

Finest 271

Chapter 271 Five Portraits of Affection

"How peculiar! I have never seen Yuruo look this way before," the Madam murmured to herself, her face painted with an expression of puzzlement.

"Eldest Miss turning red in the face? Hmm, I didn't notice," Lin Wanrong looked at the Madam in surprise, laughing, "Perhaps it's the chill of the cold. But in my view, your complexion is also quite rosy, just like—"

"Just like what?" the Madam queried.

"Just like a seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl! Ah, my only flaw is my honesty. I always speak the truth, please do not take offense, Madam," Lin Wanrong sighed.

Madam Xiao covered her mouth with a chuckle. Her mature, full-bodied figure shivered in mirth, so much so she could hardly stand upright.

"Why are you laughing, Madam?" Lin Wanrong asked earnestly.

Madam Xiao waved her hand, trying hard to suppress her laughter. Her face had turned beet-red. "Lin San, you're never serious. In my opinion, a woman who can put up with you hasn't been born yet. I must warn Yushuang about you, lest you take advantage of her gratitude towards you."

It seemed the Madam had seen through him. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, offering it as his response.

Once he ceased his tomfoolery, Madam Xiao spoke, "Lin San, aren't you considering returning home? The new year is almost upon us, and everyone is missing you."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, smiling, "Madam, have you forgotten the story of the weed I once told you? These days, consider them my vacation. After working for a year, I deserve a break. When it's time to go to the capital, I will accompany the Eldest Miss and the others again."

Seeing his resolute stance, the Madam sighed in resignation, "If you insist so strongly, I won't force you. Yuruo is a little impatient, she has decided to leave home on the third day of the new year. You mustn't forget when the time comes."

This date had been set by the Eldest Miss a long time ago. Lin Wanrong knew her fiery temperament; she'd sacrifice even her life for her ambitions, let alone her new year's day? He grimaced, "The third day it is. If a lady can manage to leave so early, why should I be bothered?"

the Madam chuckled and nodded, "Thank you for your hard work. When the time comes, please take good care of her. Our Xiao family is counting on you."

Now that was a loaded statement. Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Oh, come now, Madam, we are family now. We must help each other, don't you agree?"

Madam Xiao knew he was retaliating for her pushing him to join their family in front of Yu Shuang. She couldn't help but giggle, "You're something, Lin San. I asked you to look after Yushuang, and it's obviously to your advantage, yet you play the victim. As if my Xiao family owes you by default."

The Madam's soft laughter, her blushing brows, her gently trembling body, and her captivating demeanor caused Lin Wanrong's heart to skip a beat. Good heavens, all the women here had the same allure, clearly testing his resolve.

He firmly believed in his nature to get carried away in the throes of desire. Daring not to linger any longer, he hastily excused himself, bid the Madam farewell, and made his way back home.

Having spent the day flirting with the eldest sister and exchanging sweet nothings with the second one, Lin Wanrong returned to the boat with unexpected gains. His heart was astir, his face beaming with joy, humming a ditty under his breath. Yet, the pleasure boat was oddly quiet. Luo Yuan and Qingshan, the two youngsters, sprang out of the cabin at the sight of him and greeted him cheerily, "Big brother, you're back!"

Lin Wanrong scanned around, noticing the absence of Xian'er and Qiaoqiao. He found it odd and asked the duo, "What are you two doing here? Where are Xian'er and Qiaoqiao? It's getting late. They should be going home to bed."

Even though Luo Yuan and Qingshan were fearless, they were dumbstruck by his words and gave him a thumbs up in admiration.

Grinning, Luo Yuan said, "Big brother, I'm afraid you'll be the only one keeping watch over the empty room tonight. Sister Luo Ning has called away the two sisters-in-law for a meeting. They decided to spend the night in her tower. She sent us here to relay the message, so please don't take offense, big brother!"

Luo Ning had called Xian'er and Qiaoqiao for a meeting? What could those three girls possibly discuss? Could it be they were brainstorming how to serve their husband? This would be a long conversation, requiring dedicated attention. Yet, what struck him as strange was Xian'er's calm demeanor around Luo Ning. That was the real oddity.

"Ah, Little Luo, did your sister mention why she asked for Qiaoqiao? This ship is too large, and without them, I'm afraid to sleep alone." Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, brazenly putting his fear into words.

"I don't know what my sister and the two sisters-in-law discussed. But judging from the look on sister Qiaoqiao, it seems like she has quite a bone to pick with you, big brother," Luo Yuan cryptically remarked.

'Qiaoqiao was upset with me?' Lin Wanrong thought for a moment, realizing that Luo Ning must have shared something with them, sparking this united front against him. It appeared that Luo Ning couldn't wait and had taken the two wives hostage, forcing his hand. That put him in a tight spot.

Seeing his furrowed brow, Dong Qingshan said, "Big brother, what's bothering you? With the thousands of us from the Hung Hing, what problem can't we solve?" After Cheng De fell and the Black Dragon Society disbanded, the Hung Hing was the most prominent gang in Jinling City. Qingshan said these words with full confidence.

Lin Wanrong shook his head and asked Luo Yuan, "Little Luo, how is your father's situation? When will the imperial decree arrive?" The scandal surrounding Luo Min had already created a stir in the court, with many clamoring for severe punishment. If not for Xu Wei's intervention, it would have become a much bigger issue.

Luo Yuan's face fell. "The imperial decree has not arrived yet. Judging from the current situation at court, being stripped of his title might be the least of his worries."

Lin Wanrong patted his shoulder and said seriously, "Little Luo, I don't aim to be a villain, but I also don't want to be an overly good person. However, I do admire your father. In this era, good officials who have ambitions and ideals yet can protect themselves are rare."

Luo Yuan wiped away a tear, smiling, "Big brother, I understand. No matter what, my sister and I will always stand by our father's side."

At the moment, he was unable to assist old Luo. Once in the capital city, he'd find a way. Lin Wanrong, always jovial by nature, laughed heartily. "Let's not talk about this for now, let's discuss something more entertaining. Little Luo, do you know about your sister and me?"

Sooner or later, he would have to deal with that lass Luo Ning, who was becoming a constant worry. It seemed like he would be forced to take drastic measures. Lin Wanrong shook his head in resignation, a wry smile on his face.

When Luo Yuan heard him mention his sister, he gave a thumbs up and said, "Big brother, honestly, I am genuinely impressed by you. How did my sister, who used to be so aloof and indifferent to everyone, surrender to you so easily? She used to scare off all the talented young men by saying that she'd only marry someone who was both literary and martial. Brother, when you have time, please teach me and Qingshan. We are very envious."

Qingshan's eyes sparkled as he swallowed hard, nodding eagerly. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily at the wolf-like gleam in the young boys' eyes. Was it spring already? He thought he could hear a mating call.

He chuckled, "You're my brothers, so of course I don't mind teaching you a few tricks. As for you, Little Luo, I plan to become your brother-in-law. Are you okay with that?"

Luo Yuan shook his head, "Big brother, you should be asking my sister. She is the one who makes the decisions. Asking me wouldn't do much good."

"Slick kid," Lin Wanrong laughed and patted his shoulder, "So, you're saying you have no objections?"

"Do I have a say in this? You and my sister have been flirting and acting lovey-dovey for a long time, even involving my father as your messenger. What else can I do?" Luo Yuan pretended to be aggrieved.

So, this little guy knew everything. Lin Wanrong let out a hearty laugh and commanded, "Bring me some paper."

With the two wives away, Qingshan temporarily played the role of a page boy, fetching a sheet of rice paper from the cabin. As Lin Wanrong pondered, he took a pencil from his pocket and recalled his encounters with that lass Luo Ning. As memories surged, his pencil danced across the paper with seemingly divine assistance. Before long, a remarkably vivid drawing appeared on the paper.

A beautiful woman stood inside a building, gazing at four couplets hanging in the air, a smile on her face as she pondered. Nearby, a carefree young man was playing a game of finger-guessing with two boys, all clearly having a great time. The woman, with her refined features and rosy cheeks, was exceptionally beautiful.

After scrutinizing the drawing, Qingshan exclaimed in surprise, "Big brother, this is our restaurant! Oh, I get it, this is when you first met Miss Luo and you put forth four absolute couplets."

Luo Yuan nodded silently, remembering the day when his big brother had written those four couplets and drank merrily with him and his brother, seemingly unconcerned with his sister. Now, it seemed that this big brother was truly going to become his brother-in-law. The mystery of fate was truly unfathomable.

Lin Wanrong didn't reply, only smiling faintly as he continued to draw following the first image.

A young man stood at the podium, sweeping his gaze over the crowd with cold determination. The gathered talented young men and women were visibly astonished. Luo Ning stood in the middle, her head lifted in a daze, gently biting her silver teeth, a worried frown on her face.

Luo Yuan clapped his hands, saying, "Big brother, this pair must represent the time you gave a speech at the Jinling Poetry Association with my sister. I've heard astounding tales about it. I suppose that was when my sister began to be drawn to you. Wonderful, just wonderful, big brother, you must teach me more."

The third drawing was of a woman on an embankment, looking at the hardworking peasants with a worried expression. With a swift flourish of her brush, she began to write. Standing next to her, a servant in green robes shook his head slightly, his face filled with regret.

It was clear that the scene depicted the infamous event at Jinling, when a servant had beaten up a scholar. Lin Wanrong recalled the scene on the embankment and couldn't help but smile. 'This Miss Luo must have been deeply affected by the numerous blows she'd received to remember me so vividly.'

The fourth drawing depicted a young man on a flower boat, slightly tipsy, holding a jug in one hand, smiling at a poem. He stood out from the crowd. A lady stood behind the curtains, holding a silk handkerchief in her hands, her face slightly flushed and showing signs of unease.

Qingshan exclaimed, "I understand this! It's the scene when Miss Luo gave you the mandarin duck handkerchief. Big brother, you've depicted Miss Luo very accurately."

Lin Wanrong hesitated slightly, then continued to wield his brush. In the fifth drawing, a young man stood in the foreground, holding a piece of red silk, with a woman standing behind him. The woman's figure was graceful, but only an outline could be seen. From a distance, it appeared to be Miss Luo, but up close, it was a woman with a red veil partially covering her face, the details of which were not carefully depicted, making it unclear who she was.

After completing these five drawings in one breath, Lin Wanrong let out a long sigh, and looked at his work closely, very pleased with what he saw.

Luo Yuan clapped his head in annoyance and said, "Big brother, where do you get these ideas? How come I never think of them? With such ingenious ideas, which girl could resist being moved by you? Big brother, I truly admire you."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and nodded, "Qingshan, Little Luo, the rest is up to you guys."

"Big brother, what do you want us to do?" Qingshan asked loudly, "Thousands of brothers are waiting for your command."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "We won't need that many people, seven or eight hundred will suffice."

He whispered a few words to Qingshan and Luo Yuan, which lit up Qingshan's eyes. He exclaimed, "Brilliant! If we do this, Miss Luo will have to respond whether she wants to or not. Hey, Little Luo, I can't wait to celebrate your sister's wedding."

Luo Yuan forced a smile and said, "Big brother, isn't this too grand, too sensational? I'm afraid my sister will feel shy."

'Too grand? The thing your sister is most worried about is that it's not grand enough, making everyone in Jinling think she's chasing me. I'm sure she'll even laugh in her sleep after what I've done.'

"Don't worry! Everything is under control." Lin Wanrong said mysteriously with unwavering confidence.

Luo Yuan could only nod and laugh, "Big brother, we'll get on these tasks tonight, ensuring both you and my sister will be pleased. But, if we're not here, what will you be doing?"

Lin Wanrong shrugged and said, "Just drink some wine and sleep. These are important tasks too, someone has to do them. Sigh, there's no high or low in tasks, just different divisions of labor." Qingshan laughed heartily, grabbed the five paintings, and pulled Luo Yuan away busy with their work.

Lin Wanrong was restless, considering that Xian'er and Qiaoqiao were both with Luo Ning. They were the ones who entered the household first; he couldn't show favoritism. So, he grabbed a brush and paper, creating a portrait for each of the two women.

The painting of Qiaoqiao depicted the scene from the wedding night, the young girl's cheeks were flushed, her head slightly bowed, shyly extinguishing the candle. As for Xian'er, he painted the day he was injured by the cannonfire on Weishan Lake, a scene of deep affection between the two. These were all meaningful memories, he believed they wouldn't cause conflict among the three women.

When he reached a satisfying part in his work, he stared at the completely different faces of the women, feeling a deep sense of loneliness in his heart. He yearned to fly to Luo Ning's embroidered boudoir.

"Sister Xian'er, did you sleep well last night?" A freshly groomed Luo Ning, holding Qin Xian'er's hand as she came out from the room, her face flushed as she spoke.

Hearing the address 'sister', Qin Xian'er was pleased and gracefully nodded, saying, "I slept very well. Miss Luo, where did you get this incomplete copy of 'Flat Sands Falling Wild Goose'? I spent all night looking at it and could not bear to put it down." She gently stroked the somewhat worn booklet in her hand, her eyes glowing with love.

Luo Ning saw her cherishing the booklet, her heart rejoiced and she shyly replied, "Sister Xian'er, we had such a pleasant conversation last night, you don't need to be so formal. You can simply call me Ning'er."

Luo Ning was a renowned talent, proficient in zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting. Qin Xian'er's background was even more exceptional. Despite her hardships, her knowledge and insights were no less than Luo Ning's. Last night, when Luo Ning invited her and Qiaoqiao, they found each other's company to their liking.

Seeing Luo Ning trying to win her favor, Qin Xian'er knew her intentions. She gently smiled and said, "You're the governor's daughter, normally no one dares to casually address you by your first name—" Seeing Luo Ning looking anxious, Qin Xian'er confidently smiled and continued, "However, since you're sincere, whether in public or private, I can call you by your name. Sister Ning'er, where did you get this 'Flat Sands Falling Wild Goose'? This ancient music manuscript has long been lost, only a few copies survived, they are invaluable."

Luo Ning nodded, "I received this copy while I was studying in the capital, a close friend gifted it to me. Sister, you're a lover of music and a kindred spirit. This manuscript has no great use for me, so I give this to you, I hope you won't dislike it."

Qin Xian'er, her mind clear as a mirror, looked at her and laughed, "Sister Ning'er, you're truly clever. You lured me with this manuscript last night, making me abandon my husband to talk with you. Today, you generously gift it to me. Tell me, sister, what exactly are you thinking?"

"This is out of true friendship. Seeing sister appreciating the sheet music, I simply want to give it as a gift. There's nothing more to it," Luo Ning's face flushed crimson, she hesitated, unable to speak clearly. She felt a surge of resentment towards her big brother.

"Really, no other intentions?" Qin Xian'er asked with a bitter feeling welling up inside her, pretending not to understand.

"That's enough, Sister Xian'er. Please stop making things difficult for Sister Ning," Qiaoqiao giggled as she walked out from the inner room, her face still flushed. "Sister Ning's intentions are known to all in Jinling, it's only us who are unaware...hehe..."

"You impudent girl—" Luo Ning, unable to act against Qin Xian'er, took out her frustration on Qiaoqiao, pouncing on her playfully. Both girls had stayed overnight in Luo Ning's room, talking until dawn. Qiaoqiao was the most innocent and charming of them all.

Both women were fond of her, often engaging in playful banter. Qiaoqiao had slept the latest and was thus the last to wake up.

Qin Xian'er pulled at Qiaoqiao, laughing, "And you're lecturing us about waking up late. If your husband saw this, he'd probably smack your little butt—" she burst out laughing as she spoke. Qiaoqiao's face also reddened slightly. The two women were deeply in love with Lin Wanrong, their intimate banter only added to the richness of their married life.

"Smack what little butt—" Luo Ning asked, surprised. She abruptly fell silent as her face flushed, understanding the meaning behind those words.

"I wonder what my husband is doing now, and whether he's thinking about me?" Qin Xian'er pouted. Although she and Lin Wanrong shared a bed every night, their relationship, influenced by the love bug, had not yet progressed beyond the physical touch, and she couldn't help feeling insecure.

"Of course, big brother thinks about you. Didn't you see how he loves to touch your chest—giggle—" Qiaoqiao teased. She understood Luo Ning's thoughts well, realizing that the talented Lady Luo had no chance of escaping her big brother's charms. All the intimate moments between herself and Lin Wanrong had been witnessed by Qiaoqiao, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Luo Ning blushed, her gaze falling away from the two women. Qin Xian'er looked at Luo Ning's crimson cheeks and felt a pang in her heart. She suddenly asked, "Sister Ning, do you truly love him?"

This question rendered Luo Ning speechless. Her face burned, and it took her a while to muster the courage to whisper an affirmative answer, exhausting all her energy.

Qin Xian'er's eyes shone with an unusual light as she took Luo Ning's hand, "Then let's be good sisters. Don't worry, he will certainly treat you well, as long as you sincerely care for him, I will never harm you."

Neither Luo Ning nor Qiaoqiao understood her words, but Qin Xian'er seemed to have resolved a big issue and gave a charming smile, "Sister Ning, I took up your time yesterday. Today, let me play host and we'll go to Xuanwu Lake. He's also there, I believe he would be happy to see you."

Luo Ning's heart fluttered, she was about to blushinglly accept the offer when a maid hurriedly burst in, her voice shrill, "Miss, something terrible has happened, terrible—"

Qin Xian'er was of extraordinary birth and knew naturally how to dodge discomfort. As she was about to step away, holding Qiaoqiao's hand, Luo Ning had already seized her hand, "Sister, from now on, we are family. You and Qiaoqiao should not treat me as a stranger."

Knowing that this woman was trying to please her for the sake of her husband, Qin Xian'er did not decline, and nodded with a smile.

Luo Ning turned to the young maid, "What's the matter that's causing such a panic?"

The maid replied, "Miss, outside our mansion, there are portraits plastered everywhere. One of them is you, Miss—"

"A portrait?" Luo Ning questioned, "Who else is in the portrait?"

The maid said in a low voice, "The other person in the portrait is Young Master Lin!"

"Big brother (Husband)?" All three women cried out in unison.

Luo Ning seemed to have remembered something, a hint of joy filled her heart, and a soft blush appeared on her face. She stole a glance at Qin Xian'er, quickly suppressed her excitement, and said softly, "Who's so idle as to draw me and big brother together? Let's go out and see." Unable to suppress her joy, she didn't bother to greet the two sisters, lifted her long skirt, tiptoed, and pitter-pattered down the stairs, heading straight to the mansion's entrance.

Qin Xian'er and Qiaoqiao exchanged glances, puzzled as to why the typically composed Miss Luo would be so excited.

Luo Ning opened the main door and had just stepped out when she heard a commotion outside, "Miss Luo is coming out, Miss Luo is coming out—"

She looked up to see hundreds of townsfolk gathered at the gate, smiling at her. Looking around, her portraits with Lin San were pasted everywhere, with passersby pointing and whispering. Indistinct phrases like "poetry contest", "choosing a suitor", and "a match made in heaven" were being murmured.

"Hey, Miss Luo—" A nearly frivolous call came from the opposite building. Luo Ning looked up to see a man standing on the upper floor of the tea house across the street, grinning and waving at her.

"That scoundrel, big brother, laughing so mischievously, utterly annoying!" Luo Ning's face flushed, and she quickly turned her head, her heart filled with both surprise and joy.

'What's the matter, am I not looking flashy enough? Why did she turn her head away after just one glance?' Lin Wanrong examined himself from head to toe, finding nothing wrong. This was an outfit that had been meticulously scrutinized by Luo Yuan and Qingshan; he had never worn so much even when going out to fight. Describing him as handsome was an understatement.

"Miss, Miss, you have to see this—" The maid by Luo Ning's side suddenly cried out. Luo Ning hurriedly turned her head back. A long scroll was suddenly lowered from the tea house, from left to right it consisted of five drawings.

Upon seeing the content of the painting, Luo Ning was stunned for a moment, then her face lit up with joy, and her cheeks flushed. In the painting, she looked graceful, proud, or shy, while big brother always seemed to not care about anything. Discussing poetry in a wine shop, talking about the Dao in the poetry society, speaking about the livelihood of the people on the embankment, and standing out from the crowd in the poetry contest. This was the process of how she and big brother got to know each other and fell in love. The full scroll, though without a word, was more expressive than a thousand words.

Especially that last image, with the woman led by the red silk ribbon, looked just like herself, yet her face was purposefully left vague. Her "big brother" must have done it on purpose. A wave of shy delight washed over Luo Ning. She never thought that Lin Wanrong would satisfy her heart's desire in such a way. With this, everyone in Jinling must have known.

"Sister, how is it? Have your wishes been fulfilled?" Luo Yuan came running over, grinning from ear to ear.

Luo Ning's face flushed as she bit her lip, abruptly turning and darting back into the house. Luo Yuan hurriedly followed. In an instant, the large doors of the Luo estate closed.

"No, no, don't run!" Lin Wanrong, standing on the upper floor, panicked internally. He had never failed this kind of "pick-up" trick before. Could today be the day he capsizes in the gutter?

"Miss Luo, Miss Luo!" Lin Wanrong hastily shouted. He had originally planned to satisfy Luo Ning's longings with a simple show, yet he hadn't expected her to turn and run away. It was a real failure.

"Big brother, this move seems ineffective," Qingshan said, doubtfully, adding salt to the wound.

"Well, perhaps Miss Luo was just too excited. Think about it, if you were suddenly faced with such a scene, how would you react?" Lin Wanrong chuckled dryly, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Qingshan pondered for a moment, then said, "I might faint!"

"Exactly!" Lin Wanrong slapped his hand, finding some comfort in Qingshan's words. "I bet Miss Luo just went to calm down, to quell her excited emotions. Just wait, she'll come out soon, I guarantee it!"

The two of them waited for a while, but the doors of the Luo estate remained tightly shut. There was no sign of anyone, not even a cockroach, emerging from the estate. The crowd that had gathered began whispering among themselves.

"Brother, what should we do? Should we gather the brothers and storm in?" Qingshan suggested.

Lin Wanrong nearly fell from the building at his words. This kid, has he gone mad with fighting? This was the woman he intended to marry. Could he really go in with swords drawn? He gave a helpless smile and was about to speak when the doors of the Luo mansion creaked open. Several maids and servants rushed out and carefully removed the large scroll hanging from the tavern, carrying it back into the house.

What was going on? Lin Wanrong didn't understand, and Qingshan was even more confused. "Big brother, I will go down and look for Little Luo," he suggested.

"Looking for Little Luo for what? That's too low! Just find a couple of agile brothers, let them climb over the wall and take a look," Lin Wanrong said solemnly.

Qingshan laughed and descended the stairs, just as the gates of the Luo estate opened once more. Luo Yuan was the first to emerge, followed by a line of servants who held up the painting.

The first four images were unchanged, but the fifth one was vastly different. The woman led by the red silk ribbon, whose face had been somewhat vague, was now clearly drawn with just a few strokes. Her half-concealed red veil lifted at the corner, revealing phoenix-like eyes, cherry lips, and a blush on her melon-seed face. It was unmistakably an image of Miss Luo Ning.

He'd succeeded! Lin Wanrong's heart swelled with joy, and he hurriedly rushed down from the building. The crowd, seeing this, instantly understood that Miss Luo had accepted the offer of marriage. The talented man and the beautiful woman from the poetry competition had finally come together, fulfilling everyone's expectations. The crowd cheered loudly in approval.

"Brother-in-law, congratulations, many congratulations!" Luo Yuan changed his tone.

"Congratulations to us all," Lin Wanrong replied with a shameless grin. "Oh, where's your sister?"

Helplessly, Luo Yuan said, "After completing the painting, my sister couldn't bear to face you. She's hiding in the embroidery room right now."

"Is that so?" Lin Wanrong queried, "Why be shy? Look at me, I'm not bashful at all." Luo Yuan and Dong Qingshan both fell silent.

"Hmph. My husband only knows how to play favorites!" Xian'er complained to Qiaoqiao after witnessing the drama unfold.

"Who says that my husband is playing favorites?" Lin Wanrong's voice echoed in her ear.

"Husband—" Delighted, Qin Xian'er quickly turned around.

"Speaking ill of your husband behind his back deserves a spanking." Lin Wanrong grinned, reaching out to lightly pinch Qin Xian'er's rear, but handed her the scroll in his hand.

Xian'er blushed as she hurriedly unrolled the scroll, revealing a delicate portrayal of the two of them feeding fish soup to each other on a fishing boat. His hand was still exploring her body. "Ah!" She gasped, heat flooding her body as she quickly rolled the scroll back up. Her heart pounded with a mix of joy and embarrassment; all the grievances she'd felt before had vanished without a trace.

"Little darling, this is for you. I'm sure you'll like it." Lin Wanrong winked at Qiaoqiao and handed her another scroll.

Unrolling the painting, Qiaoqiao saw a romantic scene under the glow of red candles. A young woman in bright red lingerie, her snow-white wrists embracing Lin Wanrong's neck. Her slender legs were wrapped around his waist, her eyes filled with love, depicting their intimate moments on their wedding night.

"Big brother—" Qiaoqiao quickly put away the scroll, her cheeks flushed pink. She leaned weakly against his chest, speechless.

Seeing the success of his strategy, Lin Wanrong wished he could burst out laughing. Every time he'd take a wife in the future, he'd create such a "masterpiece" for her to cherish. This was art, far more sophisticated and intimate than any mundane self-portrait.

"Oh, where is Miss Luo?" Lin Wanrong asked, pretending not to notice the blushing faces of the two women.

"Sister Ning is upstairs!" Qiaoqiao quickly replied.

"Well, let's go up and see her then. While everyone is here, we should hold a meeting."

"A meeting?" Qin Xian'er, her cheeks still tinged with blush, asked as she lifted her head.

"A family meeting. We can schedule rotating shifts or joint shifts, and I can tell you sisters some stories!" Lin Wanrong responded seriously.

"A story? What kind of story?" Qiaoqiao, having her hand held by her big brother as they dashed towards Luo Ning's floor, asked curiously.

"The story of the monk beating a drum in the temple!"

"Ugh—" The two women blushed and spat out lightly, pushing him forward, "Big brother (Husband), you go find Sister Ning by yourself. It's not convenient for us to follow."

Well, they made it seem like it would be more convenient if they were all together. As Lin Wanrong climbed to Luo Ning's embroidery floor, it was quiet, but he could hear a rush of quickened breaths. This girl, why was she so shy? Where had her usual assertiveness gone?

"Miss Luo, Ning'er, Lady Benefactor—"

Luo Ning hid in her boudoir, staring at her blushing reflection in the mirror. Her heart pounded wildly, and she barely mustered a response, "Big brother—" but dared not say anything more.

Upon entering Luo Ning's boudoir, Lin Wanrong found the renowned beauty of Jinling sitting gracefully on a stool. Her long skirt hung naturally, and her face was as red as if she'd applied rouge. Her ruby lips parted slightly, and the soft, watery glow in her eyes was utterly captivating.

"Miss Luo, these past few days, I've been trying to find a way to make all of Jinling aware of you, but without causing your displeasure. It's truly been a troubling task, leaving me sleepless and tasteless. It wasn't until yesterday that I thought of this method. If you think I was late, feel free to beat me up. Even if it hurts to death, I won't utter a sound." Lin Wanrong held Luo Ning's hand with utmost sincerity.

Shyly, Luo Ning responded and collapsed into his arms, "Big brother, thank you for caring so much for Ning'er. I'd work as hard as an ox or horse to repay you for a lifetime!"

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Alas, this woman was so lovestruck, even he found himself moved. Holding the talented lady Luo in his arms, Lin Wanrong lightly patted her shoulder, saying, "Don't speak so. From now on, we will take care of each other, love each other, strive hard, progress together, bear sons and daughters, and prosper Great Hua."

At his words, Luo Ning's heart pounded several times, her face flushed bright red as she shyly said, "Big brother, you're so wicked." Fearing that he might say something more embarrassing, she quickly said, "I left Qiaoqiao and sister Xian'er here yesterday, you don't blame me, do you? I just wanted to have a good talk with them."

"Is it just as simple as talking?" Lin Wanrong laughed, "It seems that I am thinking too complicatedly."

Seeing his gaze teasingly fixed on her, Luo Ning couldn't hide her feelings. She couldn't help but whimper, covering her face and saying, "It's because Ning'er noticed big brother has been inactive for many days. I was worried, but didn't dare to seek you out directly. So, I had to use talking with Qiaoqiao and sister Xian'er as an excuse, to make you feel anxious first, and remind you of me. Otherwise, with your nonchalant character, I don't know how long I would have to wait."

'This girl really understands me,' Lin Wanrong chuckled: "So that's how it was, understood! Ning'er, what did you talk about with Qiaoqiao and Xian'er last night? I saw they treated you quite well."

Luo Ning hit him lightly, and retorted faintly, "You are deliberately teasing me, I won't tell you."

"I know even if you don't tell me. You must have bribed them with something. Hmm, not a bad idea," Lin Wanrong guessed randomly.

Luo Ning felt a sudden warmth on her face when he accurately guessed her intentions. She scratched his back vigorously, huffed, "Not at all, it's because sister Xian'er and sister Qiaoqiao are good people that they get along well with me."

Knowing this girl was shy, Lin Wanrong didn't tease her anymore. They spoke for a while and were quite cheerful.

Feeling her long-cherished wish fulfilled, Luo Ning was filled with joy. She accepted the original pictures of the five paintings that Lin Wanrong handed her, and admired them closely, her face flushed with happiness.

"Big brother, this is the most unexpected and precious gift I have received in my life. How did you come up with the idea to paint these?" Luo Ning held the smallest brush, and meticulously depicted the last picture. Looking at the painting symbolizing their acquaintance, her face was full of reminiscence.

"Ah, I racked my brains for three days and three nights, didn't eat or drink, exhausted my energy, only then did I get this idea. I hope I have not failed Miss Luo's trust. Now everyone in Jinling should know, between Ning'er and me, it was I who took the initiative, and Miss Luo agreed with a blush. Hehe, tomorrow there will be storytellers in the tavern, narrating this romantic tale, the poetry festival's love token solidified our relationship, the five paintings bound us for life," Lin Wanrong said earnestly.

"Big brother—" Luo Ning, hearing this, was both shy and joyful. She hurriedly held him, pressing her pretty face on his shoulder, softly saying, "Thank you, Ning'er will serve you forever."

"Heehee—" A woman's giggling echoed from behind. "Congratulations, Sister Ning, on the fulfillment of your wishes. It was worth us staying over last night after all." Qiaoqiao strolled in, her face lit up by a joyous smile. Her close friend from the boudoir had become a lifelong sister, naturally she was overjoyed.

Xian'er trailed behind Qiaoqiao, her face wearing an ambiguous smile. Luo Ning, for reasons unknown, felt somewhat apprehensive towards Xian'er. Upon noticing her mysterious smile, Luo Ning's face flushed. She hastily went forward and said, "Sister Xian'er, you've arrived?"

Xian'er chuckled, "Sister Ning, don't mind us interrupting your private moment with your husband." Her words were so blunt that Luo Ning turned red with embarrassment and bowed her head in silence.

Xian'er gave a light laugh and took Luo Ning's hand. "Don't be shy, sister. We are now a family, all serving our husband together. There will be plenty of days ahead for us. If you don't believe me, ask Qiaoqiao. Our husband enjoys it the most when we serve him together—"

Xian'er, bold and daring, gave Lin Wanrong a flirtatious glance as she spoke. Remembering the passionate scenes with Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning in the past, Lin Wanrong responded with a lecherous grin and winked at Qiaoqiao.

Luo Ning, unfamiliar with Xian'er's style, gave Qiaoqiao a puzzled look and asked softly, "Qiaoqiao, does our husband truly enjoy our joint service? How should we serve him?"

Qiaoqiao's face turned a bright red. She quickly took Luo Ning's hand and said, "Sister Ning, Sister Xian'er is just teasing us, let's ignore her."

Luo Ning, uncertain about the coded conversation, noticed that both Xian'er and Qiaoqiao held a painting each. She turned her attention and asked, "Qiaoqiao, what are you holding? Is that painting made by our husband for you? May I have a look?"

Qiaoqiao turned beet red and quickly hid the painting behind her. Xian'er's face flushed as she giggled, "Sister Ning, you can certainly have a look if you wish. But not now. Once you've joined our family, you can see as much as you want. Our husband will specially make beautiful paintings for you, right, husband—"

"Indeed, indeed. Anyone who sees them will receive a share. Miss Luo, tomorrow I'll make even more splendid paintings for you to delight your heart." Lin Wanrong approved of Xian'er's words, this girl certainly knew how to please him.

Qiaoqiao, blushing at the flirtatious exchange between Xian'er and their husband, could no longer bear to listen. She took Luo Ning's hand and said, "Sister Ning, let's go downstairs to pay respects to the old lady. Husband, are you coming?"

The commotion today was large enough to be known throughout Jinling, and certainly Old Madam Luo and Governor Luo would be aware. The fact that neither had shown up by now could only be seen as tacit approval. Having eloped with their daughter, it was only right to give an explanation. With the approval of these two elders, Luo Ning could truly become his wife.

Luo Ning had already taken Qiaoqiao downstairs. Before leaving, she shyly glanced back at Lin Wanrong, her longing gaze clear as day.

Lin Wanrong let out a hearty laugh, about to follow, when Qin Xian'er grabbed him, pleading softly, "Husband..."

Seeing Xian'er's expression so pitiful, tears welling up in her eyes, Lin Wanrong was taken aback. "Xian'er, what's wrong?"

Qin Xian'er felt a wave of sadness welling up in her, and she suddenly flung herself into Lin Wanrong's arms, sobbing quietly, "Husband, do you really like Miss Luo that much?"

Lin Wanrong was well aware of Xian'er's jealous nature. With Qiaoqiao already in the picture, and now Luo Ning too, this girl was surely feeling aggrieved. He quickly grasped Xian'er's hand and reassured, "Xian'er, are you upset? If you're upset, just cry it out, I'm here for you."

Xian'er gave a soft whimper, "Husband, if you really like Miss Luo, then marry her soon, I..." She leaned in, whispering a few words into Lin Wanrong's ear, her face flushing with embarrassment.

At her words, Lin Wanrong was stunned, falling silent for a long while before responding, "Xian'er, how can we do this?"

Qin Xian'er's expression turned bitter as she hastily replied, "Husband, don't you trust me? I've told you before, as long as Miss Luo is sincere towards you, I would never harm her." Her face flushed further, and she shyly lowered her head, "Husband, don't you want to be truly husband and wife with me? My initial plan was to capture that fox Xiao Qingxuan, transfer the Love Bug to her, and have her serve both of us. But these recent days, I've been so happy with you. The thought of not being your true wife makes me anxious. Miss Luo sincerely likes you, I can't bear to refuse her, and once I explain the situation to her, I'm confident she will agree. After all, I won't harm her. Husband, please agree to this, alright?"

Lin Wanrong broke out in a cold sweat. He had thought Xian'er unusually compliant, but now he understood her intentions. Considering Xian'er's relationship with Qingxuan, if she wanted to transfer the Love Bug, she couldn't give it to Qingxuan or Luo Ning. It had to be someone with whom she had the closest bond so that she would never have the heart to harm her. But where could such a person be found?

Sister An?! A lightbulb went off in Lin Wanrong's mind, and he almost leapt up in excitement, his heart pounding like a stampede. Perfect! That vixen's beauty and figure were beyond words. But thinking about her relationship with Xian'er, his lust was instantly extinguished. 'Amitabha, Amitabha, it was just a fleeting thought, no malicious intent at all. All the bodhisattvas know that I am always honest.'

He felt a teasing itch in his heart, forcefully suppressing his turmoil of emotions, as he soothed Xian'er by rubbing her fragrant shoulder, "Silly girl, haven't I told you? When we reach the capital, I'll find a way to resolve the Love Bug issue. I also want to be your husband, but this isn't something we can rush, nor can we pass our pain onto others, right? Do you think of me as someone who covets momentary pleasure? I have always believed that the spirit is more important than the body. What's that saying... if two hearts have long been in accord, is there need for touch and grab? My darling, tonight we'll try a new method, I assure you, you won't expect it. I wonder if your master ever taught you..."

Lin Wanrong whispered something in Xian'er's ear. A soft murmur escaped her lips, and instinctively, his hand found her curvaceous hip. Her body went limp, her face flushed as beautiful as the sunset's glow.

When the maid led Lin Wanrong into Old Madam Luo's room, he saw Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning sitting beside the old lady, engaged in idle chat. One was charming, the other shy. Together, they resembled twin sisters, and their beauty was ineffable.

Unexpectedly, Luo Min was also sitting beside his mother, conversing with the old lady. With the issues of the White Lotus Sect and Cheng De resolved, there were no other concerns in Jiangsu, and he, a man living under the cloud of misdeeds, finally found some peace.

Knowing Luo Ning's thoughts, Lin Wanrong bowed to the old lady with a cheeky grin, "Greetings, Madam Luo. I hope you are well. Are you enjoying your meals? And hello, Governor Luo."

Old Madam Luo nodded with a smile, "Young Master Lin, your visit is timely. The girls and I were just talking about you. I hear you've gifted Ning some lovely paintings. Is that true?"

Lin Wanrong cleared his throat and feigned modesty, "Oh, I wouldn't dare say they're good. Just some doodles, Madam. You flatter me."

The elderly lady inspected him from head to toe, then glanced at her rosy-cheeked granddaughter sitting next to her, nodding her approval, "At my birthday feast, I knew you were no ordinary man. As expected, you were the champion at the poetry contest. Your future is boundless. Our Ning has good taste, picking you out from the crowd. Remarkable indeed—"

"Grandmother—" Luo Ning interrupted her grandmother's teasing, a whimper of embarrassment escaped her lips. She shot a glance at Lin Wanrong, her face bearing a shy smile before she lowered her head.

Old Madam Luo laughed, "Silly child, there's no need to be shy. For us women, finding a compatible man isn't easy. When you find one, hold on tight, or you'll live in regret. Back in my day, even though I was a noble princess, your grandfather was a penniless scholar. He was so shy he'd dodge and weave whenever he saw me. In a fit of annoyance, I hit him with a bamboo ball. That's how we ended up with your father and you siblings!"

At the old lady's nostalgic recount, Qiaoqiao covered her lips to stifle a giggle, Luo Min's face grew awkward, and Lin Wanrong couldn't help but laugh. So, Luo Ning's courage ran in her genes.

Immersed in the joy of her recollections, Madam Luo beckoned Lin Wanrong over. "Young Master Lin, this is my only beloved granddaughter. She's literate, well-mannered, and has lofty ambitions. She's at the age to get married, but no suitable family has been found. I was fretting over this, but she had already chosen you. That sneaky girl kept it a secret from me and her father—" The old lady lovingly stroked Luo Ning's hair, then took her hand and placed it in Lin Wanrong's. "A woman shouldn't delay marriage. Young Master Lin, today I entrust Ning to you. Treat her well. Don't let her suffer from cold or hunger. Pamper her, spoil her—"

Listening to her grandmother's rambling, Luo Ning's heart pounded. She sneaked a glance at Lin Wanrong, her small hand tightening around his, gently scratching his palm.

'This young lady can't wait, huh? Regrettably, I don't have the time to wed just yet, or else I could grant her wish sooner.' Lin Wanrong chuckled: "Thank you for your blessing, Grandmother. I will indeed take good care of Ning'er and ensure that she leads a joyful life."

Luo Min stood up, patting his shoulder, and said with profound meaning, "Little brother Lin, I entrust Ning'er to you. Treat her well."

Old Luo looked somewhat disheartened. Lin Wanrong knew what he was thinking, so he remained silent, only giving him a solemn nod. The two men exchanged smiles.

"Congratulations to Sister Ning. Brother Lin is the best husband in the world," Qiaoqiao whispered in Luo Ning's ear, gripping her hand.

Luo Ning hummed shyly in response. Before she could say anything, a voice from outside announced, "The imperial edict has arrived! Jiangsu Governor Luo Min, receive the decree—"

Luo Min's body trembled slightly, his hands shaking. He managed to suppress his excitement, adjusted his official robe, and was about to go out when Old Madam Luo said sternly, "Min, prepare the incense table here to receive the edict."

Luo Min glanced at his mother and hastily agreed. Lin Wanrong pulled Qiaoqiao into the room to avoid the commotion.

After the incense burner and desk were arranged, a clean-shaven eunuch strode in, announcing, "Jiangsu Governor Luo Min, receive the imperial edict."

"Criminal subject Luo Min, humbly receiving the imperial edict!" Luo Min knelt and kowtowed, while Old Madam Luo, aided by Luo Ning, also attempted to kneel.

The eunuch who was delivering the edict hurriedly said, "Old Madam, you must not. The Emperor has explicitly instructed that as a descendant of a founding minister and a bestowed county princess, you, graced with a first-rank command, and whose merit extends to three generations, need not kneel upon receiving the edict."

"I thank the Emperor for his grace!" The old lady straightened her body, giving her thanks. As a woman of high status, the current Emperor even addressed her as aunt.

"Upon investigation, Jiangsu Governor Luo Min, without requesting imperial decree, had arrested Jiangsu Commander Cheng De, and presumptuously executed him, causing his death. This demonstrates disrespect towards the court, overstepping boundaries, and committing grave crimes. However, the evidence Luo Min provided about Cheng De's corruption is undeniably true. Luo Min, though having minor merits, disrupted law and order by using private punishment. As per regulations, he should be sent to serve in the army. However, considering his ability to discern and manage people, his lack of serious faults during his tenure, and his assistance in eliminating the White Lotus Sect, Luo Min is to be stripped of his governorship and demoted to serve as the county magistrate of Jining, Shandong. His family will accompany him. Depart immediately."

The eunuch paused before continuing, "Old Madam Luo, a first-rank command, a paragon of loyalty, filial piety, and endurance in the world. A son's crimes do not implicate his mother. Therefore, thirty eastern pearls and one thousand taels of silver are awarded, and a close attendant will escort you back to Beijing to enjoy your remaining years. This is the Emperor's grace!"

Lin Wanrong, in the back, heard everything clearly. The Emperor had demoted Luo Min, but rewarded the Old Madam, a subtle balance indeed. Jining was a stronghold of the White Lotus Sect, just recently taken over. Sending Luo Min, demoted to a minor county magistrate, there was indeed a tough task. Escorting the old lady back to Beijing clearly showed a gesture of care.

Luo Min knelt on the ground, saying loudly, "The criminal Luo Min thanks the Emperor for his grace!" When he raised his head, there were already tears in his eyes. He stood, received the edict with both hands, then knelt before the Old Madam, sobbing, "Mother, I have failed in my filial duty to protect you. Please punish me."

The Old Madam slammed her hand on the table, her voice echoing through the room. "A man's knees are made of gold, they should not easily touch the ground. Min, don't kneel there, get up quickly. The Emperor rewards and punishes with clear distinction. If you have made a mistake, you

must bear the consequences. If your conscience is clear, then stand tall. Do your duty for the Emperor, serve the people, and honour the court. For generations, the Luo family has not raised spineless men. Even though I am old, I refuse to see you live on your knees."

Although Luo Min was of considerable age, he did not dare to say a word upon hearing his mother's admonition. He quickly got up and stood beside Old Madam Luo. Luo Ning's eyes filled with tears, which she did not let fall, only secretly wiping them away.

Watching all this, Lin Wanrong nodded silently. No wonder each child of the Luo family was accomplished. With this Old Madam Luo in charge, it would be hard for any of them to turn out mediocre.

Having received the imperial edict, Luo Min was now to hurry to Jining. Lin Wanrong felt a certain melancholy. Once Old Luo left, he would also have to leave. In the city of Jinling, only Qiaoqiao would be left alone and helpless. It nearly broke his heart.

He pulled Qiaoqiao into a tight embrace, his voice soft, "Qiaoqiao, wait for me. Once I establish myself in the capital, I'll come for you. Then we'll open branches there. Ten, or even eight branches, and you'll be the lady boss, my most beautiful lady boss—"

"Big brother—" Qiaoqiao cried out, throwing herself into his embrace.

Chapter 273 Desolation

"It's going to snow." Luo Min gazed at the brooding sky, a sigh of melancholy escaped him. He moved forward, his steps, both aged and solemn, crushing the wilted grass beneath, making a rustling noise. The withered branches along the path, rattled in the chilly wind, wailing mournfully, were like skeletal fingers, reaching out to the horizon, painting a scene of desolation.

From the moment Luo Min received the imperial decree of his demotion to Jining the previous day, his household began packing. It was not until this morning that they bid farewell to the Old Madam Luo, who was returning to the capital. Luo Min seemed like a child who had been abandoned, seeming to age several years overnight, his demeanor extraordinarily desolate. It was only the two tears shed by the elderly madam before her departure that truly revealed his lonely state of mind.

The imperial decree from Emperor of Great Hua was stern, ordering Luo Min to immediately take up his post in Jining, and clearly stated that his entire family must relocate, including his children Luo Ning and Luo Yuan. For the siblings who were deeply attached to Jinling, how could they not

be overwhelmed with sadness? With the New Year just around the corner, it was heartless of the Emperor to not let them celebrate the Spring Festival in Jinling.

Jining was remote and Luo Min's new position a demotion; everything was yet to be settled. The conditions for a minor county magistrate would naturally not be favorable. Luo Min dared not let his old mother accompany him to this new post. Besides, the emperor had decreed, specially dispatching a servant to escort the Old Madam back to the capital for recuperation, which aligned with his intentions. However, as the New Year approached, while other families gathered, the Luo family was torn apart, the inevitable sadness within their hearts could not be avoided. Old Madam Luo, however, was remarkably strong and unpretentious. As she left, she only said three words to Luo Min — diligence, stability, and endurance. These three simple words embodied countless hopes and expectations, inspiring respect within him.

Although Luo Min had served in government for many years and was accustomed to the unpredictability of the royal court, the melancholy he felt in this situation did not need to be spoken for Lin Wanrong to deeply perceive it. Seeing Old Luo's greying hair and sad expression, he didn't know how to comfort him, he could only shake his head helplessly. Being at the Emperor's service required enduring his whims, and being prepared for sudden changes in fortune.

"Indeed, it's going to snow. Without snow, it wouldn't be winter. That's the law set by the heavens. Nobody can stop it." Lin Wanrong said, "It's just like humans, there are no eternal gatherings, but countless partings. If you are born into this world, it's meant for you to suffer. Human affairs are ever-changing, and even the Emperor himself can't change that."

Luo Min gazed deeply at him and said, "Little brother Lin, listening to you, it feels as though I can't tell who is older among us, and your words seem sincere, not contrived, which is strange to me."

Lin Wanrong had been betrothed to Luo Ning, making him technically Luo Min's son-in-law. Luo Min addressing him as "little brother" might have seemed out of place, but to both of them, it felt right. It was a testament to their close relationship.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "These are just my wild thoughts, it has nothing to do with age."

Luo Min shook his head helplessly, "Without people, where would there be matters to attend to? Don't dwell on it too much. There are better days awaiting you."

‘Open-minded? Is there anyone more open-minded than me in this world?’ Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, raised his fist to Luo Min in a gesture of thanks, and said, "I've learned my lesson."

The carriage creaked slowly forward, with Luo Min and Lin Wanrong leading the way on foot, followed by Luo Yuan and Luo Ning. Luo Ning looked at Lin Wanrong, her phoenix eyes glistening with tears, but she held them back with sheer willpower.

Luo Min had few possessions. One carriage was loaded with books of poetry, while another held a few trunks of clothes and Luo Ning's personal belongings, including some calligraphy and paintings. Apart from that, there was nothing else. A fitting description for Luo Min would be "clean-handed".

"Old Luo is a clean official," Lin Wanrong exclaimed, even though there was no crowd of citizens to send him off, nor any grandeur to speak of. However, officials like Luo Min, who knew how to hide and protect themselves best, were the truly talented and smart ones. Lin Wanrong could not help but give a thumbs up in admiration.

"Mr. Luo," Lin Wanrong began, "The Emperor's edict came too abruptly, and it's exceedingly unreasonable. It's as if he deliberately wanted to make a display for someone. Logically speaking, regardless of the gravity of your mistake, you've always been fiercely loyal to the Emperor. He should understand this better than anyone else. Unless he is a thoroughly foolish and incompetent Emperor, he wouldn't do something to hurt a loyal official's heart. Moreover, Mr. Xu is mediating. Even if he couldn't completely absolve you, he wouldn't have forced you to relocate before the Spring Festival. I suspect there's more to this situation than meets the eye," he said, trying to comfort Luo Min after seeing his lingering melancholy.

Luo Min shook his head and smiled bitterly, "The Emperor's mind is inscrutable. While your interpretation makes some sense, it is still speculation. Outsiders will never truly know what the Emperor is thinking. That is the art of ruling. I once thought I was above it all. Though I can't say I was never elated by possessions or saddened by personal issues, I believed I could face them with equanimity. But today, when I encountered this setback, I realized that I, Luo Min, am just an ordinary man. I can feel resentment and complaint, and I am far from the path of tranquility."

Lin Wanrong sneered at the idea of not being elated by possessions or saddened by personal issues. Humans, nourished by grains, feel joy, sadness, pride, and desolation. These are the basic emotions of a human being. If one were to discard all these, could they still be considered normal? They'd be closer to a stone!

Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "Mr. Luo, it's normal for you to have such thoughts. We are ordinary people and naturally, setbacks would make us feel this way. However, the Emperor never does things straightforwardly. As you said, he's naturally meant to be speculated about." Lin Wanrong pulled out a pencil, found a piece of paper and began sketching, "Mr. Luo, please look. This is

Jinling, and this is Jining. Further north is the capital. Tell me, is Jinling closer to the capital, or is Jining?"

Luo Min laughed heartily at the profound implication, "You indeed know how to comfort me. If it's as you said, then it would be worth it to become a humble county magistrate in Jining."

Lin Wanrong chuckled along, helplessly shaking his head as he looked at the distances marked on the paper, thinking himself even more adept at delusions than he'd accused others of being.

Luo Min gave him a meaningful look, sighing, "For the sake of my daughter Ning'er, I sincerely hope that you won't enter the capital. The place is a sea of nobles and a minefield of dangers, a single misstep could lead to irreversible catastrophe, far worse than Jinling. Ning'er is deeply attached to you, if anything were to happen to you, I fear she would not survive alone in this world."

Lin Wanrong glanced at Luo Ning, who was walking beside him. Her cute little face, red from the cold, her lips slightly parted, and a trace of tears glistening in her eyes. Smiling at him, she snuggled closer to his side.

Luo Min took a deep breath, adding, "A real man should have ambitions and you are no exception. If you're shackled in Jinling, it would be a waste of your talent and Ning'er would surely feel discontented. It's a real dilemma. Fortunately, you have a powerful patron. Even if you were to go to the capital, you should be able to turn bad luck into good fortune. This reassures me."

When Luo Min mentioned the mysterious patron again, Lin Wanrong could not help but ask, "Mr. Luo, we are about to part ways, can you finally tell me who this patron is? So that I won't be haunted by doubts. If the patron is influential enough, I would fear nothing in the capital. I could walk around with my head held high, which is what I prefer."

Luo Min laughed, "Your patron? Isn't Xu Wei, Mr. Xu, a powerful enough patron? Isn't that enough of a backing?"

Lin Wanrong forced a smile. 'You old man are fooling me again. After becoming my father-in-law, you still won't tell me the truth.'

Luo Min, knowing his thoughts, patted him on the shoulder, "It's not that I don't want to tell you. Given your relationship with Ning'er, if I could, I would have told you long ago. However, you can

rest assured. With this powerful figure as your patron, you can freely venture into the capital - although, even without this patron, with your character, I doubt you'd ever lay low, would you?"

"Don't say it like that, I've always been low-key," Lin Wanrong answered earnestly. With his unique experiences, he would never demean himself. He had already faced death multiple times, why should he act like a subordinate in front of others?

Luo Min laughed and nodded, then asked, "Are you planning to head to the capital on the third day of the New Year?"

"That's the plan, it's what I arranged with Eldest Miss Xiao and the others," Lin Wanrong replied.

Luo Min glanced at Luo Ning and said, "The New Year is in a few days, and there isn't much time before the third day. That's a good plan. After you've settled in the capital, I'll send Ning'er and Little Yuan to visit their grandmother in the capital. You must take good care of the two of them when the time comes."

There was no need to even say that. One was his wife-to-be, and the other was his brother-in-law and brother. Naturally, he would take good care of them.

"The newly appointed Governor of Jiangsu was once a colleague of mine. He's been in close contact with Mr. Wenchang and me, and I can assure you that after I leave, he will take care of the Xiao family and the properties in your name. Given that Mr. Xu must have given him instructions, you can rest easy." Luo Min advised meticulously.

This wasn't a concern for Lin Wanrong. The Emperor had demoted Luo Min, but he wouldn't hand over Jiangsu to anyone else. The new governor was bound to be one of Xu Wei's men. With old Xu Wei around, he was sure that the new governor would look after the Xiao family and his properties.

Old Luo, having become his father-in-law, was different. He was thoughtful about these little things. Lin Wanrong nodded, and a few light, fluff-like snowflakes landed on his face, icy cold. He reached out and gently touched them, and the fluff disappeared instantly.

"The snow... it's finally falling," Luo Min sighed. The fluttering snowflakes fell on Old Luo's white hair and beard, frosting the edges of his temples.

Luo Ning hurriedly draped a long robe over her father, then gently straightened Lin Wanrong's clothes. Her gaze was full of affection as she looked at him, her eyes misting over with unshed tears.

"You two should say your goodbyes," Old Luo said beside the long pavilion where they were seeing off Xu Wei. Looking at his children and Lin Wanrong, he couldn't help feeling a pang of sadness. After walking a few steps, he climbed into the carriage and disappeared behind the curtains.

Luo Yuan and Qingshan exchanged a few words on the side, both young men breaking into tears. They had built Hung Hing together, surviving life-threatening battles and forming an unbreakable bond. Naturally, they were finding it difficult to say goodbye.

Lin Wanrong walked over, clapped both men on their shoulders and said, "What are you two crying for? Jinling is only a day's ride from Jining. If Qingshan misses Little Luo, he can lead the brothers there, and take the opportunity to establish a Hung Hing branch in Shandong, or even Jining. Doesn't that solve everything?"

Qingshan slapped his forehead, suddenly enlightened, "Right, why didn't I think of that? Little Luo, let's stop crying. You'll lay the groundwork in Jining, and I'll lead the brothers to join you soon."

Luo Yuan laughed heartily, feeling touched. He grabbed Lin Wanrong and said, "Big brother, thank you for always taking care of me. Without you, there wouldn't be the me of today."

"I didn't teach you anything. Drinking, gambling, swindling, robbing, it's all self-taught, and has nothing to do with me," Lin Wanrong said earnestly. The three of them burst into laughter as snowflakes gently fell around them, landing on their heads and bodies.

Luo Yuan glanced at Luo Ning standing beside Lin Wanrong. Winking mischievously, he said, "Sister, brother-in-law, time is precious, you two should talk. I won't disturb you." He then walked a few steps forward with Qingshan, leaving Lin Wanrong and Luo Ning some space.

Luo Ning's face flushed as she grumbled, "That Luo Yuan, he's so disrespectful in his speech."

"How so? Wasn't he right?" Lin Wanrong pulled her icy cold hand into his chest, rubbing it briskly a few times, "Don't you want to talk to me?"

Luo Ning stole a glance at Qiaoqiao, standing far off at the pavilion, waving towards them. She gritted her teeth in secret, her eyes welling up, and could no longer contain herself as she threw herself into his arms, sobbing, "Brother, Ning'er doesn't want to leave you—" Only recently had she and him committed to each other, envisioning a romantic future under the moonlight and blooming flowers. Yet an imperial edict shattered her dreams before they could truly be together. How could she possibly bear it?

Lin Wanrong heaved a sigh. He and Luo Ning, the talented woman, had always been together sparingly, with very few opportunities for proper companionship. Most of the time, he had been teasing her, which, upon reflection, made him feel somewhat guilty. Patting her on the shoulder gently, Lin Wanrong managed a forced smile, "Little Ning'er, stop crying. If people see the renowned talented woman of Jinling crying like this, they might think I've been bullying you again."

Luo Ning whimpered, lightly beating his chest, "You did bully me. You've been doing it since the first time we met. You've made me lose my appetite and my peace of mind. I can't focus on anything else. And worst of all, we have hardly had a proper conversation, and yet we have to part again. Big brother, why is my life so bitter? I want to be like Qiaoqiao and the others, always by your side, listening to you speak, never parting—"

Her simple request would only be possible once he returned from the capital. These girls, he couldn't bear to leave any of them behind. Damn, how did he develop such a bad habit of loving them all? This was really troubling.

Seeing Luo Ning crying so sadly, he softly said into her ear, "Ning'er, didn't you once say that you wanted a husband who was both a scholar and a warrior? What do you think of me? Have I fulfilled your requirements?"

Luo Ning chuckled, her eyes glistening with tears, she looked up at him briefly before burying her head back into his chest, "Big brother, that was when Ning'er was naïve, with some childish thoughts. Big brother, your literary talent is unmatched, even if others spent ten years studying, they might not match up to you. Even if you don't know martial arts, what does it matter? I love you for who you are. Even if you have nothing, I will follow you, for a lifetime, without any regrets."

Lin Wanrong spoke seriously, "Ning'er, actually, I completely meet your requirements of being both a scholar and a warrior. Now that we're here, I have to tell you the truth. The Big brother Lin standing in front of you is actually a general who has fought in many battles, once following Marshal Xu Wei to quell the White Lotus Rebellion. As a Commander commanding the right flank of a hundred-thousand-strong army, I have led tens of thousands of troops, battling the enemy on the front lines of Jining. Leading my brothers, we defeated the bravest warrior of the White Lotus,

captured their King, and effortlessly captured Jining City. Enemies hearing my name would lose heart; those catching my eye would only flee. People call me General Lin of a hundred victories, with an invincible spear. This is no empty boast."

Luo Ning stared blankly at him for a while, then suddenly hid her laughter in her sleeve, "Big brother, you say these things as if they were true. If I hadn't heard so many of your jokes, I would certainly have believed you. Big brother, the things I said in the past were just naive words of a young girl. I thought I was pursuing those things. It wasn't until I met you that I realized how shallow I was. A man like you, big brother, is truly wise. Even if you can't go to the battlefield, you're the hero in my heart."

Why was it that people always believed him when he lied, but no one believed him when he told the truth? His character was never in question. Lin Wanrong shook his head helplessly, his face pulling into a smile that was even more painful than a cry.

Luo Ning giggled, glanced around, saw no one was paying attention, stood on tiptoes, and quickly pecked him on the lips like a dragonfly skimming the water. Her face instantly turned red as a crimson cloud, and she turned to leave.

Remembering the day she had forcefully kissed him on the flower boat, Lin Wanrong wouldn't let her have her way again—now it was his turn to take the initiative. He chuckled, swiftly pulled her back into his arms, found her tender lips, and kissed her fiercely. Her small, fiery tongue and sweet essence filled his mouth.

"Big brother, always remember Ning'er. Once father settles everything, I will come to the capital to find you, wait for me!" The carriage carrying Luo Ning and her family slowly disappeared in the distance, her passionate words still echoing in Lin Wanrong's ears.

"Ning'er, we'll meet in the capital!" He waved gently at Luo Ning's receding carriage, the ground blanketed with white, the swirling snowflakes landing on him, encasing him like an undissolved snowman...

Chapter 274 Journey to the Capital

The chill of spring was biting, and the cold wind was sharp as a knife. The hard, frozen ground, recently dusted by snow, was riddled with clumps of soil turned icy. As a result, the carriage

traveled with a rough jolt. The air was filled with a faint scent of gunpowder from spent firecrackers. The just-thawed river flowed with a gurgling sound, its crisp and clear noise stimulating the spirit.

Every household had hung lanterns at their doors. These lanterns were of various sizes and designs, differing in shape, with their lights either bright or dim, either near or far. Seen from a distance, they looked like hanging lamps in the sky, each lit and glowing, creating a magnificent spectacle.

There were many pedestrians on both sides of the road. The maids held lanterns, their figures swaying gracefully in the cool spring wind. Young ladies walked hurriedly with shy smiles, their heads down, as if fearful that others might see their faces. Young gentlemen seeking springtime pleasures held small, casual fans, occasionally appraising the women passing by with an air of nonchalance.

The saying "fire of the 30th, lanterns of the 15th" rang true. Half a month had passed since the Spring Festival, and now it was the Lantern Festival. Spring was in full swing, and the city was alight with lanterns, marking a prosperous start to the year.

At the side of the city's moat, where ice had just begun to melt, the water flowed with a constant hum. Countless flower lanterns floated on the surface, gently swaying. Their forms varied, some in the shape of lotuses, others peonies, competing in their splendor and beauty. The lanterns' reflections danced on the water, and each one created a corresponding shadow. The surface of the water mirrored the scene above, appearing like numerous fallen stars, stunningly beautiful.

This was the widely celebrated Flower Lantern Festival in the north. Legend has it that during the Lantern Festival at the start of spring, young ladies would write their wishes on paper, put them in specially made flower lanterns, and let them float downstream. If a scholar happened to pick up the lantern, he was deemed the destined one. The mythical Flower Goddess would bless these couples, who were brought together by the flower lanterns, to enjoy a harmonious and enduring union.

This legend, passed down through hundreds of years, had indeed brought together several renowned couples. Over time, the Flower Lantern Festival became a unique highlight of the northern Lantern Festival.

The Lantern Festival came early this year. With the river ice just beginning to thaw and the weather still bitterly cold, a large crowd of young gentlemen, eager to fish out the flower lanterns, lined the riverbanks in thick clusters, leaving no room to pass.

A boy, about eleven or twelve years old, dressed in silk, held a long bamboo pole. Attached to it was a small iron hook, which he skillfully used to hook several flower lanterns, evoking a wave of admiration and envy from the other gentlemen on the riverbanks. Most of them came empty-handed, and even those who brought tools hadn't prepared as thoroughly. Seeing this young lad, barely eleven or twelve, continuously collecting the lanterns dropped by the ladies upstream, they couldn't help but respect him: "Whose young master is this? Such foresight is remarkable indeed!"

A large carriage slowly made its way from the distance, bobbing along the bumpy road.

The two horses pulling the carriage were blowing hot breaths from their mouths, their bridles foamy. Despite their travel-worn state, they appeared vigorous and gallant. The carriage behind them was considerably large, covered in a layer of dust, showing signs of a long journey.

The carriage jolted, and from inside came a woman's soft shout: "Hey, what are you doing? You're pressing on me!"

Another man's voice rang out, "Ah, I'm sorry, it's the bumpy ride. I didn't mean to... Wait, what's this soft thing? Oh, there's another one over here—"

"You, get out!" Two women's voices chorused from inside the carriage.

The curtain was hastily pulled back, and a healthy-looking man with a smile on his face was pushed out by two pairs of small hands.

Brushing off his green robe and adjusting his cap, he chuckled, "What's there to be embarrassed about? It was an accident. Even though you're well-shaped, there's no need to be so domineering. Getting out is fine; I was getting tired of sitting in the carriage anyway. Walking a bit will serve as good exercise."

The carriage hadn't gone far before it came to a halt. A man who had been walking beside the carriage yawned, looked at the dense crowd on both sides of the river, and jumped in surprise. What the hell was going on? It was pitch-dark, and everyone was here fishing?

The curtain of the carriage window was lifted, and a beautiful little face poked out. With a sweet smile, she curiously examined the crowd before her and asked, "Sister, why are the people in the capital so strange? It's cold and dark, yet they are gathered by the river. Oh, there are so many lanterns on the river. They're so pretty."

Another woman also leaned out of the window. Her face was exquisite, cheeks pink, eyes sparkling, and she exuded grace. She observed the crowd before speaking, "Ah, is it the Lantern Festival today? We've been on the road for so long that we've even forgotten about this important day. This must be the legendary Lantern Festival of the Flower Goddess. The legend states that if an unmarried woman floats a lantern down the river with her wish written on it and a gentleman catches it, this would be a divine matchmaking by the Flower Goddess, leading to a lifetime of happiness."

The younger woman exclaimed in delight, "Really?" She sneakily glanced at the man walking beside the carriage and whispered, "Then I'll also send one and let that naughty man pick it up."

The older, beautiful woman laughed softly and said, "What's the point of him picking it up? You could simply be together with him for a lifetime without these complexities. Making it so roundabout just complicates things."

The younger girl squealed, her face reddening beyond her ears, as she playfully argued with her sister inside the carriage.

The man walking beside the carriage suddenly understood upon hearing their conversation. So, these people were here to pick up lanterns, no wonder everyone was so eager, their eyes gleaming. But this activity seemed beneficial for these lazy young men and women.

He glanced around, noticing a boy of around eleven or twelve who was deftly picking up four or five lanterns in a short time. The boy glanced at the messages inside each lantern, snorted, and tossed them aside. More and more disregarded lanterns, each bearing the heart of a charming young lady, piled up, causing the spectating gentlemen to anxiously salivate.

"Damn, even a little boy is catching lanterns. Is there no sense of decency left?" the man muttered, shaking his head. "So young and he's already playing this romantic game. What a disgrace." He spat in disdain, his smile broad as he approached. With a pleasant smile, he said, "Hey, kiddo. Wow, you're amazing, picking lanterns at such a young age. Can I play with you?"

The young gentlemen in the crowd watched as a commoner made friendly advances, instantly feeling contempt. "Whose servant is this, showing such lack of manners? Does he have no sense of propriety, swindling even a child?"

"Sister, he's up to no good again. Aren't you going to restrain him?" the younger girl inside the carriage peeped through the curtain and huffed.

Her sister chuckled. "He's been up to mischief more times than I can count. Who can really control him? It would be a daunting task for our family."

The younger girl retorted, "I think you just don't want to interfere, sister. This bad man, journeying all the way from Jinling to the capital, he looks for trouble every day. Without supervision, who knows what evil he might do?"

The older sister laughed, "Evil deeds? When he is mischievous around you, I see you enjoying it very much. Don't think I haven't noticed just because I'm asleep."

"Sister!" The younger girl blushed and buried herself in her sister's arms, speechless.

The older sister touched her nose helplessly. "You're still so young, but you allow him to fool around with you every day. What will you do in the future? Didn't I give you a small knife for self-protection? If he bullies you again, stab him with it. But don't say I taught you this. He loves to get back at me."

As the two sisters laughed and talked in the carriage, the man had already shamelessly approached the child. "So, little brother, do you agree? If you don't speak, I'll take it as a yes. Here, this is a piece of silver. If you can catch ten lanterns, this silver is yours."

The boy hummed, not saying a word.

'He's got character. I like that,' he chuckled, brandishing the shiny silver before the boy's eyes. "See this? It's shiny silver. Ten lanterns for a piece of silver, quite a bargain."

The boy looked at him scornfully, took out a gold ingot from his pocket, about four to five taels in weight, and signaled with his little finger. "Here, this is five taels of gold. If you can catch a lantern, consider this young master's reward to you." The crowd burst into laughter at this.

'Damn, he's more arrogant than me? The capital really is different. Even the kids are so cocky,' he thought but, being thick-skinned, the man wasn't bothered by the laughter. He gave a thumbs-up, "Little brother, you certainly have character. I like it. Let's be friends. My name's Lin San. What's yours?"

"Lin San?" The boy frowned, shaking his head. "That's a terrible name. Utterly common. If your name is anything to go by, your learning can't be much better."

The little fellow acted like a tiny adult and had spoken at length, yet he had not revealed his own name. Lin Wanrong didn't mind and chuckled, "True, my name was given by others, a crude and vulgar mess. I wonder, what kind of noble name do you have, little brother?"

The child gave him a wary glance and said, "Why do you ask for my name? Hmm, among those who try to cozy up to me, eight out of ten have ulterior motives. You have the look of a crook, aren't you planning to kidnap me? Let me tell you, I'm not to be trifled with! I could kill cats when I was three and rip apart leopards when I was five. I've just recently slaughtered a ferocious tiger with my bare hands. You want to kidnap me? Be careful, my fists don't discriminate!" He waved his little fist around, portraying himself as a muscular man.

Lin Wanrong stood dumbfounded. 'Damn, I've finally met someone more shameless than me, and he's so young too. He has potential, a promising future indeed.' He laughed slyly, "Little brother, you indeed are formidable. Fine, fine, I won't ask for your name anymore. Tell me, why are you trying to pick these lanterns? Is it really to find a wife?"

The boy dismissed him with a snort, "Find a wife? What would I want with a wife? You think everyone is like you, always thinking about wives!" The crowd erupted in laughter. Lin Wanrong was sweating, this kid was on the mark, he indeed came to the capital to find a wife. The two sisters, hearing Lin Wanrong getting one-upped by the boy in their conversation, couldn't help but cover their mouths with their hands and giggle in the carriage. The older sister said, "There you go. There's always someone who can scare you, right?"

"If you're not looking for a wife, then why are you picking those lanterns?" One of the bystanders, having listened to their conversation, finally couldn't hold back and asked.

"The lanterns are nothing interesting." The boy said, "I've picked forty to fifty lanterns, all containing the love poems written by ladies. They are simply unbearable to read. I wanted to find some pastries to my taste, but failed to find any."

The sound of countless young men gasping. This damn brat! He was picking the lanterns to look for pastries and casually discarded the love poems written by the ladies, utterly heartless.

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. He never held a liking for such love poems anyway. This kid was amusing and made people laugh despite themselves.

The boy, seeing the hateful stares from the crowd, showed no fear. He tugged at Lin Wanrong's sleeve, "Lin San, you're not too bad!"

"What's not too bad?" Lin Wanrong asked, curious.

The child said seriously, "These people are all trying to find a lady through a lantern, utterly vulgar and shallow. Although you are of low status, you are not like them. You didn't try to pick a lantern, nor did you ridicule me. Your character seems alright. So, I'll tell you my name. I am Li Wuling. In the future, if anyone bullies you in the capital, just mention my name. I guarantee that no one would dare lay a finger on you."

'Damn, is he really that awesome?' Lin Wanrong chuckled secretly, not taking it seriously. However, he had an inkling from the boy's previous words that this kid was not ordinary. Li Wuling had a round and chubby face, with black pupils and sparkling eyes, indeed clever and adorable. Thinking of his unique reason for picking the lanterns, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but laugh, "Little brother, are you picking these lanterns for snacks? Have you been tricked?"

Li Wuling snorted, "Yesterday, I heard people talking about this Lantern Festival of the Flower Goddess, so I asked Grandpa what the festival was about. He was busy at the time, so after I pestered him a bit, he said it was to appease the gods who crave sweets, with each family's young ladies making pastries to offer to the River God. Hmph, he dared to lie to me. Tomorrow, I'll show him who's boss and let him see my power."

Incredible, Lin Wanrong broke into a cold sweat upon hearing this. This little guy was likely a tyrant at home, even his grandfather wasn't spared from his audacity.

"Look, look, it's the Flower Goddess Lantern!" A shout echoed from upstream.

"Flower Goddess Lantern, Flower Goddess Lantern!" Young men on both banks echoed in unison, their voices filled with excitement and fervor. The two young ladies hidden in the carriage, hearing the commotion, couldn't help but peer out.

"What's this Flower Goddess Lantern?" Lin Wanrong looked at Li Wuling, puzzled.

"You're asking me? How would I know, I'm just a kid!" Li Wuling rolled his eyes.

'Damn, this kid's a tough one,' Lin Wanrong smirked, and turned his gaze upstream. There, slowly approaching, was a lantern the size of a person, shaped like a beautiful woman. The lantern figure was coy, smiling, with fluttering skirt ribbons, lifelike in every way. This beautiful lady lantern radiated a gentle yellow glow all over, surrounded by dozens of small lights forming a lotus shape. From a distance, it looked like a celestial being floating within a lotus.

So, this was the Flower Goddess Lantern? Lin Wanrong silently admired it. Aside from the concept, to make such a large lantern float on the waves without tipping over was a great challenge, not something an ordinary person could achieve.

"What Flower Goddess Lantern? Watch me hook it up just the same." Li Wuling said dismissively.

People on both sides of the river had long been captivated by the breathtaking Flower Goddess Lantern, with many prostrating in worship. Only Li Wuling and Lin Wanrong were fearless, after all, it was a lantern released by upstream maidens, might as well hook it up and have a look.

Li Wuling was standing at a narrow part of the river, the best spot for lantern fetching. He extended the bamboo pole, gauging the direction the Flower Goddess Lantern was drifting from, and pulled hard. Despite the lantern's height, it was quite stable in water, Li Wuling's pull tilted it slightly but didn't hook it over.

Lin Wanrong, quick on his feet, grabbed the bamboo pole and yanked, finally hooking the beautiful lantern over.

Once the lantern was ashore, Lin Wanrong closely examined its base. There was a circular support bracket holding the lamp with several wooden wheels attached, allowing the lantern to change direction freely according to the water flow. The lantern came from upstream with the wheels following the water flow, thus, to hook the lantern over was to change the direction of the wheels, requiring considerable force.

Amazed by the ingenious mechanical design, Lin Wanrong nodded approvingly, acknowledging that the capital truly was filled with talented people.

Seeing the Flower Goddess Lantern was hooked up, the crowd flocked over. The two young ladies in the carriage couldn't help themselves either, they elegantly moved closer, standing beside Lin Wanrong.

The two women were gracefully proportioned, stunningly beautiful, even surpassing the celestial fairies depicted in paintings. Onlookers were momentarily stunned, mouths agape. Even Li Wuling, the young lad, seemed somewhat entranced.

‘Damn it, they’re my wives, not yours to gawk at.’ Lin Wanrong felt disgruntled and moved to shield the two ladies. He cleared his throat and asked, “Little brother, what are you going to do with this lantern?”

Li Wuling rubbed his eyes, stating, “These sisters are truly beautiful. Lin San, are they your wives?”

That was a good question. Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, “Close enough.” Xiao Yushuang blushed ear to ear at his words, while the Eldest Miss pinched the flesh on his waist with force.

“Lin San, why do you look so peculiar?” inquired Li Wuling.

‘Well, I was being tormented by this little minx, experiencing pain in my own flesh, yet I had to keep a smile on my face. Could I not look peculiar?’ He chuckled, “Stop with the chatter, Li. Check if there are any pastries in the lantern. I’m a bit hungry. After eating, I’ll go home to sleep with my wife.”

“You wish! Dare to say such things?” the Eldest Miss gripped harder, her face as red as the evening glow. She whispered softly into his ear. The fragrant breath she exhaled was intoxicating, making Lin Wanrong’s heart flutter.

Li Wuling nodded and examined the contents of the flower lantern. Of course, there were no pastries, but he did find a crumpled piece of paper. Disappointed, the young boy didn’t even glance at the paper before tossing it to Lin Wanrong. “You hooked the lantern, so naturally, you should read the letter written by the young lady.”

Feeling a sharp pain in his waist, Lin Wanrong forced a smile. “Miss, I didn’t mean it. Don’t be jealous for no reason. How about I let you read it? I won’t bother.”

Xiao Yuruo blushed, sneakily glancing at her younger sister, and huffed, “Who’s jealous? You just love talking nonsense. Yushuang, let’s ignore him. Let him have his way.”

Xiao Yushuang nodded and asked in puzzlement, “Sister, what’s wrong? Your face is so red.”

"Is it?" The Eldest Miss covered her cheek, her heart pounding, "Maybe it's the wind. Anyway, it's all because of Lin San. Let's just ignore him."

Seeing Lin Wanrong holding the paper ball, an expression of both sweetness and pain on his face, Li Wuling couldn't help saying, "Lin San, are you going to read it or not? If not, throw it away earlier to spare your wife the jealousy."

'For the sake of calling her his 'wife,' I'll let this little guy off.' Lin Wanrong grinned and unfolded the paper, reading a line of small characters: Dragon, dragon, dragon, when will you lead the phoenix?

This seemed like half a poem or couplet, leaving the reader puzzled. Li Wuling peeked at it, scoffing, "Something about dragons and phoenixes, this young lady from wherever sure thinks highly of herself."

That makes sense. These young ladies were always daydreaming, just like Ning'er in the past. But fortunately, with his irresistible charm, he managed to win over the talented lady Luo. Otherwise, who knew how long she would have had to suffer?

Insect, insect, insect, adept at taming phoenixes and dragons! Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, adding a few words that seemed to capture his own image.

Li Wuling, wise beyond his years, nodded approvingly. "Lin San, your response is fitting. A dragon conquering a phoenix isn't impressive. But an insect doing so? That's a real accomplishment."

Lin Wanrong tucked the slip of paper back into the lantern. The two of them returned the flower lantern to the river, watching as the divine lantern with its beautiful image continued to drift downstream. Li Wuling giggled, "Lin San, you're an interesting man. Once we enter the city, I'll treat you to some tea. Now, I have to go back and ride my horse. Until we meet again."

Riding a horse? In pitch darkness? Was his whole family mad? Lin Wanrong was left in a daze long after Li Wuling had departed. The capital was indeed different - the people he met were all so unique.

As they climbed back into the carriage, Yushuang giggled, "What was written on the flower lantern that held you up for so long - Sister, is this the right question?"

"You naughty girl!" The Eldest Miss blushed and quickly turned her head away.

Lin Wanrong discreetly drew on the Eldest Miss's palm and replied solemnly, "Nothing much, it's the Flower Goddess blessing us!"

"Blessing us with what?" the Eldest Miss asked softly.

"Blessing us with eternal harmony and the early birth of noble children!" Lin Wanrong giggled.

Both women simultaneously gave a light scoff. The younger sister, thinking the words were about her, felt her heart pounding, while the Eldest Miss, conscious of her secret, turned crimson. She hurriedly said, "You can't be serious for even a few words. I'll punish you by walking into the city."

There was no need to walk into the city. As they conversed, the carriage slowly reached the city walls. Lin Wanrong stood on the carriage shaft, looking at the vermilion city gates and the two bright red characters above them. A surge of excitement welled up in him. "Qingxuan, I'm here!"

Chapter 275 The Lantern Festival

The fifteenth day of the first lunar month was the Lantern Festival, commonly known among the people as the Shangyuan Festival, or colloquially as the "Lantern Festival." By tradition, the Spring Festival was considered finished only after the Lantern Festival's celebrations had concluded. As such, the Lantern Festival was one of the most significant holidays in Great Hua.

The tradition of the Lantern Festival was said to have been passed down since the time of Xiang Yu, the founding emperor of the Great Chu Dynasty. During the Chu-Han contention, it was rumored that the Jade Emperor ordered the Fire Deity to set the capital city ablaze on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Xiang Yu, the Emperor of Great Chu, had a dream about this and thus led his ministers and the citizens of the capital to welcome the Fire Deity, pleading bitterly. The Fire Deity, unwilling to cause widespread destruction yet also afraid of defying the heavens, was caught in a predicament when a wise man proposed a strategy. That night, lanterns were lit everywhere in the capital, from the imperial palace to the common people's courtyards, making the city as bright as day. The blazing light pierced through the clouds, deceiving the Jade Emperor into believing that heavenly fire had already descended. From then on, every fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the capital would light all its lanterns in commemoration. This marked the origin of the Lantern Festival's custom. In order to pay respects to the Fire Deity, people would make balls of glutinous

rice flour as offerings. Resembling pearls, they were called "tangyuan" in the South and commonly known as "yuanxiao" in the North.

On the day of the Lantern Festival, the beginning of spring and the reawakening of all things, people who had stayed indoors throughout winter would begin to emerge, making it even more lively than the Spring Festival. However, on the fifteenth day, according to Great Hua customs, it was the time to eat yuanxiao before one could go out on a journey.

Lin Wanrong and the two young ladies' carriage entered the city. The Eldest Miss, gazing at the scenery outside, sighed softly, "We've been traveling since the third day of the New Year until today. We've been on the road for over ten days, and we've unknowingly arrived at the Lantern Festival."

While most people spent the Lantern Festival with family, enjoying a harmonious and joyful time, they had left on a journey since the third day of the lunar new year, which was indeed strenuous.

The Second Miss, experiencing a long journey for the first time, had slightly red eyes as she said, "Sister, I miss mother. I wonder what she is doing alone at home, has she eaten any yuanxiao?"

Upon hearing the two young ladies, Lin Wanrong also felt uncomfortable. He wondered what his wife, Qiaoqiao, was doing at the moment. Was she staring blankly at the white yuanxiao in her bowl, dropping her tears into it? He thought about their farewell when she had fainted crying in his arms. Lin Wanrong couldn't help but feel a twinge in his heart. Indeed, having a wife was to have worries. Fortunately, Xian'er had received a message from Sister An earlier and had arrived in the capital beforehand. Otherwise, who knew what kind of scene it would have been.

"Misses, will we have a place to eat yuanxiao tonight? I'm a little hungry," Lin Wanrong chuckled, diverting the sisters' attention.

"All you think about is eating!" The Eldest Miss playfully scolded, "Once we get to the branch office in the capital, will you be lacking anything?"

The carriage moved a few steps and then could no longer progress. Coinciding with the Lantern Festival, the entire capital was out to admire the lanterns. The roads were unbearably congested, not just for carriages but even pedestrians found it difficult to get through.

Yushuang, being young and after missing her mother for a while, looked at the bustling scene outside and suddenly felt an urge to join. Wiping her tears, she suggested, "Sister, since the carriage can't move forward, why don't we get down and walk? Today is the Lantern Festival, and it's lively outside. Let's go out and see?"

The Eldest Miss was mature and steady and The Xiao family was not to be trifled with in Jinling. However, this was the capital city, where nobody knew the Xiao family, so it was better to be cautious.

Seeing the Eldest Miss shake her head slightly, the Second Miss clung to Yuruo's arm and cooed, "Sister, it's rare for us to be here on this auspicious day of the Lantern Festival. Let's go out and have some fun!"

This young lady... The Eldest Miss let out a helpless sigh, glanced at Lin San, and sought his opinion, "What do you think?"

Lin Wanrong let out a wry smile, "The carriage can hardly move an inch right now. Even if we didn't want to get off, we have to. Let's grant the Second Miss her wish."

Yushuang gave him a sweet smile, biting her red lips. If it weren't for her sister being nearby, she would have jumped on him and hugged his neck already. The Eldest Miss resigned herself and said, "Alright then. But this is the capital, not Jinling. We must be careful, especially you!" She glared at him, a hint of reproach in her eyes. "There are many people outside. We three should stick together. We must not get separated."

'Three people together? How should we walk? I haven't tried that before.' Lin Wanrong chuckled, lifted the curtain, and jumped off the carriage, looking around.

The moon was bright, rising from the east, making the capital seem draped in a layer of silver. The city was bustling, with lanterns everywhere, people coming and going like a surging tide. Each person held a small lantern in their hand. Even the sons and daughters of the rich, surrounded by dozens of servants, carried lanterns of various sizes, making the street impassable.

Both sides of the street were adorned with high-hanging colored lanterns. Horse lanterns, jade rabbit lanterns, gourd lanterns, watermelon lanterns, cat lanterns, doll lanterns, peacock lanterns, and Shen Gongbao lanterns. All of them were realistic and beautifully crafted, like competing flowers in full bloom. The crowd was busy admiring and pointing at the variety of lanterns, laughter and joy filled the air, even more lively than the New Year's Eve.

Lin Wanrong glanced around and couldn't help but shake his head. No matter the era, the capital always had the most people, it was a golden rule.

The sisters stepped down from the carriage and also looked ahead. The younger sister was young and her face flushed with excitement, "Lin San, is this the Lantern Festival in the capital? It's even more lively than the lanterns on our Qinhuai River."

Although the Eldest Miss had traveled to many places, this bustling scene was her first. She looked around and sighed deeply, "Who can sit idle when the moon is seen? Who doesn't come to see the lanterns? In Jinling, we used to appreciate the lanterns at this time of the year. When I was a child, my mother took me to see them a few times. I thought at the time that the south of the Yangtze River was the most prosperous place in the world. Now that I am here in the capital, seeing this lantern festival, I realize that my perspective was too narrow."

"Crowds do not equate to prosperity. I still miss Jinling a bit more." Lin Wanrong said with a faint smile, full of profound meaning.

A wave of the bustling crowd surged forward, leaving the two young ladies with ashen faces. Lin Wanrong quickly spread his arms to shield the ladies, laughing, "Don't be scared, that's what happens when there's a crowd. Besides, you two are so beautiful, it would be unusual if people weren't drawn to you. I'll join the pushing and shoving later on, for your sake."

The younger lady giggled, while the elder one gently said, "Let's not stir up any trouble, we've just arrived in the capital city and should be cautious. Lin San, it's crowded here, hold onto Yushuang. We need to stay together, we can't get separated."

"Look!" the younger lady cried out suddenly, a slender finger pointing in the distance, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

The elder sister and Lin Wanrong followed her gaze, and saw a grandly erected light city on a distant platform, towering and radiant, its glow mingling with the moonlight. The magnificently imposing gate, and the shimmering sea of lights atop the city, was a majestic sight that left onlookers in awe. At the heart of the light city, a nine-lotus treasure lantern stood, surrounded by a sea of lights and throngs of people.

"This must be the official lantern," the elder sister murmured.

"What's an official lantern?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously. When it came to these matters, he was utterly naive.

The elder sister looked at him, smiling. "So, there are things you don't know after all. I had thought nothing in the world could stymie you."

She took this opportunity to playfully tease Lin Wanrong, who responded with a chuckle. "If one can know seventy or eighty percent of all things in the world, it would be a great fortune."

"Blowing your own trumpet." The elder sister giggled behind her hand, a delicate blush coloring her face. "The so-called 'official lantern' is the lantern made with funds from the government. Every year at the Lantern Festival, it's actually a competition of lanterns, where wealthy and influential households all invest in making lanterns. The government is no exception, it's their way of participating in the public celebration. The larger and more beautiful the lantern, the higher their status."

So that's how it was. It was essentially a group of wealthy people flaunting their money. Lin Wanrong scornfully shrugged it off. With a northern nomad invasion imminent, it was disheartening to see the court wasting money on such extravagances rather than on more urgent matters.

The younger lady, who had been unable to contain her excitement, exclaimed in her sweet voice, "Sister, Lin San, let's move forward and buy some of these beautiful lanterns to look at." With that, she took Lin Wanrong's hand and led him forward, leaving the elder sister to shake her head in resignation, whispering into Lin Wanrong's ear, "Remember, we must stay together, we can't separate."

A warmth spread in Lin Wanrong's heart. Was the girl hinting at something? He laughed, nodding, "Remembered, always together, never to part, even if it kills us."

Xiao Yuruo's face flushed a deep shade of red. "I have no idea what you're rambling about, I can't be bothered with you. Yushuang, let's go."

The streets were packed with people, causing quite a crowd. The two ladies walked ahead, and Lin Wanrong, unwilling to let them out of his sight, quickly took a few steps forward, grabbing hold of Yushuang's small hand, eliciting a sweet smile from the younger lady.

Seeing the elder sister's unchanging expression, Lin Wanrong decided not to think too much about it. He stretched out his large hand, reaching directly for Xiao Yuruo's petite one.

The Eldest Miss's gaze fell on the lanterns ahead, her face a gentle shade of pink, her small hand trembling slightly, dampened by nervous perspiration. Lin Wanrong grabbed her little hand. She

anxiously glanced at Yushuang, relieved to see no hint of suspicion in her eyes, before glaring resentfully at Lin Wanrong, her hand making a feeble attempt to escape his grip.

Lin Wanrong seriously said, "Hold tight, we can't afford to get separated. It's not easy to find each other in this crowd."

"I hate you," Eldest Miss bit her lip silently, too scared to speak or struggle further.

It wasn't his intention to upset her. Lin Wanrong, clasping Eldest Miss's hand, also felt a slight tremor in his heart.

From the beads of sweat in Eldest Miss's palm, he could feel her anxiety and excitement. Was she his older sister-in-law? Probably not. After holding the Second Miss's hand and now the Eldest Miss's, he was uncertain about who was who. It was all so confusing. He decided to let it be and not dwell on it too much. After all, regardless of the circumstances, they were still in this together. He chuckled, lightly tickling the palm of Eldest Miss's hand, reveling in a sense of unspoken triumph.

With a "boom," several splendid fireworks soared into the sky, exploding into a dazzling array of patterns. People craned their necks, cheer and applause filling the air. Everywhere you looked, there were colorful lanterns, their radiant hues fiercely competing for attention.

"The Wishing Tree!" Yushuang, leading the two, suddenly cried out.

The Wishing Tree? Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Was such a thing in existence already?

Following the direction pointed by the Second Miss, he saw a towering ginkgo tree on the street ahead. Judging by the size of its trunk and branches, it must have been thousands of years old. The tree was adorned with a variety of exquisite little lanterns, and colorful ribbons were wrapped around its branches. Under their combined glow, the tree was incredibly beautiful.

A thousand-year-old ginkgo was considered a great omen. According to the legend, making a wish under a ginkgo tree would make it come true. A multitude of women of all sorts had gathered under the tree, tying their wish-filled sachets onto the ribbons, adding colorful stones, and tossing them high onto the branches.

Seeing that the crowd was composed mainly of women, and therefore less dense, the Second Miss freed herself from Lin Wanrong's grasp. She pulled her sister along and said, "Sister, let's go make a wish. You, stay here and wait for us. Don't come over."

'Damn it, without me, who will protect you? What if you encounter a group of lascivious women?' He thought self-righteously. Displaying shameless perseverance, he trailed the two Misses, blending into the crowd of women.

Eldest Miss blushed slightly. Arguing with him was pointless, so she just let him be.

The young ladies who were making wishes hardly even noticed the presence of the green-capped servant. Perhaps in their eyes, a servant was barely considered a man. They didn't realize that this servant might be the most exceptional in history, having won over two sisters, indeed a role model envied by everyone in his profession.

Shameless men knew no fear. Lin Wanrong cast his eyes around, noticing the varied wishes written in the sachets of the young ladies.

"May I find my perfect suitor!"

"Wishing for young master Zhang next door to return soon!"

"Praying for the Undersecretary of the Ministry of War to take me as his eighteenth concubine!"

Lin Wanrong broke out in a cold sweat, deeply feeling he had come to the wrong place.

Yushuang whispered a few words into her sister's ear, then stole a glance at Lin Wanrong. Her face flushed slightly as she picked up a sachet and put her wish into it.

The Eldest Miss paused for a moment before writing down her wish as well, placing it at the other end of the rope. Yushuang lightly tossed her hand, and the sachet bearing the two sisters' wishes hung securely from the tree.

"We made it, we made it!" The younger sister exclaimed excitedly, her face full of joy. The Eldest Miss gazed gently, smiling faintly. The moonlight, lanterns, and fireworks illuminated the two

sisters' flower-like faces, highlighting their graceful figures, rendering them unspeakably charming and attractive.

‘What a precise throw by my little sister-in-law!’

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, walking over to congratulate them. "Congratulations, congratulations. What did the Second Miss wish for?"

Yushuang replied coquettishly, "You shouldn't ask. Asking will render it ineffective."

Lin Wanrong leaned in and whispered, "Did you wish to start a family for the Lin Household soon? You don't have to tell me, I already know."

Yushuang let out a yelp, embarrassedly hiding behind her sister. The Eldest Miss gave him a sideways glance. "Stop bullying Yushuang!"

"What did the Eldest Miss wish for? Oh, forget I asked—"

The Eldest Miss huffed, "Every day I have to converse with you, my anger only increases." Lin Wanrong was accustomed to their daily bickering and the added heat. Moreover, having Yushuang by his side, this secret pursuit was more exciting than openly courting the Eldest Miss. Men always enjoyed such things, didn't they?

"Ladies, would you like to buy lanterns? Top-quality lanterns for the Lantern Festival, twenty taels each. Guaranteed to make your wishes come true and bring you sweet dreams," cried a few vendors nearby. The ladies who had made their wishes were already carrying several lanterns, looking as lovely as flowers.

‘Twenty taels each? Damn it, why don't you just rob someone? You need to have morals!’ Lin Wanrong, who came from a merchant background, looked down on these vendors. However, Yushuang was delighted and promptly approached, asking, "Is this a Double Fishes lantern?"

"Indeed, indeed. Miss, the Double Fishes lantern is based on the story of mutual help and support. It's perfect for a gift to your loved one," the vendors were accustomed to telling this to young ladies, and it almost always worked. Yushuang cast a shy look at Lin Wanrong, not daring to speak.

‘If the wife likes it, I must reluctantly fork out the money.’ Lin Wanrong stepped forward, pointing at the largest Double Fishes lantern. "This one, the biggest one, how much is it?"

"Fifty taels!" Seeing the good business of the night, the vendor raised the price exorbitantly.

‘Damn it, I could buy half a bottle of perfume with that.’ Lin Wanrong took out a banknote. "Here, a hundred taels. If you dare give me change, I'll smash your stall! Second Miss, do you like it?"

The peddler, upon hearing this, was inwardly taken aback. If he were to give him change, he'd be a fool, he thought. He wondered who this servant could be, audacious enough to flirt with a young lady. Such gall, such audacity!

Yushuang nodded slightly, her face flushed, her eyes full of soft affection. In a gentle voice, she said, "Lin San, thank you. Let us be like these fishes that help each other in hardship, forever together."

She picked up a small brush, delicately inscribing a line of characters: "In heaven, may we become lovebirds flying wing to wing!" After she finished, she let out a small whimper, handed the brush to Lin San, and shyly hurried away.

‘As an old married couple, what is there to be embarrassed about?’ Lin Wanrong chuckled, pulled out a pencil, and added a line on the back: "On earth, forever joined like the entwined branches." He lit the candle inside the lantern, and after a while, he and the Second Miss held up the Double Fishes. The lantern gradually ascended, slowly soaring into the sky. Yushuang's face was flush with excitement, she clung to his hand with an affectionate, honeyed look of unspeakable joy.

The Eldest Miss watched the pair and sighed softly. Lin Wanrong chortled, "Miss, whichever lantern you like, I'll buy for you as well. The silver notes I'm carrying are quite burdensome, really bothersome. It would be nice to lighten the load a bit."

The Second Miss chimed in, "Sister, you should choose one as well. Lin San, you can't favor one over the other, you need to give sister a lantern too."

‘Oh dear, Miss. That's not how you use the idiom 'favoring one and discriminating against the other'. It could cause misunderstandings.’ His mind was racing, but he felt somewhat pleased, lightly caressing the hand of the Second Miss he held.

The Eldest Miss's cheeks flushed, and she snorted, "Mother has placed all the silver notes with you. You're being reckless with money, spending so frivolously. Be careful, I might report you to mother." She was getting smarter, knowing she had no way to handle Lin San, so she shifted all responsibility to Madam Xiao, which was quite a significant improvement.

Lin Wanrong laughed, "These notes are the result of my hard work, there's no misuse of public funds. Please, feel free to choose your lantern."

The Eldest Miss blushed slightly, walked to the lantern stall, and carefully began to choose a lantern. Mandarin duck lanterns, lotus lanterns, Guanyin lanterns; she looked at one after another, unsure of which one to pick.

Lin Wanrong picked up a lantern and said, "Choose this one. This one is good."

Xiao Yuruo looked at the lantern in her hand; it was a Matchmaker Red String lantern, as tall as a person. The benevolent-faced matchmaker was tying a red string around the ankles of a young man and woman, a gentle smile on his face.

Xiao Yuruo's heart pounded. She stole a quick glance at him and quickly turned her head away. Recalling the incident on the boat where the red string had been cut by Qin Xian'er, causing her immense pain, her eyes grew a bit moist. She bit her silver teeth lightly, glanced at Yushuang, and said nothing.

Lin Wanrong didn't care what the young ladies were thinking anymore, and lifted the red string lantern, asking, "Boss, how much is this?"

Seeing that he was a big spender, the owner said, "You've already bought a lantern, sir, so I can give you a bit of a discount on this one, fifty taels of silver. I'm practically losing money at that price!"

"What?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "Fifty taels of silver?"

The shopkeeper was taken aback. "Well, sir, there's room for negotiation. How about I knock off another ten taels, how does that sound?"

"Damn! How could such a nice lantern only be worth fifty taels?" Lin Wanrong angrily retorted, "If you don't increase the price to one hundred taels, I won't buy it."

The shopkeeper was stunned for a moment, then stammered, "O-one hundred taels?"

"Babbling, how can you do big business like this?" Lin Wanrong shoved the banknote at him, took the red string lantern, and handed it to Xiao Yuruo, chuckling, "This is for you."

While others didn't understand his peculiar haggling, Xiao Yuruo understood clearly. Despite the absurdity of it, she couldn't help but laugh. Her eyes gathered a layer of mist as she quietly said, "Thank you, I really like it!"

From her bosom, she pulled out a piece of red string—the very same one that had been cut by Xian'er. Her face blushed as she sneakily glanced at him, her hands trembling slightly as she tied the red string onto the figures on the lantern.

"Sister, what are you doing?" the Second Miss asked, confused.

"This is a poignant story. I'll tell you after the rice is cooked," Lin Wanrong chuckled mischievously.

The Eldest Miss picked up the brush, unsure of what to write. After much hesitation, she wrote, "Longing as endless as the dust—"

'Is she waiting for me to continue? The Second Miss is still here!' Lin Wanrong grinned, about to step forward with the pencil in hand when his gaze swept towards the distance. Suddenly, there was a "clatter," and the pencil in his hand fell to the ground.

Lin Wanrong stood still as if struck by lightning, rooted to the spot, unable to move a muscle!