyone in the hall, including Xu Wei, was taken aback. It was indeed oil, and it was definitely boiling. Did this mean that they really had to wash their hands in it? Their confusion grew.

Lin Wanrong said, "Please grant me five copper coins, Minister Xu."

Xu Wei took out five coins and handed them to Lin Wanrong. With a flick of his hand, the five copper coins fell into the oil pan.

The oil pan continued to heat up, the oil rolling and thick smoke billowing. Lin Wanrong looked at Tao Dongcheng and said, "Young Master Tao, these five copper coins must be retrieved in five attempts. Please retrieve them."

Facing the boiling oil pan, Tao Dongcheng's face turned pale. Retrieving coins from a boiling oil pan was no joking matter; it could cost him a hand. But if he didn't try, not only would he lose face, but the Tao family's cloth business would also be lost to the Xiao family. He stared at the boiling oil pan, contemplating: as long as Father doesn't fall, we can restart the cloth business, but if this hand is ruined, it can never be recovered.

Tao Dongcheng clenched his teeth, took a few steps back, distancing himself from the oil pan, and said, "I can't retrieve them. But if Miss Xiao can't retrieve them either, it shouldn't count as my loss."

Lin Wanrong had accurately predicted that Tao Dongcheng would take this move. He turned to Xu Wei and said, "Minister Xu, this is Young Master Tao's suggestion. If Miss Xiao retrieves the coins, then we win the second round."

Xu Wei nodded and said, "That seems fair."

Eldest Miss Xiao's face turned slightly pale. Facing the boiling oil pan, it would be a lie to say that she, as a delicate woman, wasn't afraid. But she was much stronger-willed than Tao Dongcheng. For the sake of the Xiao family, she could disregard anything.

However, Lin Wanrong smiled at her and said, "Don't be afraid, trust me. All you need to do is retrieve the coins as quickly as possible. I guarantee you'll be fine. After all, I am the second most talented person in the world."

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded and slowly walked towards the oil pan. Everyone in the hall, including the Tao siblings and Xu Wei, held their breath. It was now the most crucial moment. Could it be that this delicate and beautiful Miss Xiao would really have to sacrifice her hands in this way? That would be such a pity.

Eldest Miss Xiao stood by the oil pan, and the rising steam tinged her face with a red hue. She faintly sensed a sour smell in the air, the scent of aged vinegar. But in this highly tense moment, she had no time to think about such things.

She had only one thought in her mind: to trust Lin San. He wouldn't be wrong. Yet, even she could hear her heart pounding loudly.

Lin Wanrong also stood by the oil pan, knowing what Miss Xiao was thinking. He chuckled and said, "Don't forget, after we win, you have to help me with laundry for a year."

Eldest Miss Xiao snorted, feeling much calmer. Lin Wanrong glanced at the oil pan and noticed the bubbling at the bottom. A smile appeared on his face as he said to Eldest Miss Xiao, "Listen to me, be quick, retrieve the five silver coins swiftly, and don't delay."

Eldest Miss Xiao nodded. Her heart was about to jump out of her chest. The people below were anxiously observing every move of Xiao Yuruo. Xu Wei looked at Lin Wanrong and said, "Lin San, be careful not to hurt Miss Xiao."

Lin Wanrong slowly nodded and shouted, "Miss, retrieve the coins quickly!"

Seeing his determined and confident expression, Miss Xiao's heart steadied. She gritted her teeth and extended her jade-like hand into the oil pan.

"Ah!" Countless people in the audience exclaimed. Even Tao Wanying covered her eyes, unable to bear watching. Even Xu Wei, an experienced person, couldn't help but turn his head away.

There was no expected scream, no cry of pain. There wasn't even the slightest sound. Everyone quickly looked and saw that Eldest Miss Xiao's face showed initial fear, then surprise, and finally, delight.

When Xiao Yuruo's hand first entered the oil pan, it wasn't scalding as they had imagined. Instead, it was only slightly warm, like water for washing one's face. Although it was a little hot, it was not much hotter than washing water. She could hardly believe it. Was this really an oil pan? It was more like water for washing her face.

Lin Wanrong smiled faintly and said, "Don't wash your hands. Grab the coins quickly."

Eldest Miss Xiao responded with a joyful "Mmm" and quickly reached into the pan, retrieving one copper coin. While the astonished cries from the audience hadn't even subsided, Eldest Miss Xiao swiftly reached into the pan again, grabbing the second coin, then the third... She managed to retrieve all five copper coins from the oil pan in one go.

There was nothing but joy on her face, not a trace of pain. Looking at her delicate hand, there wasn't even a hint of burning. It remained as flawless and pure as ever.

Unbelievable! Everyone in the audience stood up and exclaimed. If they hadn't witnessed this scene with their own eyes, who would believe that Eldest Miss Xiao, a delicate woman, could retrieve five copper coins in succession from the scalding oil pan unharmed? Besides the words "miraculous" and "mysterious," there were no other words to describe it.

"How is this possible? How is this possible?" Tao Dongcheng collapsed onto a chair, murmuring to himself.

"A Statue can grow, an oil pan can wash hands. This world is vast and full of mysteries. Little brother Lin, I admire you greatly," Xu Wei sighed to Lin Wanrong.

#### Chapter 164 The Kindest Man in the World

Xu Wei sighed, saying, "Little brother Lin, yesterday you unveiled the mystery of the Buddha statue's growth, and today you've clarified the secret of washing hands in the oil pot. I consider myself well-read and knowledgeable, yet when it comes to experience, I willingly admit my inferiority to you."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Mr. Xu, I believe you're mistaken. The understanding I possess comes from the wisdom of millions of citizens of our great nation, honed through thousands of years. I merely borrowed their insights. If anyone should be admired, it should be these countless clever and wise ancestors. True knowledge comes from the people."

"Aha, 'knowledge comes from the people'." Xu Wei echoed, "Little brother Lin, your words alone make you extraordinary."

The Eldest Miss laughed, "Master Xu, don't flatter him too much. The more you praise him, the more pleased with himself he'll become."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "It seems the Eldest Miss knows me well."

Blushing slightly, the Eldest Miss thought to herself, 'Know you? It's more like being tormented by you.'

The two westerners with a dejected demeanor were still tied up on the side. The one called Tavernier upon seeing Lin Wanrong, hastily called out, "Mister Lin, Mister Lin"

'This Frenchman's English is really subpar. His pronunciation is even worse than mine,' Lin Wanrong thought, looking down on Tavernier. Despite being a Frenchman who moved between Europe and Asia, he was fluent in English, yet his pronunciation bore a thick French accent, making it less than perfect.

Xu Wei queried in surprise, "Little brother Lin, are they calling you?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Yes, but their Western tongue is not very authentic, and it's hard to understand."

The Eldest Miss added, "Indeed. Not only are these westerners less good-looking than our people of the Great Hua, but their speech is also unclear and hard to comprehend."

Lin Wanrong looked helplessly at the Eldest Miss, thinking that she had never seen real Western beauties. Those Western girls, with their unique charm and ardor, were quite enticing, bringing a different flavor than that of women from their homeland.

Xu Wei, however, didn't seem to despise the Western language, laughing, "In my youth, I also encountered a Westerner. I've always found their language difficult to understand. Little brother Lin, how did you manage to comprehend it?"

This question wasn't easy to answer. Lin Wanrong laughed, "Well, it's a long story. My great-grandfather saved a foreigner at sea and learned some English phrases from him. I'm a modest and eager learner, so I followed suit. I never expected that it would actually come in handy today."

"Ah," Xu Wei responded lightly. Yet, his expression suggested that he didn't believe it.

The Eldest Miss thought, 'You should at least come up with a better lie than that, otherwise, you'll be seen through immediately.'

"Little brother Lin, what are they saying?" Seeing the Westerner continue to babble on, Xu Wei asked.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "He's asking when we will release them."

Xu Wei pondered for a moment, then said, "In fact, as early as the previous dynasty, Westerners who fell into misfortune came to our Great Huaxia, propagating their doctrines. As a heavenly kingdom, we hold no grudges or ill will against these Westerners and have never troubled them. Let's allow them to recuperate for a few days and then we can let them return home."

[TL: Huaxia, the historical concept representing the Chinese nation]

No grudges, no hatred? Lin Wanrong shook his head. It was easy to say such things now, but would this still hold true hundreds of years later? Would there still be an Opium War, the Eight-Nation Alliance? It was an entirely different world, and what was to happen in the future, no one could predict.

He sighed, "Mr. Xu, there's a question I've never been able to figure out. I'd like to ask for your enlightenment."

Xu Wei hastily replied, "Little brother Lin, please don't say 'enlightenment'. It would mortify me. If you have something to say, please speak directly." Despite being the most learned scholar in the land, he didn't dare claim the top spot before Lin Wanrong.

Lin Wanrong asked, "Earlier you said correctly that, since the era of the previous dynasty, Westerners have been stranded in our Great Huaxia. Have you, Master Xu, ever counted how many Westerners have come to our Huaxia till now?"

Xu Wei pondered for a while, then answered, "There's never been a detailed count. There are occasional rumors among the people, but I believe there have been no less than a hundred."

Taking slow steps, Lin Wanrong asked, "So, there have been at least a hundred Westerners coming to Huaxia, arriving in batches. What does this imply, Mr. Xu?"

Xu Wei shook his head, "I am not sure."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "It shows one thing: Westerners are continuously exploring the world. They drift ceaselessly at sea, searching constantly, which is why they keep getting stranded."

Though Xu Wei seemed to half-understand, Lin Wanrong continued, "May I ask Mr. Xu, has there ever been a warrior from our Huaxia who ventured to the West?"

Xu Wei shook his head, "I have not heard of such a thing. The furthest we've sent ships is to the Ryukyu Islands and Korea, no one has ever gone to the West."

Taking a long breath, Lin Wanrong slowly said, "While Westerners are constantly exploring the world, their progress may be slow and clumsy, but this is not something we should mock. On the

contrary, we should respect them. Their pioneering spirit and exploration are exactly what we, in Huaxia, should learn from. Westerners have come to our Huaxia dozens of times, yet we know nothing about the West. Mr. Xu, don't you see the danger in this? Perhaps one morning we'll wake up to find a fleet of Western ships at our doorstep"

As Xu Wei sank into deep thought, Lin Wanrong also felt a bit annoyed. These should be concerns for the officials, so why was it bothering an ordinary man like him? However, having heard Xu Wei's words, he felt an urge to speak his mind. He decided to let it go, he was not here to save the world. Even if Martians were to invade, it had nothing to do with him. To eat well, drink well, sleep well, have a good time, that was enough for this life.

After calming himself, he said, "Mr. Xu, since you've agreed to release these two Westerners, I'd like to make a trade with them. When they return to the West, I'd like them to take along our Great Hua's silk, tea leaves, and other agricultural products, as well as the luxury items such as perfumes and soaps from the Xiao family."

Damn it, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, I'm going to sell these perfumes and soaps in France, England, all across Europe, a huge sell-off. Especially those lingerie and bras, Western women will look even hotter wearing them, especially the French girls, famous worldwide. Next time, I must have Tavernier bring a few French beauties over. I've had designs for a number of adult toys tucked away in my heart, I must get a few made, I won't rest otherwise. Lin Wanrong's heart was filled with grand ambitions.

"Little brother Lin, what do you plan to trade with them?" Xu Wei asked.

"That depends on what Mr. Xu wants," Lin Wanrong answered with a meaningful smile. A flash of understanding seemed to cross Xu Wei's eyes.

Oh Xu Wenchang, Xu Wenchang, I've said all there is to say, the rest is up to you, Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly. He hoped his words today would inspire Xu Wei, he'd done all he could. He wouldn't have time to guide Xu Wei in the future, he had to chase girls, he was busy enough as it was.

Xu Wei gave Lin Wanrong a mysterious smile, "Little brother Lin, please be our translator and tell this...So and so, to demonstrate the goodwill of our Great Hua Dynasty, we are sending skilled craftsmen to Hai'an to help these Westerners repair their ironclad ship. Ask them to cooperate fully, and explain the principles to us in detail, ideally with sketches. Once we understand, we'll definitely repair it for them. If we don't, they may have to stay in Great Hua forever"

How shameless, thought Lin Wanrong, so shameless, but I like it!

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, translating Xu Wei's words with a twist. He said he had persuaded the Minister of Revenue of Great Hua to understand and tolerate the Westerners' intrusion. The agate diamond hidden in the boot that Tao Dongcheng failed to confiscate was worth it. He also expressed Great Hua's goodwill, promising to help them repair the ship, asking them to cooperate fully and to share their knowledge fully so that they could return as soon as possible.

Tavernier gratefully said, "Mister Lin, you are the kindest man in the world. To show my gratitude, I will recommend to King Louis that all future trade between France and Great Hua be conducted by you."

"Excellent, excellent." Lin Wanrong thought, Damn it, I've accidentally become a bourgeois comprador. The phrase "the kindest man in the world" made Lin Wanrong suppress a laugh. He held back his laughter and said, "However, Mister Tavernier, you still need to practice your English more. You should try to catch up with me, ha-ha."

Lin Wanrong pulled the Eldest Miss aside and asked, "Eldest Miss, how many pieces of lingerie have been made now?"

Xiao Yuruo blushed, "Why are you asking this?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "There are still quite a few diamonds hidden on this foreigner's ship. I've agreed with him, lingerie for diamonds, it's a fantastic deal."

Xiao Yuruo covered her mouth and giggled, a blush tinting her cheeks. "You're one to think of everything. As for the lingerie, we have made quite a lot. They were originally for Jinling and Hangzhou. You can take them if you need them."

Damn, Lin Wanrong thought, I don't need those things, it's the beautiful French girls who do. He chuckled and said, "Get all the silk from our fabric shop ready and prepare some tea as well. Don't pick the finest quality, second grade is fine. These Westerners haven't tried it before, they'll consider it a treasure. We'll trade all of their diamonds, and in the future, when we have nothing to do, we can sleep on a bed of diamonds."

The Eldest Miss hummed in agreement, but then she spat out in disdain, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch. Who would want to share a bed of diamonds with you?"

## Chapter 165 Misty Rain Over West Lake

Having resolved the matter of the foreigner through a combination of cajoling and trickery, Lin Wanrong managed to please both sides and even ended up with considerable benefits for himself. Needless to say, he was greatly pleased.

As he left the Sunshine and Rain Restaurant, a soft drizzle began to fall from the sky. The early winter raindrops brought with them a biting chill, which sent shivers down their spines as they landed on their faces. In the faint mist, West Lake resembled a shy maiden veiled by a blurry silk scarf, rendering it even more mysteriously enticing.

The Eldest Miss delicately raised her oiled paper umbrella, lifted her long skirt, and slowly walked forward with small steps. Seeing her cautious demeanor, seemingly fearful of the splashing mud on her long dress, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but chuckle, "Eldest Miss, do not walk hastily. Mud on your clothes does not matter, just be careful not to let the dust settle on your heart."

The Eldest Miss glanced back at him, her eyes flashing with annoyance, "Stop speaking in riddles; I don't understand them. You have plenty of confidantes to charm with your words." As she spoke, a glimpse of a red thread was visible from within her sleeve. Upon noticing it, Lin Wanrong chuckled again, "Eldest Miss, the appearance of the red thread signifies the arrival of marriage ties. It seems that good fortune is coming your way."

Startled, the Eldest Miss looked down and indeed found a red thread from her embroidery last night lodged in her sleeve, alongside two embroidery needles. She was shocked that Lin San had spotted it. Her face turned a bright red as she muttered resentfully, "Idle chatter."

Lin Wanrong, accustomed to such light-hearted teasing, didn't mind her reaction. Xu Wei, on the other hand, found it quite interesting. "Little brother Lin," he began, "when I was your age, I wasn't nearly as carefree as you. Even though I'm old now, I can't help but admire your relaxed and easy-going lifestyle."

Laughing, Lin Wanrong replied, "Mr. Xu, I am but a simple commoner, and this carefree spirit is nothing more than an illusion of poverty. It's hardly worth your admiration. We are simply puppets manipulated by others, yet we must act grateful. As someone who prides himself on his wit, this is particularly galling."

Xu Wei replied, "Little brother Lin, I had no choice but to resort to the Xiao family today to deal with Tao Dongcheng. I hope you can understand." As a clever man himself, Xu Wei understood Lin Wanrong's subtle criticism and decided to admit it frankly.

Shaking his head and laughing, Lin Wanrong said, "Mr. Xu, I hardly understand these matters. The West Lake is simply beautiful in the rain today. How delightful it would be if I could gather a few sisters and find some entertainment."

The Eldest Miss, walking ahead, could hear every word. She turned back angrily, "Lin San, why won't you mend your ways?"

Mend my ways? Me? I always think I am someone who changes easily. When did I become so stubborn? "Miss, where have I refused to change?"

Her face flushed with anger, she replied, "In Jinling, you interacted with the courtesans of Miaoyu Pavilion, and at least my cousin was with you to discuss scholarly matters. That was tolerable. But now we're in Hangzhou, and you're entertaining such vile thoughts again. Have you forgotten Miss Qingxuan and Sister Qiaoqiao?"

Sweat poured down his face. His wives didn't control him, but it seemed this Eldest Miss wanted to. Seeing her indignant expression, it seemed like a man's visit to a brothel was the gravest sin.

In front of the Eldest Miss, Lin Wanrong turned to Xu Wei and asked, "Mr. Xu, do you think visiting a brothel is a wrongdoing?"

Xu Wei, even though he was the nation's foremost scholar, couldn't help but break into a sweat. This Lin Wanrong fellow really had no fear in speaking his mind, even about such crude topics as brothels. A more refined term would be 'pleasure quarters.' During his younger days, Xu Wei had been quite the romantic himself. However, as he grew older, he became more reserved. With the Eldest Miss present, he was unsure how to respond. He finally replied, "Well, Little brother Lin, I'm not particularly knowledgeable about the matters of pleasure quarters."

Pretending to be so pure, eh? Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Mr. Xu, you've misunderstood. I am referring to the existence of pleasure quarters, not the individuals involved. These establishments exist for a reason. Some women need money, some men have certain needs. Both the buyers' market and sellers' market exist; it's only natural that this trade would flourish. As long as no coercion is involved, it meets the needs of both parties, and taxes are paid, it's a win-win situation. Prosperity and pleasure can coexist harmoniously."

Sweat dripped down Xu Wei's forehead. Every sentence Lin Wanrong uttered was shockingly audacious. But they also had a ring of truth to them and Xu Wei couldn't find a good counterargument.

Hearing Lin Wanrong's outlandish words, the Eldest Miss was infuriated. Pointing at him, she exclaimed, "You...you're shameless and outrageous! Beyond redemption!" She spun around and ran off, not even bothering about the mud splashed on her long skirt.

Xu Wei sighed, "Little brother Lin, even though I pride myself on my sharp wit, I find it hard to keep up with your ideas."

Lin Wanrong replied, "Hardly, my thought process isn't broad enough, my ideas aren't liberated enough, I need further refinement."

Laughing, Xu Wei said, "Little brother Lin, you're certainly the most intriguing person I've ever met. I wish I had met you thirty years ago. If we were of the same age, we could have become sworn brothers. Our meetings so far are fate. Today, allow me to host you. Let's take a small boat and explore the beauty of West Lake in this rain. What do you think?"

Lin Wanrong was always a bit mischievous. Today's events had been very satisfying; he had shown off his skills, gained silver, and had a thousand reasons to celebrate. Boating on West Lake amidst the rain was a favorite pastime of the witty and romantic types like him. Both Xu Wei and Lin Wanrong, one known as the top and the other as the second best, they had every right to enjoy such an outing.

With a wave of his hand, Xu Wei signaled an attendant who approached them. Judging by his movements, he seemed to be skilled in martial arts. Probably one of Xu Wei's secret guards. Lin Wanrong wasn't surprised. After giving the attendant a few instructions, Xu Wei dismissed him.

As the two men continued, they noticed the Eldest Miss standing under a tree, looking towards them from a distance. Xu Wei chuckled, "In the end, Miss Xiao can't help but worry about you, Little brother Lin."

Lin Wanrong shook his head and said, "I fear she's not worried about me, but rather which girl from the pleasure quarters I might mistreat." Xu Wei burst into laughter. Listening to this young man, Lin Wanrong, was a joy in itself.

Seeing the two approaching, the Eldest Miss blushed. She curtsied towards Xu Wei, "Master Xu, this is just how Lin San behaves, he loves to spout nonsense. Please, do not take offense."

Sweat dripped down his brow. The Eldest Miss was actually defending him, which stirred a slight feeling of gratitude within Lin Wanrong.

Xu Wei laughed, "Miss Xiao, there's no need for such formalities. Although there's a gap of over thirty years between Lin San and me, our temperaments are quite alike. Talking with him is one of the great pleasures in life, there's no cause for taking offense."

So, I'm not the only one who likes to listen to him talk? The Eldest Miss thought but didn't utter a word.

Xu Wei spoke, "I just invited Little brother Lin for a rainy tour of West Lake. If Miss Xiao wouldn't mind, why don't you join us? It would be nice for the three of us to chat." To his surprise, Xiao Yuruo agreed with a soft hum.

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile. Wasn't the Eldest Miss usually very busy? Why was she free to join them on their trip to West Lake today? Damn, this was supposed to be a trip for drinking and soliciting courtesans. How could they bring her along?

After a while, the attendant led the three onto a luxuriously appointed houseboat. Xu Wei nodded with satisfaction and invited the others, "Miss Xiao, Little Brother Lin, please come in."

As they entered the cabin, they saw a woman sitting in the center of the room with a zither in front of her. She was in her forties or fifties, her temples touched with gray and her forehead etched with fine lines, but her face still bore the traces of past beauty.

Who was she? Lin Wanrong wondered, only to hear Xu Wei exclaim joyfully, "Qinglian, is that really you?"

Seeing Xu Wei's joyous reaction, could this be an old flame of his? Lin Wanrong pondered.

Qinglian rose and said, "I am a commoner, Su Qinglian, pleased to see you, Mr. Xu." The way she referred to herself and addressed Xu Wei was a bit odd, but Xu Wei didn't seem to mind.

"Su Qinglian?" the Eldest Miss exclaimed. "Are you the famous courtesan of West Lake, Madam Su Qinglian?"

"The Su Qinglian of the past no longer exists, Miss. Please don't bring it up," Su Qinglian looked at Xu Wei, her voice cold, but her eyes filled with resentment and sadness.

"Eldest Miss, who is this Su Qinglian?" Lin Wanrong quietly asked Xiao Yuruo.

"You don't know even this?" the Eldest Miss looked surprised, both annoyed and amused. She knew his interest in brothels, yet he didn't know such a well-known story. She wondered what he spent his time thinking about if not these vulgar matters.

"Su Qinglian was a famous opera singer in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and the top courtesan at the Elegant Breeze Pavilion of West Lake. She fell in love with Xu Wei, which was a sensation back in the day."

Sweat poured down his face. So, Su Qinglian was a courtesan who sang folk songs. When Xu Wei sought a courtesan, he had chosen his old love. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but laugh at this.

"After Master Wenchang went north to study, he never returned for many years," the Eldest Miss narrated. "Miss Su Qinglian, after Mr. Wenchang left, sealed her zither, closed her doors to guests, and made a vow. She said she wouldn't touch the zither or style her hair again until Wenchang returned, she was willing to let her beauty fade away."

The Eldest Miss sighed as she got to this part of the story. How terrifying it was for a woman to let her beloved beauty fade away. And how deep was the love behind such a decision? Su Qinglian's present state was a testament to the truth of her vows. She wouldn't have allowed her beauty to fade away otherwise.

"Mr. Wenchang left for thirty years, during which he established a family in the capital. His wife was very kind and asked Master Xu to invite Miss Su to reunite in the north. But Miss Su sent a reply with just a few words: 'My heart is loyal to you, I hope yours is the same to me,'" The Eldest Miss said, glancing meaningfully at Lin Wanrong.

At this point, Lin Wanrong understood. So, this Xu Wenchang was unfaithful, and it was fortunate that his wife was kind enough to let him accept Su Qinglian as a concubine. However, Su Qinglian had a strong character, she was like a lioness, advocating for monogamy, and hoped that Xu Wenchang only had her in his heart. The outcome was predictable.

"Thus, Miss Su waited in vain for thirty years, allowing her beauty to fade without fulfilling her wish. What a tragic life," the Eldest Miss sighed, her eyes red-rimmed as she glanced at Lin Wanrong.

Damn, did the Eldest Miss also advocate monogamy? Seeing her look, Lin Wanrong was taken aback. But then he thought that her belief in monogamy was none of his business. After hearing Su Qinglian's story, Lin Wanrong, a staunch patriarchist, felt moved. Such firmness, such deep love, was not easy. This woman was indeed worthy of respect.

"Qinglian, thirty years have passed since we last met, but you're still as beautiful and captivating as before," the first words that Xu Wenchang said made Lin Wanrong taken aback. This old man's way of coaxing girls was quite impressive, there must have been many romantic tales from his past.

"Mr. Xu, I've come to fulfill our promise from all those years ago. I vowed not to style my hair again until you returned. It's been thirty years, and finally, I can play my zither and style my hair again," Su Qinglian said, her face wet with tears. Her greying temples, under the slanting rain at West Lake, appeared especially desolate. Xu Wenchang also teared up, holding onto the table as if he could hardly stand.

Witnessing the reunion of the old lovers felt quite awkward, and Lin Wanrong, pulling the Eldest Miss, wanted to leave. But he saw her stubbornly standing still, crying harder than Su Qinglian, just like the Qiantang River bursting its banks.

Goodness, Lin Wanrong secretly stuck his tongue out. So, this girl likes watching romance dramas. He hurriedly whispered in her ear, "They are here to reminisce about old times. Why are you standing here obstructing them?"

The Eldest Miss softly acknowledged, about to step out, when a humming sound resonated in the air. It was the vibration of a zither string. Before they knew it, the silver-haired Su Qinglian was sitting beside the zither, which had not been unsealed for thirty years. She plucked the strings and sang:

"Green willows and fragrant grass along the long pavilion road,

Easy for the young to abandon others and go.

Dreams fading at the fifth morning bell atop the tower,

Sorrow of parting beneath flowers in the March rain.

Loveless is not as bitter as loving too much,

An inch of love stretches into endless threads.

The ends of the earth and the sky have their limits,

Only love, love alone, knows no end."

Her voice was no longer the heavenly melody of her youth. It carried a slight hoarseness, yet the sentiment in the song was pure and sincere, like a portrait of her life. The lack of any technique only made it more heartfelt, softly sung. The wait and longing of thirty years, the day of reunion only to find her beauty had faded, and the time had passed. How much melancholy and bitterness this period had encapsulated was all intertwined within the song, filled with sentiment and scenery, making it hard not to be moved.

The Eldest Miss cried loudly, while Lin Wanrong couldn't bear the sorrowful atmosphere. He sighed lightly and said, "Since ancient times, beauties and heroes have not been allowed to grow old in the eyes of the world"

"Lin San" The Eldest Miss, her eyes swimming in tears, looked at him and sobbed, "Would you... would you become like Master Xu?"