

## Finest 226

### Chapter 226 Scare You to Death

Lin Wanrong was momentarily stunned as he heard the news. "Where did this come from? Young Master Guo got it through bribery, but where did you, Si De, hear this?" he asked, casting a perplexed glance at Si De. "How did you manage to uncover such important news while you were out looking for boy's urine?"

Si De chuckled ingratiatingly, "This news has long been circulating in Jinling City. As soon as I heard it, I rushed back to inform you and the Young Master. The way I see it, it's better to believe that it's true than to risk overlooking it. You and the Young Master are brilliant, unparalleled talents. With the two of you taking action, won't Miss Luo be easily captured?"

Young Master Guo shook his head earnestly, "I merely intended to exchange knowledge and learn from each other at this gathering. Please don't degrade me with such presumptions."

Had this matter really stirred up such a commotion that everyone in Jinling City knew about it? Damn it! Was Luo Ning, that little minx, playing me? Unlikely, she held onto me so tightly when she embraced me. Besides, with my charm, could anyone who fell into my lap run away? It was all so confounding.

When something was handed to you, you didn't want it, but when someone took it back, you felt a twinge of desire. Men were such lowly creatures, and Lin Wanrong, being a real man, was no exception. A little annoyed, he quickly found an excuse to console himself. Just as he was about to step out, Xiao Feng came running over, panting heavily. "Brother Lin, Brother Lin, something bad has happened."

"What else has gone wrong?" Lin Wanrong asked irritably. "Brother Xiao Feng, remember not to panic when things happen, as the sage once taught us."

Xiao Feng steadied himself, gasping for breath, "Brother Lin, Commander Cheng has sent troops to arrest people."

"Commander Cheng? Cheng De?" Lin Wanrong was startled, "Arrest who?"

"They're claiming that our Xiao family was involved in a brawl in the city last night and want to take us in for questioning," Xiao Feng hurriedly explained. "Right now, Commander Cheng's son is waiting in the main hall with his men. Our Eldest Miss is currently negotiating with them."

"Commander Cheng's son? Cheng Ruinian? He led the troops here?" Lin Wanrong grunted, asking.

"It's him!" Xiao Feng spat out, "The Eldest Miss asked me to find you, telling you to stay put and let her handle everything. Any issues can be addressed after today."

She's handling it? That silly girl, did she think she could easily shoulder this matter? Dammit, this Cheng Ruinian was clearly looking for trouble. He was in a foul mood today, and he decided to give him a piece of my mind.

"Si De, put down your boy's urine. Brother Xiao Feng, let's go." Si De tossed the boy's urine he held to the ground, and Lin Wanrong grinned wickedly as he led the two toward the main hall.

Young Master Guo hastily dropped his book and sprinted after them, shouting, "Lin San, are you going to fight? I'll come with you, you have to protect me."

You are shameless enough, I despise you, Lin Wanrong thought, flipping Young Master Guo the bird. He pondered for a moment, then pulled Si De over and whispered some instructions into his ear. Si De nodded repeatedly, "Brother San, you've entrusted the right person with this task. I'll take care of it perfectly." The two broke into hearty laughter.

Long before they had approached the hall, they heard a man's cold laughter echoing. "Miss Xiao, servants of your Xiao family participated in a city brawl last night. This was witnessed firsthand. How can you deny it?"

Eldest Miss Xiao responded, "Young Master Cheng, I have reiterated multiple times. Last night, someone attempted to infiltrate our Xiao family's old mansion and destroy our workshop. The members of the Xiao family defended our property and fought against the thief. Additionally, Miss Tao Wanying, an official of the Jinling Prefecture, was present and witnessed the incident. By all accounts, my Xiao family was simply acting in self-defense. Where is there any mention of a brawl?"

Cheng Ruinian grunted, "So you claim self-defense, and it becomes self-defense? There was a mob fight, and people were maimed. There are eyewitnesses. Your sophistry will not work today. Since

Miss Xiao is unwilling to hand over the criminal, I'm afraid I have no choice but to offend you. Come, take Miss Xiao to the Commandant's Yamen."

"Hold on, hold on." Lin Wanrong sauntered into the hall with a cheerful laugh, glancing around. "Oh, so many people. Quite lively, eh?"

Upon seeing him enter, Eldest Miss Xiao's expression tightened. She hurriedly signaled to him, but Lin Wanrong pretended not to notice. He caught sight of Cheng Ruinian, who was strutting about in the Xiao family's grand hall with a dozen of his personal guards.

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong, Cheng Ruinian gave a disdainful snort. "Lin San, do you still recognize me?"

"You're standing too close. I can't see clearly." Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, then stepped back to stand beside Eldest Miss Xiao before saying, "This gentleman is quite tall, fierce, and heroic. He looks somewhat familiar. I wonder which family's uncle he might be?"

"How dare you!" A guard next to Cheng Ruinian barked, "This is the son of Commander-in-Chief Cheng De, Young Master Cheng Ruinian. You're just a lowly servant. What right do you have to speak here? Step aside."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I was wondering why he looked so familiar. It turns out to be Young Master Cheng. My apologies for my lack of recognition. How come I haven't seen you at the Miaoyu Pavilion recently? I was hoping to exchange ideas with you."

Mention of Miaoyu Pavilion stirred up new resentments in Cheng Ruinian. A flash of anger crossed his face, "Lin San, I have no time for idle talk today. The Xiao family was involved in the city brawl last night, and you were the ringleader. Come, take both Lin San and Miss Xiao back to the Yamen."

Lin San appeared shocked, "Brawl? What are you talking about? We are all law-abiding citizens. The incident yesterday was a catastrophe for our Xiao family. Look at our brother here--" Lin Wanrong pointed at Si De. Si De, very cooperative, raised his head, revealing the bruises, "Those thieves broke into our Xiao mansion, smashed whatever they found, and slashed at whoever they met. This brother here almost lost his life. Our Xiao family suffered property damage, our workshop was destroyed, and we lost tens of thousands of taels of silver. We were in despair over our grievances. How can Young Master Cheng mistake us, the victims, for the perpetrators of a brawl? This is an enormous misrepresentation."

Cheng Ruinian laughed coldly, "So you are wronged when accused of brawling, huh? I have an eyewitness. Come, bring the witness--"

As he spoke, a skinny man with a shifty gaze swiftly entered the grand hall. He bowed to Cheng Ruinian, flattering, "I am Chen Xiaosong. It's an honor to meet you, Young Master Cheng."

Cheng Ruinian nodded, saying, "Chen Xiaosong, recount what you saw yesterday in front of everyone. Remember, you must tell the truth."

Before Chen Xiaosong could respond, Si De pointed at him, his fingers trembling. Fury blazed in his eyes. He tried to speak, but anger rendered him speechless. Suddenly, his body shook, and he began to fall backward.

Lin Wanrong, quick as lightning, caught him, exclaiming, "Si De, what's wrong? My good brother, what happened to you? You mustn't die."

"It's him... it's him," Si De managed to gasp out, his face pale as a ghost. He glared at the witness with a look of pure fury, proclaiming loudly, "Brother San, Miss Xiao, it was this man who barged into the Xiao house last night, smashing and stealing. Here, here, and here," Si De gestured to various parts of his body, pain evident in his voice, "all were hit by him. He even slashed me with a knife, nearly taking my life. You heartless beast! After harming the Xiao family and attempting to kill me, I'll fight you to the death!"

A few crocodile tears sprang from Si De's eyes. Lin Wanrong gave a quiet thumbs-up while his face remained a picture of grief. He hurriedly grabbed Si De, comforting him, "Don't worry, brother. We will take care of this murderer. Xiao Feng, go report this to the Jinling Prefectural Government immediately. Say we've identified the robber who barged into the Xiao mansion and injured people with a knife last night. Si De, remember his appearance to describe it to the court artist later, so they can issue a wanted notice. You murderer, you've walked right into hell's gate. Let's see where you can run to now."

Before Chen Xiaosong could speak, he was doused with a bucket of dirty water. Unable to restrain himself, he protested, "You're lying. I didn't kill anyone. It was Brother Long who slashed you. He led the attack last night. I was only keeping a lookout outside. I never set foot in the Xiao mansion."

"Oh" Lin Wanrong, Si De, Xiao Feng, and Young Master Guo all exclaimed together, "So it was Brother Long who did the slashing, and you were keeping watch. We understand. And where is this Brother Long now?"

"Brother Long is at Young Master Cheng's..." Chen Xiaosong was interrupted by a sudden coughing fit from Cheng Ruinian. Cheng Ruinian glared at Chen Xiaosong, yelling, "Chen Xiaosong, what nonsense are you spouting!"

"Oh, we understand!" Lin Wanrong chuckled, turning to Cheng Ruinian, "Young Master Cheng, we understand. Do you?"

Cheng Ruinian turned an unhealthy shade of green but remained silent. Miss Xiao saw through the situation and looked at Cheng Ruinian with a cold smirk, "Young Master Cheng, is this the witness you brought? How convenient it is that your witness turns out to be the culprit who wreaked havoc in my Xiao house last night, and he admitted it himself. Guards!"

At Miss Xiao's delicate shout, Xiao Feng and Si De promptly responded, "At your service!"

Miss Xiao elegantly pointed her slender finger at Chen Xiaosong, saying, "Arrest this thief and deliver him to Jinling Prefectural Government for investigation."

At this moment, Si De was far from his earlier dispirited state. He was energized and was about to join Xiao Feng and others to rush forward, but Cheng Ruinian interrupted, "Hold on, I dare anyone to try."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Young Master Cheng, I am naturally timid. Please don't scare me."

Miss Xiao raised her delicate eyebrows, her voice stern, "Young Master Cheng, today you brought witnesses to my residence to accuse us, suggesting that the Xiao family was involved in a brawl. However, as everyone witnessed, this man you brought confessed that he was the thief who attacked the Xiao mansion last night. What's wrong with us arresting him? Or, are you intending to shelter him? If you, Young Master Cheng, are covering up for criminals with such fervor, my Xiao family, although weak, will not allow ourselves to be bullied. I'm ready to see the officials with you."

"The right and wrong are convoluted. It's not something that can be explained with a few simple words. The court will decide. You better come with me to my father's yamen and explain everything properly," Cheng Ruinian snorted.

He gave a signal to his personal guards behind him. They immediately lunged forward to seize Miss Xiao and Lin Wanrong. Even though Miss Xiao had a thousand reasons, Cheng Ruinian was clearly

just stirring up trouble, never allowing her a chance to argue her case. She was both startled and angered, and was about to shout, but Lin Wanrong grabbed her sleeve and offered a reassuring smile.

Xiao Yuruo looked at him and felt a sense of calm. She stopped struggling. As the guards were about to grab the corner of her dress, Lin Wanrong slammed the table and roared, "Cheng Ruinian, you are quite bold!"

This sudden outburst, fueled with his inner strength, sounded like a thunderclap, leaving Cheng Ruinian pale and collapsing into his chair.

"Lin San, what, what are you trying to do?" Seeing Lin Wanrong's cold smile and dismissive gaze, Cheng Ruinian stuttered nervously.

"What am I going to do? I should be asking you what you're trying to do!" Lin Wanrong smirked, "You barged into the Xiao mansion with your soldiers. Are you planning to rebel?"

This accusation was so severe that even a stone statue might be frightened. The few guards, who were about to advance, hastily stopped, looking at each other, no longer daring to take another step.

"Rebel?" In his shock, Cheng Ruinian's heart pounded, and he could no longer sit still. He jumped from his chair, stuttering, "What rebellion? Lin San, you, you, are really bold."

Lin San laughed, "Cheng Ruinian, my dear Young Master Cheng, when I accuse you of rebellion, do you think I'm falsely blaming you?"

Everyone in the hall was frightened into silence. Lin Wanrong's accusation was indeed terrifying. Anyone would be overwhelmed. Cheng Ruinian turned pale and said, "Lin San, don't slander me. Be careful, or I'll take you to court."

Lin Wanrong snorted dismissively, "Going to court? At least you, Young Master Cheng, remember your place and know that you are not an official. In plain words, even though you have a commander as a father, you should remember your own status. You hold no official post and have no achievements. Like me, you are just a commoner."

"Heh, a mere civilian, yet you march in with soldiers who serve the court, trespassing into other's residences, kidnapping, and even committing murder. What's more, the ones you've abducted are no

common folk, but descendants of the esteemed Mr. Xiao, a man awarded by the Emperor himself. The Emperor's very own title for Mr. Xiao hangs above the doors of the Xiao residence, revered by countless individuals. Who dares to behave so brazenly in front of his house? Yet, here we are today, Young Master Cheng, you openly defy the Emperor, leading soldiers to attack. Heh, you must've enjoyed killing, blatantly standing against the Emperor. If this isn't treason, then there's no justice in the world! Heh, you've done well, quite arrogant, even more so than myself."

Si De and Xiao Feng broke into cold sweats as they listened to these words. From a small arrest operation, their brother had made such a grand case, implicating Cheng Ruinian in treason; it was indeed an extraordinary talent. The Eldest Miss gave him a glance, sighing internally. Such a gift of the gab was wasted if not employed as a diplomat.

Listening to this, Young Master Guo on the side gave Lin San a thumbs up, "Lin San, you're truly amazing!" Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself, considering himself quite the silver-tongued devil.

Cheng Ruinian, breaking into a cold sweat, hadn't expected that coming here to arrest a few people would lead to such an accusation. If his father were to find out about this, it would be disastrous.

"Lin San, you have quite a sharp tongue" Cheng Ruinian gritted his teeth, "These soldiers are my family, not an army!"

"Family members in armor? Are you raising a private army?" Lin Wanrong's eyes widened in surprise. "That's even worse, Young Master Cheng, seems like you're ready to commit to this path of no return. Alas, may Buddha bless you."

When it came to verbal sparring, who could be a match for Lin San? Cheng Ruinian wiped the sweat from his brow, hurriedly trying to justify himself, "No, no, they are infantrymen; I've only borrowed them temporarily." He was in such a state of panic that his words barely made sense.

"Infantrymen, temporarily borrowed, oh, I see." Lin Wanrong sneered. "Young Master Cheng, let's say, hypothetically, the Xiao family was indeed involved in a brawl, it's not within the jurisdiction of the city's command post to handle, it's a local issue, not military. It should be managed by the local prefecture or governor's office. The city commander's post only governs provincial military matters and cannot interfere with politics. It is under the regulation of the governor to prevent someone from exploiting military power to plot a rebellion. Now, not only have you privately mobilized the infantry, but you've also interfered in local affairs and provoked the imperial might by trespassing the Xiao residence. Tsk tsk, if this news reaches the Ministry of War, the censor, and the Emperor's ears Ah, these are all grievous offenses, Young Master Cheng. I must say, your ambition might be a tad too grand."

Lin Wanrong lamented, showing a sympathetic face, and patted Cheng Ruinian on the shoulder. "Brother Cheng, my condolences."

Darn it, he would scare him to death if need be. Lin Wanrong chuckled darkly; it was satisfying to dump all the blame on someone else. While physically eliminating an enemy was gratifying, destroying an enemy mentally was the highest realm, a direction he was moving towards. However, today's incident was indeed strange. Given the cunning nature of Cheng De, why would he send his son to make a fool of himself? It was likely that this Cheng lad had secretly slipped away from his father to stir trouble.

Cheng Ruinian was as pale as a sheet, unable to utter a single word. He was an inept fool, not even comparable to Tao Dongcheng, who had been stripped of his power. Lin Wanrong had seen through him that day at Miaoyu Pavilion when he was vying for the attention of Qin Xian'er out of jealousy.

The Eldest Miss gently tugged at his sleeve and whispered, "You're always good at fabricating reasons, and they sound rather terrifying."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Eldest Miss, it's not about scaring people. The struggle within the court is thousands of times more intense than this. Take today's matter, for instance. To us, it seems like a trivial issue of the Cheng lad arbitrarily arresting people. But if it falls into the hands of scheming old foxes, they would magnify this incident infinitely, raising it to a matter of national and ethnic importance. Just as I had explained earlier, once the report is submitted, a seemingly simple issue becomes serious. The Emperor would read of private military mobilization, interference in government affairs, and contempt for imperial power. Goodness, aren't those allegations serious when combined? I tell you, most of the impeaching memorandums the Emperor sees are like this. Therefore, deceiving the Emperor is the easiest thing."

The Eldest Miss covered her lips and chuckled, her cheeks flushed, eyes filled with softness. She softly said, "You say others are old foxes, but I see you as an unmistakable little fox. If you decide to deceive the Emperor, nobody could beat you at that."

The Eldest Miss looked incredibly alluring. Lin Wanrong's heart pounded wildly. If he was a little fox, she was a seductive little fox spirit, and her sisters were no less fox-like.

"What are you gawking at?" The Eldest Miss blushed and scolded him lightly, lowering her voice, "You're not afraid others will see."



"Heh, deceiving the Emperor doesn't interest me. I'm more into fooling princesses and concubines," Lin Wanrong teased.

The Eldest Miss's face changed, her alluring aura gone, and she turned away, saying, "You vulgar man, I won't talk to you anymore."

This girl, her mood changed faster than flipping a book. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. While he and the Eldest Miss bantered, Cheng Ruinian stood awkwardly nearby, unsure whether to stay or leave.

What, are you expecting me to invite you for lunch? Lin Wanrong was about to urge Cheng Ruinian to scam when suddenly, there was a clamor of gongs and drums outside the mansion. A servant rushed in, his face filled with joy, and shouted, "Miss, Brother San, great joy, great joy!"

The Eldest Miss's face, which had just returned to normal, was immediately flushed again. She chastised the servant, "You know not how to speak; who's joyful with him?"

Lin Wanrong laughed awkwardly, "What great joy? The time for great joy hasn't arrived yet."

The servant, panting heavily, said, "Brother San, it's a grand celebration. Both the Prefect and the Governor have come together to bestow a farewell upon our Xiao family."

"A farewell?" Lin Wanrong kicked him on the backside, laughing, "What bestow a farewell? Be clear next time, it's bestow a plaque."

"Right, right, bestow a plaque, bestow a plaque!" The servant quickly corrected himself.

The Eldest Miss looked at Lin Wanrong in confusion, and talked to herself as if asking him, "Why would the Prefect and the Governor bestow a plaque on us?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "If someone doesn't talk to me, even if I know, I wouldn't tell her."

The Eldest Miss huffed, about to retort when the sound of drums and music filled the courtyard, announcing the arrival of a group of visitors. Leading the procession from the Governor's Mansion was Luo Min's messenger, whom he had met at the opening of Food for Immortals, and standing next to him was the grinning Luo Yuan, who was making a bow towards Lin Wanrong.

The one leading from Jinling Prefect was a young miss, followed by a group of officials. Recognizing a few of them, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but laugh. Weren't these the very men he had fought with in Hangzhou that morning? Why had they willingly come to his door today? The young miss, bearing the surname Tao, gave Lin Wanrong a slight smile, a touch of blush gracing her features.

Oh dear, why was this Tao girl here again? Didn't they finish their conversation yesterday? Before Lin Wanrong could finish his thought, he heard the Eldest Miss ask, "Wanying, what's going on?"

Tao Wanying responded with a smile, "Yuruo, no need to ask just yet. Prepare to receive the plaque."

## Chapter 227 Extortion

Several people from the Jinling Prefecture office and the Governor's office were carrying a plaque each, swathed in red silk, the content of which remained unknown.

The Eldest Miss didn't want to converse with him. She gave him a glance, her delicate hand pointed towards him, then towards the plaque from the Jinling Prefecture office, indicating that he should unveil it.

Realizing she was communicating in sign language, Lin Wanrong grinned, thinking to himself, You think you're the only one who can do this? I'm an expert. He mimicked her actions, pointing towards her and then the plaque from the Governor's office, meaning, You should unveil that one.

Upon seeing him mimic her, Xiao Yuruo blushed uncontrollably, a mix of shyness and anger causing her to stamp her foot furiously, This fool, utterly annoying.

"Miss Tao," Lin Wanrong cheerfully asked, "Shall I unveil yours? Would that be alright?"

Tao Wanying gently nodded and replied, "This is my gift to you; of course, you should be the one to unveil it."

In the midst of hearty laughter, Lin Wanrong and the Eldest Miss simultaneously pulled back the red silk, revealing the eight gilded characters on the two plaques to the crowd: "Loyal and Honest; Wisdom and Bravery."

"Ah, who's praising me like this? How embarrassing," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. Tao Wanying said to Xiao Yuruo, "Sister Yuruo, I have reported your family's heroic stand against the thieves yesterday to the Prefect. The Prefect was very pleased and relayed it to the Governor. Both highly appreciate the significant effort your family has made to maintain peace in Jinling city, and they present these plaques as tokens of their commendation."

'Loyal and Honest; Wisdom and Bravery?' Lin Wanrong smirked inwardly, 'Did this little girl come up with these four words? She's still pondering over that incident. This plaque gift is pure nonsense, probably Governor Luo's effort to legitimize the Xiao family after hearing about last night's event. Good thing he's so considerate, it wasn't in vain that I advised him.' He nodded with a smile towards Wanying, "Miss Tao is too kind. I thank you on behalf of my Eldest Miss."

The messenger from Governor Luo's mansion added, "As Miss Tao said, Governor Luo deeply appreciates the Xiao family's courageous and heroic actions. Not only that, he was greatly impressed when the Xiao family defeated the king of couplets from the Seven Northern Provinces at the old lady's birthday banquet, bringing glory to the scholars of the south. Hence, this plaque is given to show gratitude."

Luo Yuan bowed with a grin, "Exactly, Miss Xiao, brother Lin, allow me to congratulate you both first!"

The Eldest Miss responded, "Thank you, Young Master Luo, Miss Tao. Your kind gestures towards my family fill us with gratitude." Servants presented red packets, which she personally handed to the bearers of the plaques from both mansions.

Upon seeing Luo Yuan's gleeful expression, Lin Wanrong thought to himself, 'Your father has played a good card. He silenced that Cheng Ruinian, leaving him to eat humble pie. However, your sister is looking for a suitor, you could have at least informed me, causing me such embarrassment yesterday.'

The magistrate of Jinling Prefecture and the Governor of Jiangsu had already concluded yesterday's event as a brave act of self-defense against thieves. Cheng Ruinian felt even more awkward, deeply regretting his presence here today. However, with all eyes upon him, he had no idea how to react and could only stand there, his face sullen, without uttering a word.

Luo Yuan feigned surprise as if he was just noticing Cheng Ruinian. He exclaimed, "Ah, isn't this Brother Ruinian? What brings you here? Are you here to offer congratulations too?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled slyly, "Young Master Cheng has come to rebel"

"To pay a visit, I've come to pay a visit," Cheng Ruinian, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead, hastily interjected, overtaking Lin Wanrong's words.

"Oh, to pay a visit?" Luo Yuan queried with a smile, "Since when have you and the Xiao family been acquainted? This is news to me."

"We weren't acquainted before," Lin Wanrong mysteriously smiled and added, "But since he visited today, he is now. Isn't that right, Young Master Cheng?"

Under such circumstances, Cheng Ruinian had no choice but to nod in agreement. Lin Wanrong continued, "Young Master Cheng and I are old friends. We've had our share of drinks together in Miaoyu Pavilion. He came here today with no grand intentions. He's just a bit tight on cash recently and looking to secure some silver. Isn't that so, Young Master Cheng?"

"Indeed, indeed," Cheng Ruinian nodded, "I'm running short on money recently. I came to borrow some silver from Brother Lin. Now that I have the silver, I won't overstay my welcome. I'll take my leave."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Brother Cheng, why be so formal? We share a bond over drinks; there's no need for such courtesy. Besides, this sum of fifty thousand taels of silver, I am merely the guarantor. You borrowed it from Miss Xiao, so it's her you should thank."

Fifty thousand taels of silver? Everyone present secretly gasped. Such a colossal sum! What did Young Master Cheng need so much money for? And would Miss Xiao agree to lend it? The more astute ones began to sense the game afoot.

Hearing Lin Wanrong brazenly name such a huge sum, Cheng Ruinian paled with shock, he protested angrily, "You"

"You what?" Lin Wanrong shot back with a sinister tone, "Didn't you come to visit?" He deliberately blurred the pronunciation of "visit" with "rebel".

Others may not have noticed the difference, but it was enough to unsettle Cheng Ruinian. 'This lad wants my life,' he thought, realizing the so-called witness was still present, and Luo Yuan, his nemesis, might reveal his intentions. That would be a colossal blunder.

Cheng Ruinian, seething with anger, lowered his voice so only the two of them could hear, "Lin San, is this extortion?"

"Extortion?" Lin Wanrong replied with a strange smirk, "From where do you get that? I wouldn't dare coerce the esteemed Young Master Cheng. You came here today solely to 'rebel,' didn't you?"

Cheng Ruinian suppressed his rage with tremendous willpower, grinding his teeth, he conceded, "Fine, if that's the case, I thank Miss Xiao. I assure you, I will repay the fifty thousand taels promptly."

Enraged, he didn't wait for anyone to reply and hurriedly began to leave with his entourage. Lin Wanrong called out after him, laughing loudly, "Why the rush, Young Master Cheng? There's no need to hurry."

Cheng Ruinian turned back, glowering at him, "Is there anything else?"

Lin Wanrong put on a benevolent face and said, "Young Master Cheng, it's not for me to say, but one must be decent. Having borrowed fifty thousand taels of silver from Miss Xiao, you should at least make a note of debt. Miss Xiao is kind and upright. She lent the money willingly, but we should still be conscious, shouldn't we?"

Cheng Ruinian felt like his lungs were about to explode. He was extorting him for fifty thousand taels and demanding a note of debt? Was there no justice in this world? However, since he had allowed Lin San to obtain some leverage over him, and the situation had escalated to such a point, he could only accept the loss and find a way to make it up in the future. With this in mind, he remained silent, swiftly penned a note of debt for fifty thousand taels of silver, signed his name, and left in a huff.

Lin Wanrong held the note, inspecting it with satisfaction. 'You think you're wicked?' he thought, 'I can be even more so.' Eldest Miss Xiao approached him and whispered, "You, even scamming a high-ranking official's son. Aren't you afraid of his revenge?"

Startled, Lin Wanrong replied, "Eldest Miss, you're speaking to me again?"

Accusing him of being an ingrate in her mind, Xiao Yuruo felt a mix of anger and embarrassment. As she turned to leave, Lin San caught her sleeve, laughing, "Don't be angry. It's just a joke. I like teasing you, don't I?"

Eldest Miss Xiao retorted, "I kindly converse with you, and you persist in mocking me. I'd be a fool to trust you in the future."

Lin Wanrong sighed, "This Cheng De, he's fully fixated on us now. Cheng Ruinian's visit today is likely just the beginning."

Hearing him speak of the serious matter, Eldest Miss Xiao stopped her antics. She frowned and asked, "Then why do you continue to provoke Cheng Ruinian?"

Lin Wanrong gave a bitter smile, "My dear Eldest Miss, why don't you understand? Even if I didn't provoke Cheng Ruinian, would Cheng De let us go? Our Xiao family is already a thorn in their side. They won't rest until we're removed."

Eldest Miss Xiao sighed softly, "My Xiao family seems cursed, attracting such formidable foes."

"The taller the tree, the harder the wind blows. Our soap and perfume business is flourishing, and they're green with envy. If they can't join us, they're naturally left with destruction," Lin Wanrong calmly explained, "In any case, we're already at odds. Instead of being oppressed by them, we might as well oppress them first."

With Xu Wei's troops on hand, and Luo Min soon to take action against Cheng De, Lin Wanrong wasn't afraid. He chuckled, shaking the promissory note in his hand. 'With this note, in a few days, I'll have Si De come to your door to collect the debt. If you refuse to pay, I'll go to the yamen to beat the drum and air my grievances. Luo Min would probably love to see this, making a spectacle that everyone in Jinling City knows about. Let's see what you can do then, old dog.'

Miss Xiao had her people hang the two plaques. The Xiao family, of course, was overjoyed, especially the household servants who had fought alongside Brother San the night before. Not only did they enjoy the fight, but they also received plaques personally bestowed by the City Prefect and the Governor - a supreme honor. 'Living the life of a servant, yet managing to erect an archway as an emblem of virtue - Brother San truly is a model for our times.'

Tao Wanying glanced at Lin Wanrong before timidly stepping forward, "Lin San, there is something I want to ask you."

"Miss Tao, you're toopolite. Helping others brings joy, so feel free to speak your mind," Lin Wanrong replied, his mood buoyant after having dealt with Cheng Ruinian. This made him regard the young Tao Wanying much more kindly.

"If I ask, promise not to get angry," Tao Wanying ventured, carefully watching him as she spoke in a low voice.

"Miss Wanying, since when have you become so courteous? It was not like this before," Lin Wanrong teased with a flirtatious smile.

At the mention of the past, a blush crept up Tao Wanying's cheeks. Biting her lip, she queried, "Tell me, did you do something to my brother?"

#### Chapter 228 The Good Man, Lin San

"Your brother? Doing underhanded tricks? Miss Tao Wanying, where did you get that idea? Do you see me as that kind of person? Look at how straight my spine is, how honest my gaze. Do you really think I'm that kind of man?" Lin Wanrong opened his eyes wide in innocence: "I am as innocent as a spring onion sleeping with tofu!"

"Spring onion sleeping with tofu?" Tao Wanying asked in confusion, "What does that mean?"

"Spring onion sleeping with tofu it means we're both completely transparent, nothing hidden!" Lin Wanrong said with a mischievous grin.

Blushing furiously, Tao Wanying lowered her head in embarrassment: "Lin San, why are you talking nonsense again? Weren't you always so honest?"

Honest? Lin Wanrong wiped the sweat off his forehead. He used to tease and scold this girl and she thought he was honest. Now when he was speaking nicely, had he suddenly become indecent? He had heard of some people having a masochistic streak. Could they be referring to her? Perhaps, whips and candle wax might be suited for this girl.

Laughing heartily, Lin Wanrong said, "Miss Tao, I am still the same old Lin San. It's just that your mood when speaking with me has changed, so your perception of me has changed as well. Oh, by the way, Miss Tao, you mentioned something about your brother? What tricks did he play? Do share, I might be able to offer some advice."

Tao Wanying sighed lightly and said, "It's a long story. It began on the day you set us free," she glanced at Lin Wanrong and quickly asked, "Lin San, are you really not angry with me for what happened that day?"

"Not at all!" Lin Wanrong generously replied, "It was a moment of anger that led to your impulsiveness. It's understandable, who doesn't have a beastly side? Besides, didn't you also pay the price for your impulsiveness?"

Tao Wanying's eyes welled up with tears, "Lin San, thank you. I never expected you to be such a kind-hearted person. I robbed you, yet you bore no grudge. I wronged you, yet you kindly explained on my behalf. Lin San, you truly are the most benevolent person in the world."

Goosebumps erupted all over Lin Wanrong's body at her words. If it was about being gullible, this girl could take second place, and no one would dare claim the first. All she could think about were his good deeds. Why didn't she remember when he had tripped her on their way to Hangzhou? This girl really had a masochistic streak.

"Of course," Lin Wanrong replied unabashedly, "I have a nickname, the Honest Young Man. Being known as the 'Seven Times a Night' man isn't without reason."

Hearing his absurdity, Tao Wanying couldn't help but laugh, "You've never known modesty."

Tao Wanying might not have the beauty of a lady, but her ample buttocks and bosom compensated for that. Lin Wanrong stole a glance at her, wondering if she had been eating hormones to grow. Her body was voluptuously appealing; she likely belonged to the category of a 'grip the railings, tear the sheets' kind of woman, too exciting for words. That Hou kid was too lucky.

Seeing the conversation with this girl was getting nowhere, Lin Wanrong quickly changed the topic, "Oh, Miss Tao, let's get back to the main point. What exactly happened to your brother?"

Tao Wanying didn't know how she had strayed so far from the topic. She laughed sheepishly, then continued, "After I woke up that day, I walked back a distance and found my brother. He was lying on a slope, his body burning hot but unconscious. I had no idea what happened to him. And at that



time, I thought that I..." She blushed and lowered her head, "...you know what I thought. I believed something terrible had happened to me. Then seeing my brother in that state, unresponsive despite my calls, I couldn't help but cry. It wasn't until our house soldiers arrived and woke him with cold water..."

Having been drugged, of course, he would need to be splashed with cold water. Lin Wanrong feigned sympathy, "Ah, poor Young Master Tao, he must have been soaked through, right? How unfortunate! Catching a cold wouldn't be good. Alas, it's all my fault."

Tao Wanying hurriedly interjected, "Don't misunderstand, I'm not blaming you. We were enemies at that time; you knocking my brother out was inevitable. Besides, you kindly let him go later. None of this is your fault."

This girl is becoming more considerate, thought Lin Wanrong with inward glee. "Then what happened next?" he asked.

Tao Wanying's face was so red it looked like it would drip. She said softly, "After my brother woke up, he didn't seem to recognize anyone. He would hug anyone he saw, and he spoke nonsense"

Lin Wanrong knew exactly what sort of nonsense she was referring to. He acknowledged her explanation with a grunt and let her continue, "Later, one of our soldiers figured it out and said that he was... desiring women" Her face was a deep shade of red, and she couldn't continue.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "I see. But why would your brother act that way? I only knocked him out and left him by the roadside. Could some beast have bitten him?"

Tao Wanying forced herself to suppress her embarrassment, "I don't know. Later, we quickly took him to a small town and found a brothel, and then he"

"What did he do?" At the climax of the story, Lin Wanrong shamelessly asked.

Covering her face with her hands, Tao Wanying blushed even deeper, "He shamelessly indulged himself with those women until the next morning."

"Those women? How many were there? Be specific, were there ten?" Eager to know the potency of the drug, Lin Wanrong asked with concern.

"Perhaps four or five, all of them were shameless women," Tao Wanying said softly.

What the hell! Was the potency of the drug so strong? Could Tao Dongcheng, that little worm, entertain four or five women and enjoy himself until dawn? That was nearly half as many as him, it was outrageous. Gao Qiu, that big lecher, why didn't he contribute more of this fun stuff? Next time, he must take several doses of the "Buddha's Big Stick" for personal use. However, considering that Tao Dongcheng had already been severely impaired, with this additional torment, even an iron rod would be incapable of withstanding it, let alone the fragile corpus cavernosum. This kid was undoubtedly done for.

"Well, Miss Tao, you know me as a man of honesty and integrity. I swear I didn't do anything to your brother. Besides, his beastly behavior of tormenting women is something that couldn't be induced by any of our deeds. I suspect it's the result of his own thoughts." Lin Wanrong spoke with a righteous air, his heart already elated.

"I don't know either," Tao Wanying sighed softly. "But ever since that day, my brother has completely changed. He indulged himself in pleasure every day, his health worsened, and he eventually stopped going out. He would invite courtesans to our home, only to drive them away after a short while. He grew more and more irritable, throwing things around. Neither my father nor I could persuade him, and he lost all his vitality, becoming thin and frail."

As Tao Wanying recounted the tale, she began to cry softly. Lin Wanrong listened with great satisfaction. The fact that he hadn't allowed this Tao guy to start embroidering was already being generous.

"Because of all this, my father has turned white with worry and lost interest in everything. He had a good relationship with Mr. Cheng De, but recently it has also cooled down." Tao Wanying sobbed, "Lin San, you're so smart, is there any way to save my brother? I don't want to see my father and brother become like this. Can you help them?"

Save him? Damn, how was he supposed to fix what was broken? Could he perform an organ transplant, replacing it with a dog's part? Honestly, considering her brother's actions, replacing it with a dog's part would be an insult to the intelligent canine species.

"Miss Tao, I sympathize with your situation deeply, but I'm afraid I can't help with this. Alas, your brother, smart as he was, has been misguided. I hope he will turn around soon and redeem himself," Lin Wanrong said with feigned compassion.

Tao Wanying acknowledged his words with a faint hum, "Thank you, Lin San, you really are the best person in the world. I've kept all these things to myself and didn't know who to talk to. Sharing it with you today has lightened my heart."

With a gloomy expression, Tao Wanying left. Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh and thought, My strategies are growing more diverse. Luo Yuan came over and patted Lin Wanrong on the shoulder, a mysterious smile on his face, "Big brother, I am utterly impressed by you."

"Impressed by what?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

Pointing towards Tao Wanying, Luo Yuan laughed, "Miss Tao, crying and laughing in front of you, I think she might have fallen for you."

Damn, that's the funniest joke I've ever heard. If this girl could fall for me, that would be an injustice to the universe. But Little Luo, your sister really does like me. Lin Wanrong chuckled, replying casually, "My relationship with Miss Tao isn't what you imagine. There's been a misunderstanding, which we'll clear up soon. Speaking of which, how's your sister?"

Luo Yuan excitedly replied, "You wouldn't believe it. Big brother, after you saw her yesterday and she had sister Qiaoqiao's company, she started feeling much better. She was talking and laughing, and by this morning, she's completely recovered. If I didn't know that my sister wasn't into you, I would have thought it was your strength that helped her."

Doesn't fancy me? Lin Wanrong shot him an exasperated glance, "You underestimate me, lad. If I wanted to, not even a bitch could escape my grasp in this world. Yet Luo Ning's mixture of words and laughter left him wondering, was it because of him or was she just excited about her choice of husband?"

With a mysterious look, he asked Luo Yuan, "Little Luo, have you heard any rumors lately, about your sister?"

Luo Yuan looked puzzled, "No, I've been at home for the past few days and haven't heard anything. Big brother, is there some news?"

Damn, this matter was indeed strange, even Little Luo didn't know. Of course, he couldn't indulge in gossip about Little Luo's own sister in front of him, so he laughed it off with a few vague words.

Having bid farewell to two separate parties, the Eldest Miss was somewhat tired and headed straight back to rest. Lin Wanrong was about to leave when he saw two figures approaching from outside the hall. The man in the lead, lightly stroking his beard, greeted him with a smile from afar, "Little brother Lin, it's been a while."

Upon seeing this man, Lin Wanrong's heart swelled with joy. Here it comes, the big event was finally unfolding. Damn, Cheng De, I wonder how much longer you can continue your arrogance. He laughed heartily and stepped forward to greet him, "Oh my, Master Xu, I've missed you dearly."

## Chapter 229 The Military Strategist

Xu Wei clearly was not used to such an enthusiastic embrace, he laughed awkwardly and said, "Little brother Lin, you needn't be so formal. You're going to embarrass an old man like me."

Lin Wanrong let out a hearty laugh and released him. He noticed Xu Wei's face was full of dust and weariness, indicating that he had just traveled a great distance to get here. Behind Xu Wei was Gao Qiu, the guy Lin Wanrong had been thinking about. Gao Qiu held a riding whip, suggesting a journey conducted in haste without much rest. Lin Wanrong greeted him with a salute, "Brother Gao, I trust you have been well!"

Gao Qiu, an old acquaintance of his, returned the salute and said, "Thank you for your concern, Young Master Lin. Following Mr. Xu these past few days, everything has been quite well."

Lin Wanrong welcomed the two into the hall, invited them to sit down, and casually took a seat beside them, making no pretense of being an outsider. A servant girl promptly brought in tea. Xu Wei took a sip of the fragrant brew and chuckled, "Little brother Lin, I saw people sending over plaques with much fanfare as I arrived. It seems the reputation of the Xiao family is ever on the rise."

Lin Wanrong chuckled in response. Xu Wei was no outsider, so he didn't hide the events that had transpired the night before and during the day. Xu Wei stroked his beard and burst into laughter after hearing the story, "So that's how it is. It seems Mr. Cheng De had the misfortune of crossing you."

After a brief conversation, Lin Wanrong asked, "Did you, Mr. Xu, come specifically to find me today?"

Xu Wei nodded and said, "Indeed, I came to find you, Little brother Lin, and also to visit an old friend, Miss Guo, whom I haven't seen in many years."

So, you came specifically for the wife, with just a side visit for me. You old man, you dare to play these games in front of me? I despise you. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Why didn't you say so earlier, Mr. Xu? I will inform the Madam right away."

Xu Wei stopped him, "There's no need to trouble yourself, little brother. We already announced our presence at the entrance. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to enter this hall and sit down for tea."

That was true; they couldn't have come in without an announcement. Lin Wanrong chuckled again when suddenly they heard the soft jingle of a waist ornament from outside. A series of light yet hurried footsteps echoed into their ears, followed by the delighted voice of Madam Xiao, "Mr. Wenchang, where is Mr. Wenchang?"

The three men in the hall quickly stood up. Xu Wei laughed loudly, "Miss Guo, I, Xu Wei, am here."

Madam Xiao rushed in, carefully examined Xu Wei for a few moments, and then joyfully exclaimed, "Mr. Xu, it is indeed you who have come. I, Guo Junyi, am pleased to meet you, Mr. Xu." So, the lady's maiden name was Guo Junyi, a rather elegant name indeed.

Seeing Madam Xiao about to kneel, Xu Wei hurriedly gestured to stop her, "Miss Guo, there's no need for such formalities. Little brother Lin, please help Miss Guo up."

Lin Wanrong walked over, helped Madam Xiao up, and smiled, "Indeed, Madam, if old friends like you and Mr. Wenchang greet each other with such formality, it might create an awkward atmosphere. I'm sure Mr. Xu would feel uncomfortable."

Xu Wei laughed heartily, "Little brother Lin, you truly understand my heart."

Madam Xiao didn't kneel again. She looked at Lin Wanrong and smiled, "You do know how to say pleasing things."

The host and guest had seated themselves, and Xu Wei looked at Madam Xiao with a sigh of wonder, "It has been over twenty years since we parted in the capital. I have aged from a man

nearing forty to now being in my sixties, a figure of decay. Yet Madam, you retain your youthful looks and grace."

Madam Xiao also sighed, "Where is the grace of old? Mr. Wenchang, you jest. Truly, time spares no one. When I left the capital, I was just in the bloom of youth at 18. Now in a blink, I have a house full of children. Time is indeed a cruel knife."

Xu Wei stroked his beard and nodded, "When Miss was 18, your knowledge surpassed all in the capital, your skills were admired by all. Even the emperor himself heard of Miss's name and summoned you to court, which was the talk of the era. These memories seem just like yesterday. It's poignant that we meet again here in the south, twenty years since we said goodbye in the capital."

Seeing Madam Xiao and Xu Wei both sighing, Lin Wanrong felt a bit disdainful. What did their parting amount to? If they knew about his experiences, they would surely shut their mouths. Alas, his experiences were secrets he was destined to keep, buried deep within him.

Madam Xiao laughed, "Back in the day, all the scholars in the capital held great admiration for Mr. Xu, taking you as a role model. Now, twenty years have passed, and your fame has spread throughout the world, even surpassing those years. It is truly something to be happy about."

Xu Wei shook his head, a touch of sadness crossing his face, "Don't talk about fame, it's all about the two words, fame and profit, that mislead people. At my age, I've come to understand this. Fame and profit are like floating clouds in the sky, they seem beautiful but are actually harmful. I wonder how many people's happiness and marriages have been ruined by these two words."

Madam Xiao looked puzzled at his words, but Lin Wanrong knew that the old man was speaking from experience. He had sacrificed Su Qinglian's happiness for his own selfish desires, and only realized it in his old age. But it was too late, and his remaining good days were few.

Not understanding the meaning of his words, Madam Xiao laughed, "Has Mr. Wenchang been well all these years? Are your wife, son, and daughter well?"

Xu Wei replied, "My wife passed away years ago, my son has his own family, as for my daughter... ah, better not to mention her."

Madam Xiao's face turned melancholy, "Your wife has passed? Such a virtuous woman, heaven is truly blind. By the way, Mr. Xu, what about your daughter?" A small smile appeared on her face, "I

remember when we left the capital, she was a ten-year-old girl with braids. I wonder how she looks now. Who is she betrothed to?"

Xu Wei shook his head with a bitter smile, "Ah, my daughter... better not to mention her. Miss Guo, if you ever visit the capital, could you please advise her? She was with you when she was young, she might listen to you."

Xu Wei's daughter? Lin Wanrong vaguely remembered a mention of her as a person of extraordinary knowledge. Seeing Xu Wei's anxious expression, there clearly was some unspeakable difficulty. Was Xu Wei's daughter so formidable that even Xu Wei himself couldn't handle her?

Madam Xiao and Xu Wei began to discuss old acquaintances and events in the capital; which gentlemen had retired, who held senior positions in which provinces; which young ladies married whom, who had been granted imperial edicts; which sages had passed away, and what posthumous titles the emperor had granted them.

Madam Xiao revealed a side that Lin Wanrong had never seen before. Speaking with Xu Wei, the current leading figure, she remained composed and didn't fall short, revealing a hint of her past glory.

Lin Wanrong remembered what the blind old man, Wei, had said. There had been a significant figure secretly in love with Madam Xiao in the past. Having listened to their half-day conversation, there had been a lot of talk about young men and women, but he had no idea who it could be.

Bored of their chatter, Lin Wanrong excused himself and stepped outside with Gao Qiu, saying, "Brother Gao, I have good news for you."

Gao Qiu laughed, "What good news? Why are you being so formal, Young Master? Just say it, we've dealt with each other before."

Lin Wanrong gave a thumbs up, "Brother Gao is straightforward, I admire that." He chuckled, told Gao Qiu about what happened with Tao Dongcheng, and Gao Qiu burst into laughter. "Brilliant! That boy is ruined, 'immortalized' seems tailor-made for him. Truly a masterstroke, Young Master."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "I'm not brilliant, Brother Gao is the true genius. That 'Buddha's Big Stick' you concocted is truly the number one aphrodisiac in the world. Even a creature as weak as Tao Dongcheng became incredibly potent, it's truly a wonder drug."

Gao Qiu beamed with pride, "Of course, the Buddha's Big Stick is very difficult to make. I used many precious ingredients, such as goji berries, angelica, saffron, tiger penis, deer penis, and bear penis. Even a eunuch could gain some potency after taking it."

Saffron too? As if you're treating a gynecological disease. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself, then whispered, "You used so many good ingredients? Indeed, a wonder drug, it stirs up one's blood and directs one's thoughts. I wonder if Brother Gao could provide me with a few kilos for self-defense."

A few kilos? Gao Qiu gasped. When it came to bold moves, Lin Wanrong was indeed extraordinary. Most people would already be overwhelmed with a few ounces, but he asked straightaway for a few kilos. And for self-defense, who uses aphrodisiacs for that?

Gao Qiu patted his shoulder, glanced around, and when he saw no one was watching, he softly said, "Little brother, not to criticize you, but you're too young to be playing these games. You can't exhaust yourself like this. We men can fail at everything, except in this respect we must stay strong."

As if you need to tell me that, Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Don't worry, Brother Gao, I was born unique and powerful, known as the 'bane of women, invincible among men'. Speaking of performing seven times a night, that's me being modest. On average, without eight or nine times, I can't sleep. In my free time, I used to play drums with that thing, changing the drum every three days, and only beating it for two hours a day. You know the saying, 'Always ready, always standing'? That's talking about me."

Gao Qiu was taken aback and it took a while before he managed to say, "If you're really that formidable, brother, why would you need these stimulants?"

Lin Wanrong grinned, "It's just to be prepared for any eventuality. As you've seen, I am quite skilled in many ways and thus invite a lot of jealousy. Should I encounter a situation like Tao Dongcheng's again, I won't be as amicable. I'll give them a good dose of this and let a mad dog loose in their house..."

A shiver ran down Gao Qiu's spine. He recalled how Lin Wanrong had made Lu Zhongping surrender with just a single sentence during his interrogation. In a flurry, Gao Qiu took a small white bag from his bosom and handed it to Lin Wanrong. "Little brother, no more words. This is all my stock, it's all here."



Lin Wanrong chuckled and was about to put the bag away when the Eldest Miss's voice echoed, "Lin San, what are you holding there?"

"Flour," Lin Wanrong responded calmly. This girl, wasn't she supposed to be resting? Why was she out here again, almost exposing him?

"What kind of flour? Let me see," the Eldest Miss smiled as she approached, extending her hand to grab the small bag.

Oh no, she couldn't get hold of this. Lin Wanrong quickly hid the bag in his clothes and asked, "Why would the Eldest Miss be interested in flour?"

Gao Qiu was breaking out in a cold sweat on the side. Lin Wanrong's audacity truly left him no choice but to admire.

"Sneaky, I can tell it's not something good," the Eldest Miss pouted, then smiled at him, "I heard from the servants that Mr. Xu is here, so I hurried over. Why aren't you talking to him?"

"Madam is catching up with Mr. Xu. I was just chatting with Brother Gao." Lin Wanrong chuckled.

Gao Qiu quickly added, "Indeed, Young Master Lin and I were having a lively conversation when we saw Eldest Miss approaching."

Upon hearing that her mother was speaking with Mr. Xu, Eldest Miss decided not to rush in. She stayed in the yard, chatting with Gao Qiu. She seemed a bit absent-minded, repeatedly glancing at Lin Wanrong as if wanting to say something but then swallowing her words.

Being a sharp man, Gao Qiu understood that Eldest Miss and Lin Wanrong had important matters to discuss. So, he hurriedly excused himself, "I'll go attend to Mr. Xu. You two continue your chat."

Only after Gao Qiu had left did Lin Wanrong laughingly ask, "Eldest Miss, is there something you wish to discuss with me?"

Xiao Yuruo nodded, pondered for a long while, and finally said, "Lin San, have you heard about that matter?"

"What matter? Which matter?" Lin Wanrong replied, confused, "Eldest Miss, could you be more specific?"

"Dummy," the Eldest Miss playfully scolded, "I mean the matter of Miss Luo seeking a marriage proposal. Have you heard of it?"

Damn, this was the third person today who brought this up, yet even Little Luo himself had no idea. It was truly strange. Lin Wanrong nodded, "I heard from Young Master Guo and Si De about it."

Xiao Yuruo bit her lip lightly, "So, what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean, 'what am I going to do'?" Lin Wanrong asked, "What does this matter have to do with me?"

Miss Xiao saw his determined attitude and a hint of a smile appeared on her lovely face. "Right, it really doesn't concern you, so we don't need to concern ourselves with her."

Why did Eldest Miss Xiao seem so pleased? Where had Miss Luo offended her? Was she eager to see her married off? Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Actually, I asked Little Luo about it today. Since even he doesn't know, it can't be true."

"Really?" Miss Xiao nodded, "Then it must not be true. I only learned about it when I went back to my room and heard the maids discussing it."

Everyone in the mansion knew. This matter really made waves, smoke without fire. He didn't know who had started the rumors and what their intentions were. Miss Luo was still sick and now these rumors made her situation pitiful, which angered him.

"Lin San," Eldest Miss Xiao lowered her head and softly asked, "If this matter is true, would you go to the poetry competition?"

She gently asked, and when she didn't hear his answer, she repeated the question, but still, there was no response. Looking up, she saw Lin San staring at the withered flowers in the courtyard, deep in thought. He hadn't even heard her question.

"Lin San, Lin San," Eldest Miss Xiao called out several times before Lin Wanrong came back to his senses. He quickly asked, "What did you say, Eldest Miss?"

Eldest Miss Xiao had spoken so softly, and he was so lost in thought that he hadn't heard a word. Eldest Miss Xiao huffed through her nose, her face frosty. She turned her head away and wouldn't look at him again.

Well, he was just lost in thought for a moment. Why had he offended her again? He chuckled, not bothering to apologize to Eldest Miss Xiao. The two of them stood silently in the courtyard, the atmosphere becoming cold once again.

"Lin San," as they were engaged in their silent standoff, they saw Madam Xiao walk out smiling. She waved at Lin Wanrong, "Come with me."

Eldest Miss Xiao was startled and softly asked, "Mother, what do you need him for?"

Madam Xiao replied with a smile, "I have something to tell him. Yuruo, go chat with Mr. Xu. It's good to know him better. We could use a friend in the capital next year."

Eldest Miss Xiao did as she was told, but before she left, she shot him a glare. Lin Wanrong found her expression quite amusing. This wasn't the demeanor of a lady, but rather a girl who had lost an argument. This Eldest Miss Xiao could be rather cute. Lin Wanrong chuckled and followed Madam Xiao, who was still smiling and waving him over.

Perhaps because of the reunion with an old friend, Madam Xiao was full of joy today. Her smooth face was flushed with a light pink, not resembling a mature woman, but more like a maiden in love. She was dressed in a pink satin dress that clung tightly to her full figure. Her hair was coiled high with a gold hairpin sticking out, revealing her delicate and smooth neck. It was as smooth and soft as a layer of warm jade.

Lin Wanrong followed behind her, inhaling her faint rose perfume scent. Noticing her light footsteps and radiant smile, he couldn't help but sigh. This Madam Xiao, who had once been a Miss Guo, seemed not to be truly happy after marrying into the Xiao family. Xu Wei was just an old friend, yet his visit could elicit such joy in her. It was evident what her years had been like.

"Madam, do you miss the capital?" Lin Wanrong asked lightly.

Madam Xiao was taken aback, she halted and glanced at him, chuckling, "Miss? It's more reminiscing about those carefree days, a little nostalgia. The capital surely has its allure, but Jiangnan also has its charm. No matter where you are, life is laborious." She paused before adding with a smile, "Lin San, your perceptiveness is indeed commendable. No wonder Mr. Wenchang highly values you."

"Perhaps for others, being valued by Mr. Wenchang is an honor, but for me, it's as simple as eating and sleeping," Lin Wanrong replied with a grin.

"You certainly are thick-skinned." The Madam laughed and opened the door to her chamber, ushering him in. It was a quiet room, simply furnished. What caught his attention was the portrait of a young woman hanging in the center of the room. He studied it closely, noticing the striking resemblance between the subject and the woman in front of him.

"Is this your younger sister, Madam? She appears to be around the same age as you," Lin Wanrong shamelessly flattered.

Such blatant flattery amused Madam Xiao and she couldn't help but giggle, "Lin San, what nonsense are you spouting? This was painted when I was sixteen in the capital."

Lin Wanrong sighed, speaking in disbelief, "Madam, can you tell me how you've managed to maintain such youthful beauty over the past twenty years? If you were to market this secret, our Xiao family would surely make a fortune."

Madam Xiao could barely contain her laughter, she held it in and chided, "You talk without a filter. If you continue this nonsense, I'll have to punish you." Given her usual demeanor, treating him with such leniency was a rare act of kindness.

"Lin San, do you know why I've called you here?" As they turned to serious matters, Madam Xiao's smile faded. She looked at Lin Wanrong sternly.

"Could it be a raise? Oh, Madam, I would be too embarrassed. A humble tenfold increase would suffice," Lin Wanrong replied, feigning surprise.

"You jest." Madam Xiao laughed, "Actually, the reason I've called you here is that Mr. Xu would like to borrow you for a few days."

Borrow me for a few days? That's quite ambiguous. Lin Wanrong asked seriously, "Madam, do you mean that Mr. Xu wants me to transfer over to him over for a few days, is that correct?"

"Exactly, he will borrow you for a few days, and once the task is completed, you will return," Madam Xiao confirmed.

What a turn of events! Couldn't she use a different phrase? Lin Wanrong thought grudgingly.

"Oh, did Mr. Xu mention what I will be doing?" Lin Wanrong asked. At this point, he could only guess it had something to do with the White Lotus cult and Cheng De. This old Xu, he really thinks highly of me.

"He didn't mention that," Madam Xiao pondered, "However, knowing Mr. Xu, he wouldn't ask you to do anything dishonorable. Moreover, you're not that sort of person."

Lin Wanrong chuckled at her last statement. Madam Xiao then added with a smile, "Lin San, I've always been grateful for your contributions to my family. Without you, the Xiao family would have ceased to exist long ago. My daughter and I are both aware of this. Rest assured, when the time is right, I will reward you as you deserve."

Her cunning was more pronounced than her daughter's. At least Eldest Miss occasionally showed genuine emotion. Aside from throwing smoke bombs, Madam Xiao had yet to show her true colors. Irritated, he entertained the thought of having his way with her second daughter and making her his wife.

Grinning mechanically, Lin Wanrong responded, "Thank you for your reward, Madam."

"Your status in the Xiao family is indeed unique, and because of this, I didn't dare to agree to Mr. Xu's request without consulting you. I value your opinion," she said, dimples appearing on her smiling face.

Big deal, he thought, I have curls on my forehead. She's trying to fool me with her sweet talk? I am a master at this game.

With an innocent smile, Lin Wanrong asked, "And, Madam, what would be the consequences if I were to decline?"

Madam Xiao hesitated, then reluctantly said, "Well, there won't be any, of course. I will explain to Mr. Xu on your behalf. Honestly, Lin San, many in the court wish for Mr. Xu's support, yet he has never shown favoritism. Now he shows interest in you. You should consider this carefully. It would be greatly beneficial for your future."

"Oh," Lin Wanrong drawled, "I see, it's for my benefit. But I am a loyal and kind person. If this is only beneficial for me and not for everyone else, I wouldn't do it."

"Of course, it will also be beneficial for the Xiao family," Madam Xiao hurriedly said, "After the New Year, you and Yuruo will be going north to the capital. If you help Mr. Xu on behalf of our family now, when you get to the capital, he will certainly help us in return. Our family's affairs would be much easier. Isn't this a win-win situation?"

"I see," Lin Wanrong nodded, trying to hold back his laughter. "Madam, I prefer it when you speak the truth."

Madam Xiao paused, "Why is that?"

"Because, when you speak the truth, you really look like you're sixteen," Lin Wanrong said, chuckling.

Madam Xiao blushed, and before she could reprimand him for his audacity, Lin Wanrong was already laughing heartily as he pushed the door and exited.

Madam Xiao sat stunned for a moment, then suddenly broke into laughter. She knew Lin San was exceptionally intelligent. Why did she bother devising such intricate strategies to outsmart him? Why not just say it directly benefits the Xiao family? Instead, he saw through her manipulations, and she even managed to lose some respect in his eyes.

Having teased the Madam, Lin Wanrong felt quite pleased with himself. If she'd spoken honestly with him, being sympathetic to Yushuang, he would've known what to do. However, she tried to outsmart him, treating others like fools. Despite being a mother, your cleverness is still far behind me; you are but a fledgling chick in my presence.

After three bursts of hearty laughter, he walked into the garden, only to see Xu Wei coming over with a smile. "Little brother Lin, how did your conversation with Miss Guo go?"

Miss Guo? What Miss Guo? She's already married, and should be referred to as Madam Xiao, you old reprobate. His irritation with the Madam shifted onto the innocent Xu Wei. Lin Wanrong didn't bother with pleasantries. "We did talk, it's just that..."

"Just what?" Xu Wei quickly asked, "Little brother Lin, I must admit that I am desperately seeking assistance and I greatly anticipate your help."

Patting his shoulder, Lin Wanrong responded, "My dear Mr. Xu, if you wanted Madam to speak to me, you should have clarified what it was about. If it's for going to a brothel or listening to music, I wouldn't hesitate."

Xu Wei chuckled awkwardly, "That's my oversight. The matter is of utmost secrecy, it couldn't be relayed through Miss Guo. Honestly, with your intelligence, do I even need to explain my intention?"

"Mr. Xu, if you don't say it, how would I know what it's about?" he pretended to be clueless. After all, Xu Wei was the one asking him.

Xu Wei smiled subtly and whispered into his ear, "I want to invite you to join me in eradicating the White Lotus."

Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. Although he had already suspected as much, hearing it directly felt quite different. War, this was something he had never experienced. It did sound exciting, though. After a brief pause, he said, "Mr. Xu, are you sure you've got the right person? I'm just a commoner, without authority or office. How does that relate to war?"

"Patience, patience," Xu Wei smiled, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket. "The command has been given. I ask you to serve as my military strategist."

## Chapter 230 A Misunderstanding

A Military Strategist? What sort of position was that? Lin Wanrong hesitated for a moment, "I must tell you, Mr. Xu, that war involves deaths. I was born a coward, deathly afraid of dying. How could I step onto a battlefield?"

Xu Wei burst into laughter, "Little brother Lin is indeed straightforward. I won't hide from you, I too fear death. But in our upcoming campaign against the White Lotus cult, we hold an absolute advantage. Furthermore, as a Military Strategist, there's no need for you to personally engage in combat. You just need to plan in the army. Also, I will assign the high-ranking Gao Qiu to guard you closely. Feel free to proceed, little brother."

He had witnessed Gao Qiu's skills - the Emperor's personal bodyguard, how could his skills be lacking? In that case, it was indeed an imperial kind of treatment. This old Xu Wei didn't seem to mind spending a hefty sum. Lin Wanrong pretended to be reserved and said, "Mr. Xu, your army is full of talented individuals. Why do you insist on having me join? I've never been on a battlefield, and the sight of a large blade frightens me. The sight of blood makes me dizzy. I'm afraid I won't be of much help if I go."

Xu Wei shook his head and said earnestly, "Little brother, you're too modest. I've witnessed your talents. You are skilled in astronomy, geography, physics, mathematics; you are capable in every aspect, and I admire you greatly. What does it matter if you haven't been to the battlefield? Isn't every soldier a first-timer at some point? Currently, although I have elite soldiers and good generals at my disposal, I lack strategists. Relying solely on my own strength, even if I exhausted all my efforts, I wouldn't be able to take care of everything perfectly. That's why I particularly invite you to be my Military Strategist and offer me advice."

Hearing him say this, Lin Wanrong felt more at ease. It was thrilling to be able to experience a battlefield without danger. However, this was a matter of life and death, so he had to be careful. He thought for a moment and asked, "Mr. Xu, how many soldiers do you currently command?"

Xu Wei waved five fingers in front of him and grinned smugly.

"Five hundred thousand?" Lin Wanrong was taken aback, this was a massive scale! With just a few rounds of urination, they could flood Jinling City.

Xu Wei almost fainted, he hastily shook his head, "No, no, it's fifty thousand. Forty thousand infantry, ten thousand cavalries, and five thousand in divine machine unit

Fifty thousand? Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat off his forehead, feeling a bit embarrassed. Having read too many novels, he was used to seeing large-scale battles involving millions. To eliminate the White Lotus cult with five hundred thousand soldiers, wouldn't that be laughable? However, Xu Wei's ostentatious gesture of five fingers would naturally be interpreted as five hundred thousand by anyone.



"So, how many troops does the White Lotus cult have?" Lin Wanrong asked again.

Xu Wei shook five fingers again, this time Lin Wanrong was careful and asked directly, "Fifty thousand?"

Xu Wei almost bit his tongue. He was now starting to doubt whether hiring Lin Wanrong as a Military Strategist was a huge mistake. This young man didn't seem to have any military knowledge. They were on a mission to suppress the White Lotus cult. If it were fifty thousand against fifty thousand, what suppression would that be?

"Five thousand!" Xu Wei said, his cheeks flushed red.

"Only five thousand?" Lin Wanrong could hardly believe his own ears, he was stunned for a moment before muttering to himself, "Five thousand people, that wouldn't even be satisfying to fight."

Xu Wei was left without an ounce of patience by Lin Wanrong's few words. This was a war where people could die, not a child's playtime. He sighed and said, "The White Lotus cult entrenched in Shandong province claims to have tens of thousands of followers. However, the actual number of those who can really fight is only around five thousand. Moreover, they are all soldiers who have never received training, their combat power is incomparable to my infantry and cavalry. Our fifty thousand against their five thousand, ten men to one, is a guaranteed victory."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Mr. Xu, if wars were just about numbers, there wouldn't be any need to fight, just directly send troops to engage in bloody combat. Wars are won on timing, geographical advantage, and harmony of people. There are countless examples of the few defeating the many. One should never underestimate the enemy."

These words had the air of a Military Strategist, which slightly relieved Xu Wei. He nodded and said, "Little brother, your words are very true. I am worried about making mistakes in my unilateral decisions, hence why I have invited you to join me. With my infantry and cavalry, plus the divine machine unit, if we can't win this war, I would be too ashamed to face the people of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces upon my return."

"Divine machine unit?" Lin Wanrong suddenly got interested, "Do you have any red cannon?"

Xu Wei nodded and said, "In the divine machine unit, besides strong bows and crossbows, there are also ten improved red cannons. Speaking of which, we have to thank you for the improvement of these red cannons."

"Oh? How so?" On hearing about artillery support, Lin Wanrong immediately perked up. As Xu Wei had said, fifty thousand against five thousand, with the red cannon bombing like crazy, if they still couldn't win, he might as well crash into a block of tofu and die.

"Do you still remember the Frenchman Tavernier? The one caught by Tao Dongcheng," Xu Wei said.

Of course, how could he forget Tavernier? The old man promised to bring two French beauties when he came to Great Hua next time, and also promised to give him the sole agency of the diamond business. In return, Tavernier got the exclusive rights to sell perfume and soap in Europe, and he also followed through with the tea and silk trade. By this count, he, Brother Lin, could be considered the first person in the Eurasian trade. The Silk Road on the sea was laid by him. It would be unjust if he didn't make a name in history.

Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "I remember, I remember, that brother looked so peculiar, it would be hard to forget. By the way, is Tavernier still in Haian? Has their ironclad ship been repaired? Have they returned to France?"

Xu Wei laughed, "Last time, little brother, you asked me to find more skilled craftsmen to help the French repair their ship in Haian. I chose about ten from the divine machine unit to go with them. The ironclad ship of these foreigners was indeed incredibly strong and cleverly structured, suitable for ocean voyages. Their cannons, compared to ours in Great Hua, were much more accurate and powerful. Our craftsmen stayed there for about ten days, thoroughly understanding the structure of the cannons before returning. Based on this, they were able to improve the cannons of Great Hua, their power just barely matching those of the Western cannons."

"So that's how it was. When I asked you to send someone, it was because I wanted you all to observe the skill level of the Westerners and advance Great Hua's industrial development. It seems we have gained some results after all." Lin Wanrong nodded, asking, "So what did you think of the Westerners' ironclad ship?"

Xu Wei sighed, "The craftsmen I sent, they're the best from the divine machine unit, but they were utterly helpless against that ironclad ship. According to their estimations, the armor on that ship is something beyond the capabilities of any blacksmith's workshop. We have no idea how these Westerners accomplished it."

Lin Wanrong heaved a sigh. The Westerners were in the machine age while they were still in the manual labor era. The gap in basic industry couldn't be bridged in a day or two. He'd shown Xu Wei the way, done what he had to do. Whether they could learn well or not, it was completely up to them now.

Seeing Lin Wanrong suddenly become solemn for no apparent reason, Xu Wei hurriedly said, "Little brother Lin, for this campaign, would you be willing to lend me a hand?"

Xu Wei had shared such important military secrets without holding anything back, a sign of tremendous trust in him. In this world, if there was anyone who could match Lin Wanrong in perspective, it would have to be Xu Wei.

Fine, helping him is the same as helping myself, eradicating the White Lotus cult, clearing up internal unrest. Let Xu Wei further improve those cannons, next spring, head up north, fire a few rounds, and knock those barbarians down. With a cannon in hand, the world is free of worries, why fight the barbarians? Let them go back home to herd sheep.

Having made up his mind, Lin Wanrong laughed, "Mr. Xu, I have no problem acting as your chief strategist. However, you know, I've deeply offended Cheng De. If I leave, they might come to take revenge on the Xiao family, and my restaurant. If there's no one to look after them, I would be very worried."

Xu Wei laughed, "You can rest assured about this. Governor Luo has already thought about these issues. Didn't Cheng De volunteer to move the infantry and cavalry of Jiangsu to the border of the two provinces? I just obliged him, moving his troops, let's see if he goes or not."

They were all old foxes, Lin Wanrong sighed inwardly. Xu Wei was indeed taking advantage of Cheng De's mentality and turning the tables. If the troops of Jiangsu moved to the border of the two provinces, they would fall into Xu Wei's army of fifty thousand. If they didn't leave Jinling, Xu Wei would be more at ease to eliminate the White Lotus cult. Meanwhile, with his large army around, Cheng De wouldn't dare to act rashly.

"Regarding the Xiao family and your restaurant, not only will Governor Luo's experts secretly protect them, but I will also assign elite troops to protect them secretly. With my large army nearby, I don't believe Cheng De would dare to openly mobilize his troops. You can rest assured, little brother," Xu Wei added.

With Xu Wei's sincerity at this level, what else could Lin Wanrong say? He immediately made a fist salute and said, "Alright, since Mr. Xu values me this much, if I still refuse, it would be posturing. Please inform your wife for me, Mr. Xu, that I have accepted this task. I'll go help you out."

Xu Wei let out a hearty laugh, "I am deeply grateful for your willingness to lend a hand, little brother. In that case, prepare yourself tomorrow. The day after, we will set out early in the morning."

The two agreed upon a time and place to meet, and then Xu Wei sent Gao Qiu to inform Madam Xiao, before departing.

It was twilight by then, and as Lin Wanrong considered the upcoming battle, he paced around his room, unable to settle due to a mixture of anxiety and excitement.

"I should see Qiaoqiao," he said to himself. He was about to go to war, and there were things that needed to be said. Qiaoqiao was his betrothed, and she deserved some explanation.

By the time he arrived at the Food for Immortals, it was closing time. He quietly ascended the stairs, noticing the bright lights in Qiaoqiao's room, wondering what she was doing.

His heart filled with tenderness, spreading warmth throughout him. Stealthily, he entered her room, only to see a woman with her back turned, completely engrossed in some embroidery under the lamplight.

Lin Wanrong chuckled quietly, sneaking up like a cat, suddenly encircling her waist from behind. He laughed lightly, "Little darling, did you miss me?"

The woman tensed, about to shout, but upon recognizing his voice, she froze, trembling slightly, "Big brother, is it you?"

The moment Lin Wanrong's hands touched her waist, he knew something was wrong. He was an expert in such matters, and the feel of this woman was different from Qiaoqiao's. This woman's waist was smooth and elastic, even a bit slimmer than Qiaoqiao's.

Oh no, I got the wrong person, he thought quickly, but his hands still lightly squeezed her waist as he chuckled, "Qiaoqiao, isn't it me, Big brother?" It was a well-practiced tactic, one any man would know. It's called "persisting in a mistake," leaving no room for suspicion.

The woman turned around, looking at him faintly, and softly said, "Big brother, it's me, Ning!"

Lin Wanrong jumped back three steps in surprise, a look of combined horror on his face, "Miss Luo, how could it be you?"

Seeing Lin Wanrong retreat from her as if she were a dangerous beast, Luo Ning bit her lip and softly asked, "Big brother, were you looking for Qiaoqiao?"

"Yes. Oh, I'm sorry about just now, I got it wrong," Lin Wanrong explained without a blush.

Luo Ning blushed from her face to her neck. Her hands didn't know where to go, so she bowed her head, too embarrassed to speak.

Little girl, just say you liked me touching you, Lin Wanrong shamelessly thought. Luo Ning's confession the previous night had stirred him, but today's rumors about Miss Luo looking for a husband made him feel somewhat deceived, his thoughts inevitably twisted.

In the end, he was disappointed. Luo Ning's skin wasn't that thick, and she didn't dare say a word as she lowered her head. He didn't know where Qiaoqiao had gone, and for a while, neither spoke, making the atmosphere in the room quite awkward.

Lin Wanrong didn't know what to say, seeing Luo Ning holding a piece of red silk-like satin in her hand, which she had been embroidering.

"Miss Luo, you're embroidering!" Lin Wanrong thought he found an opening for conversation and thus he forced a smile.

Luo Ning let out a gasp, hastily hiding the red satin behind her. Already flushed from embarrassment, her face now became as red as a beetroot, looking as though it would drip with moisture.

Lin Wanrong carefully thought for a moment, suddenly realizing, Oh, I'm really naive. That's not just any satin, it's a woman's lingerie! No wonder the design looked so strange, and I couldn't tell whether it is fastened at the front or the back.

At this point, the air between the two had reached a stalemate. Having come so far, Lin Wanrong didn't care anymore. He chuckled awkwardly and said, "Well, Miss Luo, such clothes are not beneficial to your body's development, they might lead to sagging. Our Xiao family has recently introduced some new women's underwear, scientifically designed for health and fitness. Tomorrow, I'll send you ten or eight sets to switch around as you like."

"Big brother" Luo Ning couldn't stand his teasing anymore. With a delicate cry, she quickly buried her head in her bosom. Lin Wanrong took the opportunity to glance at her. She was biting her silver teeth, her face burning like fire, her white neck tinted with a soft pink. Her full chest heaved dramatically, the twin peaks almost breaking free from her clothes.

"Well, Miss Luo," Lin Wanrong swallowed hard and started to speak out of the blue, "How did you come to be here?"

Luo Ning hummed softly in reply, "I felt much better today and didn't want to stay home alone, so I came here with Qiaoqiao. I didn't expect to run into Big brother."

"Oh, I see." Lin Wanrong wanted to ask about the proposal, but then thought better of it. It would seem self-deprecating for him, as it was she who had pursued him. He needed to maintain some dignity as a man.

"Are you really feeling better? Do you still have a fever? How's your appetite?" Lin Wanrong asked.

The redness on Luo Ning's face had faded significantly. She lifted her head and smiled sweetly, "I am feeling much better. Qiaoqiao made many delicious dishes for me today. You'll be in for a treat from now on."

Qiaoqiao's culinary skills were certainly top-notch, but where had that girl gone? He had been here for a while, and she had not shown up to take care of her husband. Just as he was about to ask Luo Ning, she preemptively asked, "Big brother, will you participate in the poetry contest?"

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Before he could bring it up, she had already mentioned it. He laughed and said, "That poetry contest is for scholars and literary women like you. I am just responsible for sponsoring it. Whether I attend or not doesn't make much difference."

Luo Ning's face turned pale, "Big brother, didn't we agree on this? You must participate."

Lin Wanrong smiled. When Luo Ning had invited him to the poetry contest, he had joked that even if he attended, it would only be to eat and drink and that it would serve no other purpose. Moreover, he wasn't particularly interested in the poetry contest. Lin Wanrong helplessly said, "Miss Luo, there's no use in me going. I have no interest in these things, and it would only make me a laughingstock."

Luo Ning clenched her teeth and looked at him, "Big brother, you must come. You must come, or else, Ning" Her eyes welled up with tears, and she couldn't say another word.

Was the poetry competition really that significant? Could the proposal rumors actually be true? However, why wouldn't she just speak up to him? He was baffled. Seeing Luo Ning in such a pitiful state, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but sigh, "Miss Luo, do you have something you need to tell me?"

Tears welled up in Luo Ning's eyes as she said, "Big brother, everything I said to you last night was true, you must believe me."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "I know. But I have urgent matters and will have to leave Jinling the day after tomorrow. I don't know if I'll be able to return in time for the poetry competition." He had already become Xu Wei's military advisor; his military duties were of great importance. He didn't know how long the campaign against the White Lotus would take, he simply didn't have time for a poetry competition.

Upon hearing this, Luo Ning's face turned pale, and she blankly asked, "Big brother, you're leaving Jinling?"

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Yes, I have some important matters to attend to."

"When will you be able to return?" Luo Ning asked softly.

"Well, I'm not sure," Lin Wanrong hesitated. The timing of warfare was uncertain, "It might be three to five days, or maybe..."

"Big brother, you must come to the poetry competition" Luo Ning cut him off. She was sobbing, her dress already soaked by her tears.

She insisted that he must come? This girl was too domineering. Lin Wanrong felt helpless, looking at Luo Ning's tear-streaked face, her teardrops gently rolling down her white neck, appearing innocent and pitiful.

He couldn't bear to see her like this. Seeing her crying softened his heart. Well, fine. If he had to, he could request leave from Xu Wei and rush back from Shandong. Damn, how did he fall for this beauty scheme? He scorned himself for a moment, then said with a smile, "Alright, alright, don't cry. I promise you, I'll make sure to return in time."

"Really?" Luo Ning perked up immediately. Her pale face brightened, her long eyelashes trembled with glistening teardrops under the dim light, shimmering attractively.

"If I don't promise, won't I be drowned by your tears?" Lin Wanrong joked.

Luo Ning blushed slightly, her watery eyes glanced at Lin Wanrong, softly saying, "Big brother, you are so kind to me."

Sweat, that was Qiaoqiao's favorite phrase, when did Luo Ning pick it up?

"Big brother, today is the thirteenth of the twelfth lunar month, there are seventeen days until the poetry competition. You must return, I'll be waiting for you by Xuanwu Lake," Luo Ning calculated by counting her fingers, her demeanor was hardly that of a renowned talent in Jinling.

Done for, my greatest weakness is finally exposed. If an enemy were to employ the beauty scheme against me, I would certainly surrender without a fight. Lin Wanrong sighed in resignation. Only then did he see clearly what Luo Ning was embroidering on the undergarment in her hand, it was a pair of bird-like creatures.

Seeing his gaze fixed on the undergarment, Luo Ning's face reddened with embarrassment. Biting her lip, as if making a huge decision, she nervously held up the undergarment for his inspection, burying her face in her chest, listening to her own heartbeat.

"Miss Luo, did you embroider these birds? They are truly beautiful," Lin Wanrong said, his eyes wide open, his voice pure and innocent.

"Big brother, these are not just birds, they are mandarin ducks, ah" She stopped abruptly, realizing she had been tricked. It was improper for a lady to mention mandarin ducks in front of a gentleman.



Moreover, given his erudition, how could he not recognize mandarin ducks? Blushing, she covered her cheeks with her hands and softly said, "Big brother, you're so naughty"

Lin Wanrong chuckled. Usually, when a girl said "You're so naughty," what she really meant was, "I hope you're even naughtier." Should he become even naughtier? Last night, he had been teasing Qiaoqiao in Luo Ning's room, and tonight, he was teasing Luo Ning in Qiaoqiao's room. Truly, what goes around comes around. Retribution, indeed, retribution!

Lin Wanrong cleared his throat awkwardly, "Well, Miss Luo, I didn't do it on purpose, just like when I mistook you for someone else earlier, it wasn't intentional."

"Big brother" Luo Ning lowered her head, her voice trembling slightly, "Please, no more frivolous talk. I can't bear it. You are the nemesis in my life."

Her words sent a thrill through Lin Wanrong's heart. Nemesis? Damn, hearing such words from a pretty girl was simply unbeatable, it was downright provocative.

Luo Ning let out a soft whimper, her head nearly dropping to her ankles in embarrassment. Lin Wanrong chuckled, about to speak, when a delicate voice echoed from upstairs, "Sister Ning, I've finished bathing, could you please bring me my clothes?"

The voice was unmistakably familiar, it was his darling Qiaoqiao. Luo Ning glanced at him, her voice shy as she said, "Sister Qiaoqiao is bathing upstairs, I'm about to bring her clothes."

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong's voice took on a suggestive tone, "No rush, Miss Luo, let me accompany you."

Luo Ning's heart fluttered, her hands trembled, and in her surprise, she dropped the clothes onto the floor.