

## Finest 286

### Chapter 286 Is My Wife a Princess?

As they watched Li Tai stride away, sweeping his sleeves, no one knew quite what to say. Li Wuling spoke up, "Lin San, are you truly not considering a military career? Although I disagree with your viewpoint, I greatly admire your courage. Few dare to speak to my grandfather in such a manner."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Speaking the truth is a sign of respect for the old general. At present, I do not wish to join the military, but life is unpredictable and circumstances often change. Who knows? One day we may become brothers in arms again."

Hu Bugui hurriedly nodded, "Exactly, exactly. General Lin's actions are always unexpected, too profound for simple folk like us to comprehend. I believe there will come a day when he surprises us all."

Hearing General Lin's refusal to re-enlist, everyone felt a sense of disappointment. But, as General Lin had said, nothing is constant in this world, and everything can change. Perhaps one day he would return.

They were all open-minded individuals. They talked about their brotherhood and shared some happy moments. Li Wuling, despite his young age, had grown up in the military and fit right in with the group; there was no barrier between them.

When Lin Wanrong asked about the situation of Hu Bugui and others after they arrived in the capital, their faces turned grave. It turned out that Xu Wei highly valued the Right Wing Army for their significant contributions. After the army returned to the capital, Marshal Xu personally recommended them to the Emperor. Hu Bugui and the others were summoned to court and received commendation, each being rewarded with command over ten thousand men.

Not only that, Xu Wei also recommended the trio to the First Marshal of Great Hua, the veteran General Li Tai. Once they rushed to the frontline to resist the northern nomads, it was certain that they would have the opportunity to achieve new merits.

Lin Wanrong nodded. Xu Wei was indeed a rare wise man, selfless and unambitious. He was adept at suppressing rebellions and reforming the officialdom, but when it came to resisting the northern nomads, he gave preference to the respected General Li Tai. Hu Bugui and the others were brave

and resourceful generals. Their talents could only be fully utilized under Li Tai, fighting against the northern nomads.

After talking for a while, Hu Bugui sighed, "Speaking of resisting the northern nomads, I am confident of victory, but some harsh realities cannot be denied. The northern nomads are tall, strong, and skilled in mounted combat. Our forces, when it comes to individual combat, are somewhat lacking. However, our advantage lies in strategy and command, allowing us to defend our country beyond its borders. Yet in recent years, the court values scholars over warriors. During our nation's heyday, extravagance has become the norm, scholars are engrossed in useless poetry and painting. When it comes to real military needs, we can't find a few competent generals from the court. Worse, some nincompoops even propose ceding territory and paying tributes to appease the northern nomads, to maintain temporary peace for Great Hua. Damn it, are these people pig-brained? The northern nomads' wild ambitions are clear to all but these well-fed court officials. It's pathetic, utterly pathetic..." Here, Hu Bugui slammed the table in anger, his face flush with rage.

Upon seeing Lin Wanrong's astonishment, Du Xiuyuan realized that he was not privy to the inner workings of the court and the military affairs. Sighing, he said, "Don't blame Brother Hu for his rudeness, General Lin. A few months ago, when Marshal Xu proposed a campaign against the northern nomads in the spring, someone actually suggested ceding land for peace, which was truly disgraceful. Thankfully, Marshal Xu and Elder General Li forcefully pointed out the drawbacks of such an approach, and the Emperor finally made up his mind to wage a decisive war against the northern nomads in the spring. Unfortunately, our Great Hua has been at peace for many years, and the culture of scholarship has flourished while the military has been neglected. When it came time to mobilize the troops, there was no one in the court, save Elder General Li, who was deemed suitable for the task. With no alternative, the elderly general was called upon once again to lead the troops into battle. Isn't that heartbreaking?"

At this point, everyone sighed in regret, even the young Li Wuling shook his head incessantly.

"Civil prosperity flourishes in times of peace, and martial prowess rises in times of chaos," Lin Wanrong responded, smiling. "This is a natural law of societal development that no era can escape. But there's no need to worry. Our Great Hua has a long history and is not without talent. There are dragons hidden in the abyss, yet to be discovered. There are always talented people emerging in every era, and when a crisis arises, there will surely be heroes who stand up."

Hu Bugui nodded and said, "That's true, but when we see the elderly general having to travel thousands of miles and fight for our country at his age, we can't help but worry—General Lin, are you really not going to reconsider?"

They were still hoping for him to return to the army, Lin Wanrong noted, and he laughed, "Let's put that aside for now. Plans may not keep up with changes. Oh, by the way, is the Teacher Xu you mentioned the Miss Xu who taught astronomy and calendar?"

Du Xiuyuan seemed surprised, "Indeed, it's that Teacher Xu. Have you met her, General Lin? That's great! You're both such talented people. You could have good conversations and become close friends."

Close friends? He felt more like they were mortal enemies. Hu Bugui nodded in agreement, "Teacher Xu is knowledgeable about everything from astronomy and geography to mathematics and the calendar. I didn't believe it at first, but after she and Elder General Li taught us military strategy, even the Elder General often consulted her, I was completely convinced. It's not an exaggeration to say that she's the first prodigy among women in our Great Hua."

Listening to them praise Miss Xu, Li Wuling laughed, "You don't need to tell me this. Who in the capital doesn't know about Aunt Xu's talents?"

Aunt? Lin Wanrong was puzzled for a moment. Miss Xu was General Li's daughter? That couldn't be right; one had the surname Xu, the other Li—they were not relatives at all.

He pulled Du Xiuyuan to the side, "Brother Du, is Teacher Xu related to Elder General Li?"

Du Xiuyuan sighed, "Since you've been out of the military, it's not surprising that you're not aware of their connection. The Li and Xu families have been close friends for a long time. Miss Xu was betrothed to General Li's second son from a young age. However, as the elder general has been stationed at the frontier for many years, his son, who was with him, had not met Miss Xu before he died on the battlefield. Both of General Li's sons sacrificed their lives for the country, and it took eighteen imperial edicts from the Emperor to persuade the stubborn old general to retire to the capital."

So, it was like that, Lin Wanrong heaved a deep sigh. Miss Xu turned out to be the intended daughter-in-law of Li Tai who had not yet married into the family. No wonder when asked about her marriage, she simply chose not to respond, and no wonder despite her hair done in a married woman's bun, that Ye fellow persisted in his pursuit. A fair lady, a noble suitor. Especially for a widowed lady, this was quite understandable.

"Lin San, do you know my aunt too?" Li Wuling asked. "I feel like you two would get along well."

"Young man, a man's intuition is often mistaken," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily as he slapped Li Wuling's shoulder, prompting a round of laughter from Hu Bugui and the others.

After saying goodbye to the men at the Jinghua Academy, dusk had settled. He wasn't sure whether the Eldest Miss had returned from visiting the Madam's old friend. With nothing to do, Lin Wanrong started wandering around outside Jinghua Academy.

The Jinghua Academy was nestled against a hill, overlooking a deep lake with a lovely name, "Bi Bo Tan" boasting tranquil surroundings and scenic beauty. The cool lakeside breeze grazed his face. Though it was slightly bone-chilling, it was also refreshing.

Lin Wanrong found a clean spot and sat down, leaning against a barren willow tree. The lake was misty with a vast smoky surface, which left him a bit dazzled.

When would he find Qingxuan? Was he to wait indefinitely? Until the seventh day of the seventh lunar month? But what about Qiaoqiao? She was in Jinling, day and night longing for his return. Thinking about this, he felt restless. He picked up a stone and threw it into the water. It splashed with a light 'plop', creating ripples that spread all around.

"Who's there?" A soft yet stern voice called from not far away.

Lin Wanrong looked up, startled. A silhouette stood by a tree nearby. He could vaguely make out it was a woman, her slim figure and face hidden by the robust tree trunk. It seemed the sound had startled her from her thoughts, prompting her to inquire.

'This wasn't your private lake, making a fuss over a thrown stone?' He was not in the mood and grumbled, "Not a human!"

Upon hearing his response, she looked at him more closely and said, "Oh, it's you!"

Seeing the delicate face from behind the tree, it turned out to be Miss Xu. Including their meeting at the temple yesterday, this was their third encounter in two days.

"We really have a knack for running into each other, eh, Miss Xu," he said, laughing. Since she'd seen him, he casually strode towards her.

Miss Xu glanced at him warily and asked incredulously, "Have you been following me?"

Following? He'd not stooped to that level for a long time. Lin Wanrong shrugged, "If I say no, would you believe me? Consider it following if you like. Now, am I here to rob you of your wealth or your virtue?"

Miss Xu frowned, "Such disrespectful talk, you really deserve a beating."

She brandished her repeating crossbow, "I've warned you yesterday, yet you haven't learned your lesson."

'This girl, always carrying around this thing for self-defense.' Lin Wanrong laughed, "Learned my lesson? For what? I neither steal nor rob, who do I need to repent to? But Miss Xu, you're carrying a repeating crossbow everywhere, I wonder who you're defending against. Didn't Brother Li Sheng or General Li Tai tell you that a repeating crossbow is not omnipotent?"

"You know Li Sheng?" Miss Xu asked curiously, "This crossbow is powerful and suitable for cavalry and infantry battles. What other weapon could be stronger than it? Ah..."

With a loud 'boom', water splashed high into the air. A large vortex slowly dispersed across the surface of the lake, filling the air with a smoky scent.

Lin Wanrong chuckled and shook his palm, "Did you see that? This is called the 'One Yang Finger', which is a hundred times more powerful than your crossbow. I have been lenient with you, not picking a fight."

Miss Xu was startled by the sudden explosion and covered her ears. Upon seeing Lin Wanrong's smug exhibition, she couldn't help but laugh, "A musket is a musket. You can't deceive me by calling it the 'One Yang Finger'!"

"You know about muskets?" Lin Wanrong was shocked. The precious object given to him by Qingxuan was not something everyone knew about. Miss Xu being able to name it struck him as profoundly surprising.

"This musket is brought in by the Westerner. A British missionary once demonstrated it in the palace years ago. I witnessed its power and have studied it. However, our Great Hua's craftsmanship is not yet capable of reproducing it..."

"British missionary?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed, stepping forward, "What's his name?"

Miss Xu stepped back, raising her crossbow, "What are you doing?"

'Damn it, do you think I'm going to harm you?' Lin Wanrong urgently asked, "Miss Xu, is this British missionary called York?"

Miss Xu looked at him in astonishment, "How do you know? Missionary York has already returned to Britain. Is the musket in your hand from him..."

'Thank heavens!' Lin Wanrong nearly broke down into tears of relief. At last, he had found someone who he could talk to, even though she was not exactly friendly to him.

He tried to maintain a friendly expression, softly asked, "Miss Xu, do you know who the missionary York gave the musket to afterward?"

"You're holding the musket and still asking to whom it was given?" Miss Xu shook her head and snorted, "You use a musket to intimidate a weak woman and still show off like this. It's nonsensical."

'You're the one being nonsensical! If you weren't aiming your arrow at me, would I have drawn my musket?' Lin Wanrong was annoyed, but his face bore an irresistible smile, "Miss Xu, you've misunderstood. This musket was given to me by a friend. Unfortunately, we parted ways and I don't know where she lives, hence my question. Do you know a Miss named Xiao Qingxuan?"

Miss Xu shook her head, "I don't know the Miss Xiao you mentioned, and I haven't heard to whom York gave the musket."

'Damn, you know nothing and yet act so aloof?' Lin Wanrong struggled to keep the smile on his face from stiffening, "Miss Xu, you said York was a missionary. Did you see him in the palace in the past?"

At last, Miss Xu nodded her agreement, leaving Lin Wanrong in a stunned silence. The palace? How was Qingxuan connected to the palace? A palace maid? Unlikely, were there any maids as beautiful as her? Could the Emperor even ignore her beauty? A concubine? Ridiculous, she was his wife, and she was still a virgin when they consummated their marriage. A concubine? Not a chance!

So, if she wasn't a maid, and she wasn't a concubine, could she possibly be—his heart pounded fiercely, nearly causing him to jump with surprise.

‘A princess? Is my wife a princess? By God, wouldn't that make me the prince consort?’ The thought was so overwhelming that he could hardly dare to contemplate it further. But when he thought of Qingxuan's peerless grace and extraordinary aura, the possibility seemed increasingly likely. If this were true, he'd owe an immense debt of gratitude to the heavens, to the Xiao family, and to the White Lotus Sect. Their combined efforts had bestowed upon him a princess for a wife. Oh, how he laughed with joy!

As he basked in his fantasy, Miss Xu watched him with confusion. The expressions on his face were a whirlwind of emotions—astonishment, joy, lasciviousness, contemplation—each more unpredictable than the last.

"San Lin, what's the matter?" Seeing his foolish behavior, Miss Xu couldn't help but furrow her brows, calling out to him.

"Oh, Miss Xu, are you speaking to me? I'm well, very well, hehe—" Snapping back to reality from his delusions, Lin Wanrong realized that his conjectures were just that. Until he found Qingxuan, everything remained uncertain.

He needed to stay humble and diligent, and so he gathered his spirits. Yet, his face still bore a smile of foolish delight, and after several bouts of laughter, he asked, "Miss Xu, you seem to know quite a bit about the palace affairs. Tell me, how many princesses does our current Emperor have?"

Miss Xu chuckled, "I wouldn't say I'm very knowledgeable. However, the information you're asking for is commonly known to all citizens of the Great Hua. How come you are the exception? Could it be that you're not from our Great Hua?"

‘I'm from Mars, is that not okay?’ Lin Wanrong gave a dry laugh. "I've just been too busy recently, and it's left my mind in a whirl. Could you please tell me how many princesses our current Emperor has, and what their ages are?"

Miss Xu scrutinized him closely, seeing his eagerness that seemed genuine. She couldn't help but feel a bit peculiar. This man was like he had popped up from the ground, oblivious even to such common knowledge.

"The Emperor has two princesses. The elder one is in her forties, and the younger one is just twenty."

Certainly, the one in her forties couldn't be his wife. Could Qingxuan be the younger princess? There was a two-decade age gap between the two sisters, the Emperor had quite the timing.

Seeing through his confusion, Miss Xu explained, considering his ignorance about royal lineage, "Our current Emperor is devoted to his people and has worked tirelessly. Over his lifetime, he has only married five concubines, all before he ascended the throne. Between the two princesses, a prince was born but unfortunately died in an accident twenty years ago while the Emperor was still the crown prince. A princess was born afterward, but the grief of losing his son was so great that the Emperor didn't have any more children for the next two decades."

So that's how it was! The Emperor had ascended the throne in his thirties, the prime of his life. How could he not have more children? Could his fertility have been compromised due to his tireless efforts? This was suspicious!

Lin Wanrong was full of puzzlement. 'If I were the Emperor in my thirties, brimming with vigor, I could have fathered at least eighty, if not a hundred children in twenty years!'

"Miss Xu, may I ask, has the younger princess been betrothed?" Lin Wanrong asked, a bit sheepishly.

"Why are you asking this? Could it be that you wish to—" Miss Xu chuckled, "The second princess is a simple soul, leading a quiet life. She's hardly seen in public even once in a year. Even my father only saw her when she was a child. As for whether she is betrothed, I really don't know. Perhaps, you could inquire about it yourself."

The last sentence had a mocking undertone, but Lin Wanrong pretended not to hear it. "A simple soul, leading a quiet life." This reminded him of Qingxuan. However, based solely on that, could he conclude that his wife was a princess? It seemed he might need to visit the palace to "exchange some words" with the second princess.

Seeing Lin Wanrong deep in thought, Miss Xu asked, "Do you have any more questions?"

"Not really. Thank you for answering my doubts, Teacher Xu. If I get the chance, I'd like to take you out for a meal," Lin Wanrong said, chuckling.



Miss Xu shook her head slightly. "But you haven't answered my question. How do you know Li Sheng? Are you acquainted with Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan?"

"I suppose you could say that. After all, we're all from the same walk of life."

Miss Xu nodded slightly. "I see. So you're the General Lin they often mention!"

"I'm hardly worthy of such a title. I'm just an insignificant servant in the Xiao family, trying to make a living," Lin Wanrong said with a grin.

Miss Xu looked him up and down, saying seriously, "So it was you at the lantern riddle guessing event that day? And the one who explained the planted seeds and washed hands in hot oil? I heard about you from my father and originally admired you. But after seeing what you did yesterday, it's hard for me to have a good impression. Using a pseudonym for evil deeds and your real name for good ones... It's hypocritical."

‘Real name? Does she think Lin San is my real name? Interesting!’ He laughed heartily, "Miss Xu, your words confuse me. According to you, if I hadn't committed those evil deeds yesterday, would you have developed some favorable impressions of me?"

Miss Xu was taken aback. She hadn't expected an offhand comment to provide such an opportunity for him to find fault. This Lin San had quite a swift reaction.

"Miss, you've likely been around too many modest gentlemen to be accustomed to a rogue like me. Whether it's a good impression or a bad one, they are all feelings. Just remember them. Besides, I never considered myself a good person - does being good grant long life?"

At these specious words, Miss Xu was at a loss for how to rebut. Lin Wanrong slipped the musket he'd been hiding behind his back back into his bosom, grinning, "By the way, you mentioned your esteemed father. May I ask who he is and how he came to recognize me?"

"He's just a scholar, and it's not necessary to mention his name. When you meet him, you will know," said Miss Xu indifferently.

Just a scholar? A man surnamed Xu? Lin Wanrong's expression changed, surprised. "Are you the young lady of the Xu family?" Damn it, had his brain been kicked by a pig? A Xu, standing out so remarkably and familiar with Lin San's affairs, who else could it be but the Xu family's daughter?

His lack of manners frustrated Miss Xu internally, but she did not lose her temper. She merely nodded in confirmation.

Grinning, Lin Wanrong looked at her and said, "My, my, the young lady of the Xu family has grown up? I didn't recognize you! How old are you now? It's indeed a small world. Had I known this, we could have sheltered from the rain together yesterday and gotten acquainted—"

Even the patient Miss Xu could not help feeling her anger surge at his words. Seeing her clenched fist, he pretended not to notice, and chuckled, "By the way, your father and your Aunt Su owe me for playing the role of matchmaker for them. So, Miss Xu, what's your name—"

Seeing his audacity, Miss Xu gritted her teeth in frustration. Yet when he mentioned her father and aunt, she couldn't ignore him. Grinding her teeth, she spat out, "My name is Xu Zhiqing!"

## Chapter 287 Handling the Gun

"This name is quite pleasing, Zhi from Tingzhi (Fragrant Angelica) and Qing from Fangqing (Clear Fragrant), so full of artistic conception, it's far better than my name, Lin San, with just two words. Truly befitting the daughter of the world's foremost scholar, superior even to the brilliance she sprang from," Lin Wanrong nodded and laughed.

Xu Zhiqing shook her head with a light chuckle. This man's speech was strange, rambling without any coherence. She decided to treat his words as nothing more than a jest.

"Zhiqing," Lin started, "when you get home, mention to your father that I'll be visiting your estate as soon as I have a spare moment. I'm certain Master Xu will be absolutely delighted. Oh, and let's not forget your Aunt Su. They promised to throw me a thank-you feast once I arrived in the capital. It's a shame I can't play matchmaker for you. It's unheard of, isn't it, to be one's own matchmaker?" He burst into laughter.

As he casually addressed her by name, with an uncanny level of familiarity, and brought up old subjects to tease her, Miss Xu huffed and exhaled. Her gaze, however, softened, as if ignoring his absurd words. Her face was as serene as an ancient well. Nodding, she replied, "I will certainly relay your message to my aunt and father, Mr. Lin."

"Truly the daughter of Xu Wei, she possesses an impressive spirit," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. "Miss Xu, when you find the time, you can visit the branch of the Xiao family as well. I — I mean, the young mistress is always there. Didn't you want to meet and chat with her? I believe you two will find common ground."

Xu Zhiqing's long lashes fluttered. Suddenly, she said, "Mr. Lin, I have a request that I hope you wouldn't mind granting."

He raised his eyebrows. "A request from the young lady?" Lin Wanrong eyed her carefully. Miss Xu had almond eyes, peach cheeks, fair skin, delicate lips, a slender waist, and a voluptuous body. Despite no longer being in the flush of youth, she had an even more mature allure. "What might you be asking me for? Let me clarify beforehand: if it's simple, I'll agree. If it's not, then I can't promise anything," he replied with a smile.

"Simplicity itself," Xu Zhiqing responded faintly. "I would like to examine the musket gun you carry with you."

"Borrow my gun?" He chuckled, his expression becoming serious. "That might be easy for you, Miss, but it's far from simple for me. This firearm was a gift from a friend for my self-defense; it's as precious as life to me. We're only acquainted, so how could I entrust my life to you?"

"You have a point, Mr. Lin," Xu Zhiqing nodded. She handed him the repeating crossbow she was holding. "Since the success of improving this small repeating crossbow, I've been carrying it with me every day for self-defense. To show my sincerity, I'm entrusting my crossbow to you. You can think of it as an exchange of life for life. What do you think?"

Her expression was solemn, not at all playful. Lin Wanrong glanced at the crossbow, chuckling, "So this is the so-called pledge of life, unswerving until death? We've just met a few times, and it has come to this — isn't this moving a bit too fast?"

Xu Zhiqing closed her eyes slightly, indicating she hadn't heard his words. Seeing that he had pushed far enough, Lin Wanrong chuckled and handed the firearm over, saying, "Showing it to you is useless anyway. With the standard of metallurgy in our great country, it's impossible to replicate this thing."

The firearm was surprisingly heavy in her hand. Xu Zhiqing frowned slightly as she remarked, "When I first saw this firearm years ago, I merely watched from a distance, never touching it. I hadn't imagined that it would be so heavy in hand."

"Hadn't you claimed you had studied it in the past?" Lin Wanrong asked curiously.

Miss Xu gave him a charming smile, "If I hadn't said that, would you have let me examine this firearm?"

A crafty little vixen, Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly, relieved that he had unloaded the ammunition, or who knew what might have happened with it in her hands.

After examining and fiddling with the firearm, Miss Xu shook her head and sighed, "The Westerners' craftsmanship is indeed exquisite. The gun barrel and sights are wonderfully intricate. Our craftsmen from the Great Hua fall somewhat short in comparison, and replicating this would be impossible. Mr. Lin, could you perhaps fire a shot? I'd like to observe the firing process of the firearm, the shot earlier was too fast for me to catch."

"Well," Lin Wanrong hesitated, "Shooting in front of Miss Xu might not be very appropriate, and it's not something I excel at."

Upon seeing his indescribable lewd expression, Miss Xu suddenly became more vigilant, "It's only shooting! Why would that be inappropriate?"

Lin Wanrong laughed, "Would you prefer that I shoot with my left hand or my right hand?"

Miss Xu felt his expression was peculiar but couldn't figure out what was wrong. After contemplating for a while, she said, "Whichever hand Mr. Lin is accustomed to using."

Lin Wanrong replied seriously, "Such a complex task isn't particularly easy for either of my hands. However, since Miss Xu has requested it, I will give it a try. Sigh, it's a bit embarrassing to shoot a gun in front of such a beautiful lady."

Suppressing a laugh, he loaded the gun, aimed at a withered willow by the pond, and fired. After the loud bang, the tree was riddled with bullets, deeply embedded in its bark.

Releasing her hands from her ears, Miss Xu said solemnly, "The Western craftsmanship is indeed remarkable. Just the momentum alone is enough to intimidate, not to mention the enormous power of the firearm's discharge."

Lin Wanrong shook his head, "Miss Xu, this isn't a craft, but basic precision manufacturing. Such a product cannot be created by human hands alone. Has Mr. Xu discussed with you about the Frenchman Tavernier? Li Sheng has visited Tavernier's iron-clad ship. The steel plates cut in one piece, and the cannons on the ship, all exhibit a level of craftsmanship that surpasses that of Great Hua. And this is only them stepping into the threshold of precision manufacturing. If Great Hua continues to cling to its old ways, it will fall significantly behind when the West enters the true industrial age. Ships will no longer need winds or oars but will use heat energy converted into mechanical energy to propel massive ships forward. The gap between us will be vast. Whether Miss Xu believes it or not, this is not an exaggeration. If we wake up only when that day arrives, it would be too late."

Despite her exceptional intelligence, Xu Zhiqing was taken aback by his words. "Convert heat into mechanical energy? What does that mean? Will the West really reach such an advanced stage?"

"Take this musket, for example. Miss Xu, how do you think the pellets inside this barrel are fired?"

After a moment of thoughtful contemplation, Xu Zhiqing answered, "I've studied this. It's the explosion and burning of gunpowder that propels the iron pellets!"

Lin Wanrong managed a bitter smile, saying, "You only see the surface, not the underlying principle. It's the transformation of two types of energy: the thermal energy produced by the explosion of gunpowder is converted into the kinetic energy that propels the bullet forward. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

Seeing Miss Xu's eyes widen with innocent confusion, Lin Wanrong laughed helplessly. Why did he bother explaining? Did she want to understand? Could she understand?

"Forget it, forget it," he said, waving dismissively. "Even if I explain, you won't understand. It's pointless." Looking crestfallen, Lin Wanrong abruptly walked away without another word. Where could he find someone who understood his words?

"Thermal energy? Kinetic energy? What are these?" Xu Zhiqing furrowed her brows, lost in thought. Suddenly, Lin Wanrong, who had walked quite a distance, turned back around. He approached with an embarrassed expression and asked, "Miss Xu, may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"How do I get to the Imperial Palace?"

Xu Zhiqing hesitated for a moment before finally laughing. "Why are you trying to find the Imperial Palace? That's not a place you can just visit. You would likely be apprehended before you even approached it."

"I just want to stroll around the area, maybe find someone," Lin Wanrong replied, grinning mischievously.

"You are a dreamer," she said, laughing. "The princess is a noble and cherished daughter of the Emperor. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of wealthy young men who desire an audience with her every day. You shouldn't delude yourself." Recalling the baffling words Lin San had previously spoken, Xu Zhiqing couldn't help but chuckle. His words had been so sensible just moments ago; how had he become so foolish so quickly?

Lin Wanrong giggled and said, "Miss Xu, you really shouldn't worry about me like this. People might get the wrong idea."

Xu Zhiqing replied nonchalantly, "Thank you for your concern, Mr. Lin. But I speak like this to many people, and no misunderstandings have occurred."

He scowled at her defiance. Agitated, he thought about pursuing her, winning her over, and then abandoning her, just to make her regret and suffer for a lifetime. A fittingly cruel punishment, he thought, his grin turning wicked. It seemed Miss Xu had guessed his intentions somewhat. She shook her head and scoffed, refusing to engage him further.

Visiting the Imperial Palace was a lofty dream, and Lin Wanrong was a man of action. If he thought of something, he did it, and he did it to the best of his ability. He lingered outside the gate, gazing in awe at the complex layers of the palace architecture, the painted eaves, carved beams, and numerous pillars, each exceptionally exquisite.

The inner court of the Imperial Palace was not like the Xiao family courtyard; one couldn't just come and go as one pleased. As he stood outside the moat, the palace guards stood sternly before him. Even stepping a foot forward seemed impossible. Lin Wanrong remained extraordinarily calm; he wasn't a fool. Even if Qingxuan really lived in the palace, with thousands upon thousands of rooms in the inner court, where would he even start looking for her? He would have to strategize carefully.

Standing by the gateway, he gazed longingly at the outer part of the palace, imagining he saw the figure of Qingxuan standing gracefully. 'This girl,' he wondered, 'Does she miss me just as much?'

He chuckled, as a small sedan chair nearby came to a halt. A delicate face peered out from within the sedan, and a soft voice called, "Lin San, what are you doing here?"

"Eldest Miss, I came specially to meet you!" Lin Wanrong responded, grinning cheekily.

Xiao Yuruo blushed, giving him a stern look before saying, "Stop being naughty! I came here to visit an old friend of my mother's. It was a spontaneous decision. How could you have known to come meet me? I suspect you were here for some mischief!"

After laughing heartily for a moment, noticing that it was getting late, he decided to follow the Eldest Miss's sedan chair back to their mansion. He related the story of how he had taken Yushuang to the academy, mentioning that the daughter of Xu Wei was teaching there. The Eldest Miss nodded and said, "I feel much better knowing Yushuang is under the care of Miss Xu. Once we're done with the hectic schedule of the next few days, we should pay a visit to Minister Xu's residence and have a good chat with Miss Xu. How does that sound?"

"Good, of course it's good!" Lin Wanrong responded cheerfully. "Did you gain anything from your busy day, Eldest Miss?"

Xiao Yuruo sighed faintly, murmuring, "My mother left the capital for many years. These old friends have grown distant. When I paid them a visit today, it was good enough that they didn't snub me. How could there be any gains?"

It's a universal truth, out of sight, out of mind. Seeing a hint of melancholy on the Eldest Miss's face, Lin Wanrong comforted her, "That's how the world works. The more challenging a task, the greater the sense of achievement once you succeed. Trust yourself. Besides, even if you don't trust yourself, you must trust me. I'm Lin San!"

"Annoying, when did I stop trusting myself? You're just bragging." The Eldest Miss huffed, "In a few days, the Grand Prime Minister Temple will be holding a flower appreciation event. It's a good opportunity for us. You're not allowed to slack off these few days. Stay by my side every day so we can plan properly."

"I was destined to be exploited by you. If I refuse to help, wouldn't you just eat me alive?" Lin Wanrong joked, "Speaking of which, we've earned quite a lot of silver. When can I see the account books? Make sure you're not cooking the books and skimming my share."

"You're always thinking about silver. Tomorrow, I'll move all your silver from the bank, and you can sleep hugging it." The Eldest Miss, seeing his teasing expression, felt an unspoken irritation.

Taking advantage of a moment when Sister Song wasn't looking, Lin Wanrong sneakily leaned towards the sedan chair, whispering cheekily, "Then I'll just hug you. Hugging you would be like hugging the silver."

The Eldest Miss's heart skipped a beat. She turned her head away, refusing to look at him. Softly, she said, "Shameless! Don't think about fooling me. I'm not Yushuang, only she would fall for your nonsense."

Lin Wanrong covertly stretched out his hand and lightly scratched the back of her hand. The Eldest Miss quickly withdrew her hand, her cheeks flushing red as she softly huffed, "What are you doing? People are watching! Don't think I'm as easy to tease as Yushuang!"

Lin Wanrong flirted with her for a moment, then said with a laugh, "Speaking of Yushuang, I do miss her. Now that she's gone to the academy, it's just the two of us in the inner courtyard. I'm really scared, ah..."

The Eldest Miss trembled at his words, "What... what are you planning to do? If you dare to bully me, I'll tell my mother!"

"What if you bully me?" Lin Wanrong laughed mischievously, "Should I also go tell your mother? How could I bear the embarrassment? After all, I'm a decent man—"

Xiao Yuruo couldn't bear to listen anymore. Angrily, she glared at him, "Don't assume I'm some kind of loose woman. If you dare harbor any ill intentions, I'll—"

"Alright!" Lin Wanrong gently laughed, "Stop threatening me. Can't you take a joke? There are plenty of women waiting for me to misbehave. You'd have to wait in line for three months!"



The Eldest Miss dropped the curtain, loudly commanding the sedan bearers, "Move faster! Sister Song, send word that Lin San's dinner won't be needed tonight! Those waiting in line for him have been waiting for three months already."

True to her word, no one came to serve him dinner that night. Lin Wanrong didn't mind, knowing that hitting is an expression of closeness and scolding is an expression of love. It would be strange if there was neither.

As he was lying on his bed, about to drift off to sleep, he suddenly heard a creaking sound. The door to his room was being opened.

'The Eldest Miss couldn't resist coming,' he thought, a thrill rising within him. He quickly sat up, only to freeze in surprise at the sight of the person who had walked in. Shocked, he exclaimed, "What... what are you planning to do? Don't come any closer. I'll cry for help—"

## Chapter 288 Exchange of Conditions

"What's the matter? Afraid I might eat you? Go ahead and shout, let's see who comes to your rescue," the woman quipped. A short sword grasped in her hand, she swayed it lightly, advancing with a mocking smile, her eyes resembling a pool of clear water.

As Lin Wanrong stared at the gleaming sword, his heart was filled with annoyance. Why had this witch come, and at night no less? She had dared to break into his room. What should he do if she attacked him? Should he scream for help or stay quiet? What a dilemma.

"Sigh, I see you've already made up your mind to force me. In consideration of you being Xian'er's Master, I will not resist. You may proceed, just please don't use the prone position," he sighed.

A flush of red crept onto An Biru's face, and she laughed, "Little brother, you seem to have thickened your skin during our days apart. Did the hangover soup not cure you last time? Perhaps I should prepare some other good things for you. I'm sure you would enjoy them."

Mentioning the hangover soup made Lin Wanrong feel a pang of sadness. "You vixen, one day I'll teach you what it means to be half-drunk, half-awake, yearning for life yet wanting to die," he said, laughing to mask his feelings. "Nowhere close, without Sister An's training, I would have become shyer. Sister, it's been a long time since we've met, I really missed you. Come, give me a hug!"

He made a gesture to hug her. An Biru chuckled, waving her short sword, "Fine by me. I don't mind!"

"Wait, what are you doing with that sword? Its swaying is making me dizzy. The New Year is not over yet; using swords and knives is bad luck. Put it down quickly, let's sit down and talk," Lin Wanrong said, chuckling.

An Biru sat down in front of him, glancing around the room. "The Xiao family really doesn't treat you well. Look how shabby your room is, you don't even have a maid to warm your bed. Little brother, why not follow me in the future? I promise you'll have all the luxurious food and drink you want. As for the madam and young ladies of the Xiao family, you can play with them and then cast them aside. Don't let them get too attached."

Speechless, Lin Wanrong thought, "This sister really is the world's number one woman with such strength!" He wasn't some grand master in the Xiao family. Having an independent room and the chance to flirt with the young lady every day, where could he find such an exceptional job?

Rising with a laugh, Lin Wanrong sat in front of her and said, "Sister, how did you find me... ah, the bright sword is scary. Better to put it away."

An Biru flashed a charming smile, "Finding you isn't hard. You're not the Emperor in the palace. I have a thousand ways to locate you... It's safer to keep this sword in hand. After all, we're alone in this room. If you bully a weak woman like me, where could I go to cry out for injustice?"

Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat from his brow. Him, bullying her? If she weren't forcing herself onto him, he'd already be thanking his lucky stars. If there was a woman in this world he couldn't handle, Sister An was definitely one of them.

"Sister, pointing that blade at me is making me very uncomfortable. Could you kindly withdraw it a bit? I'm afraid it might scare me," Lin Wanrong said sincerely, staring at her with a solemn expression.

"This sword serves as my protection. If you are wary, feel free to draw your own weapon. At the city gates of Jining, you were quite imposing, yet now, you seem so timid. Are you still a man? Ah, my..."

Lin Wanrong pointed the musket in his hand at her ample chest, the softness there made him push a little harder. He took a quick look at her, swallowing hard before saying, "Let's negotiate, Sister. Although you possess an extraordinary sword, I carry with me two firearms. One of them is

particularly effective against women, incomparably formidable. Now, you are not the Holy Mother of the White Lotus Sect, and I am not a general of the government army. One of us is Xian'er's master, and the other is Xian'er's husband, both her closest kin. Let's be amicable and avoid violence, like our days on Weishan Lake, discussing matters heart to heart, enjoying life. Isn't that beautiful?"

An Biru burst into a giggle, covering her mouth, and cast a coquettish glance at him, "I knew you would say that. What do you think of my precious sword?"

With a delicate flick of her hand, a crisp sound echoed, and the shining small sword broke into two, revealing a hollow core. It turned out to be a convincingly fake sword.

'Damn it, she tricked me with a fake item. If I hadn't drawn my gun, this vixen would have scared me to death.'

"I was only joking with you. After a month apart, I kind of missed you, hehe," An Biru puffed up her chest, a hint of bizarre flush surfaced on her face, and she smiled at him, "Isn't it about time you put your gun away? What are you pointing at me for?"

"Let my gun rest a bit longer; it's a rare opportunity!" Lin Wanrong chuckled. Seeing this vixen seemingly unfazed, and recalling Xian'er's words that her master always maintained her chastity, he became quite suspicious.

"In this world, the only one who can make me, An Biru, afraid, is you, little brother," the vixen smiled.

"The feeling is mutual," Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. The two engaged in a witty, flirtatious battle of intellects, a truly evenly matched game. He was cheerful by nature, and a playful exchange with Sister An elicited a feeling of mutual admiration. It was not easy to find someone who could hold their own against Lin San.

"Master Sister, how did you know I was here? I was about to look for you," Lin Wanrong said in earnest, putting the banter with An Biru aside.

"What do you want with me? I suspect you're really looking for Xian'er, despite your flattering words," An Biru said. "I happened to see Miss Xiao's sedan chair when I was out on errands today, and you just so happened to be there too. So, I came over to check. You don't appreciate my kindness but use your gun against me, where did your conscience go?"

‘Came specifically to see me? Since when were we so familiar?’ Lin Wanrong laughed, "Thank you, sister, for your kindness. I'm really grateful. When I got to the capital a few days ago, I wanted to contact Xian'er, but she left in a hurry and didn't leave an address. Oh, by the way, why didn't Xian'er come with you?"

An Biru smiled gently and said, "As for Xian'er, I sent her on a critical task. Why, do you miss her that much? Am I not here on her behalf to see you?"

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. She was his wife, what did it mean for An Biru to represent her? Did this mean An Biru could represent Xian'er in other matters too? Xian'er's entire focus was on him. If she had known he was in the capital, she would have flown to him at once. Why hadn't she appeared after such a long time? Something was off. That enchantress An Biru must have been keeping something from Xian'er. What exactly had she dispatched Xian'er to do? God damn it, she was so arrogant to treat his wife as if she were nothing.

Seeing his uneasy expression, An Biru seemed to have guessed his thoughts. She laughed lightly and said, "Don't worry. I have raised Xian'er since she was a child, and you have seen how close our relationship is. I would never harm her. As for you, if you truly care for Xian'er so deeply, why have you not consummated your marriage with her? She's been brooding over this for a while. If you genuinely care for her, fulfill her wishes sooner rather than later."

This was a lingering concern for Lin Wanrong. Initially, he planned to find Qingxuan in the capital to seek a solution. However, given the circumstances, if Qingxuan truly was the princess of Great Hua, he wasn't sure when he'd be able to see her. He had to figure out another way to handle Xian'er's situation.

With these thoughts, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered what An Biru had told him in Jinling. A flicker of hope ignited in his heart. He looked at her and said, "Sister, I call you my Master now. I understand Xian'er's feelings, but I don't know how to take out the Love Bug in her. Please help me figure out a way. In my next life, I will certainly repay you with my own body."

"Next life?" An Biru chuckled, "What a good idea you've got there. To take out the Love Bug, as I've told you before, just divorce your other wives and spend a happy lifetime with my Xian'er. Had you consummated your marriage back at Weishan Lake, we wouldn't be in this mess. Xian'er is just too soft-hearted."

If that was the case, why was he even bothering to argue with this enchantress? Damn it, speaking with her was always full of jokes. Just because she was Xian'er's master, did not mean he wouldn't

dare do anything to her. If she infuriated him, he would deal with her — his fingers and the gun at his disposal. He forced a grin, saying, "That proposal is really interesting. I've written a lot in my life, but I've never written a divorce letter. I wonder what it feels like."

Reading his face, An Biru seemed to know what he was thinking. She suddenly sighed and said, "Brother Lin, don't think so ill of me. This Love Bug is a testament to a Miao woman's deep affection. The process of administering the bug is also fraught with suffering, it can't be taken out so easily."

This was the first time An Biru had addressed him so formally since they had met. Seeing her usually playful face now deadly serious, Lin Wanrong felt a jolt of alarm. What kind of bug was this Love Bug? It could be implanted but not removed, wasn't that ruining people's lives?

"In the past, when Xian'er was young, she despised men who took multiple wives and concubines due to her own tumultuous life circumstances. She implored me to plant the Love Bug on her. Despite my repeated attempts to dissuade her, her stubborn nature wouldn't be swayed. At the time, I too was reeling from personal blows and in my unsettled state, I gave in and implanted the bug. I had thought that given Xian'er's beauty, only the rarest of men could be her match and dare to entertain thoughts of another woman before her. However, alas, she encountered a peculiar man like you. The foolish Xian'er became distraught. If you had loved only her, it wouldn't have been so bad. But what is detestable is that you have so many beloved women. Xian'er loves you to an extreme, discarding her vow from years ago, but the matter of the Love Bug — easy to plant, difficult to remove — still stands. Otherwise, it wouldn't be the 'Love Bug'," An Biru said melancholically, her eyes rippling slightly and her voice heavy with a tone of reminiscence, seemingly reliving the past.

Lin Wanrong understood. She said it was easy to plant, difficult to remove, but didn't say it was impossible to remove, which meant there was still hope.

"Sister, stop teasing me. If you have a solution, just say it. I'm still waiting for Xian'er to bear me a son! She's well-built, with ample bosom and hips, naturally fit to bear children. Sister, please think of a way," Lin Wanrong smirked.

An Biru giggled, casting him a sidelong glance. "How do you manage to say such things? If anyone else heard such words from you, they might have already chased you out."

'Damn, if anyone else were sitting in front of me, I'd have knocked them over by now. Who'd have their turn to speak to me like this?'

An Biru's beautiful eyes shone like water, a faint blush on her cheeks. She sighed lightly, "The bug was planted by me, naturally, I have a way to remove it. But the method is challenging, and I have to pay a significant price. Unless, you help me with something."

Lin Wanrong replied, "I understand, this is the real reason why Sister An came to see me today, right? Got it, got it. There's no such thing as a free lunch in this world. Let's call this an exchange of conditions."

An Biru smiled charmingly, "Brother Lin is indeed smart. It's effortless to talk to someone like you. However, don't be too disappointed. I came here today, ninety percent for this exchange, but ten percent was genuinely to see you, hehe —"

'Bluff, keep bluffing,' Lin Wanrong shrugged indifferently, "Let's cut to the chase, Miss An, what do you want me to do? By my own assessment, besides being handsome, knowledgeable, gentle, modest, and careful, I don't have many other qualities. What have you seen in me?"

An Biru gave him a faint look, "Little brother, this 'Miss An' makes us sound unfamiliar. I still prefer you calling me Sister An."

"If I were to believe you, that would be ridiculous," Lin Wanrong laughed, "Miss An, you're not being fair. This is an exchange of conditions, there's no owing between us, it's just like doing business, it's better to keep things separate. Let's talk about your conditions, let's see if I can fulfill them."

An Biru observed his composed demeanor, which seemed genuine, and hesitated for a while before laughing lightly. "My seeking you out naturally indicates my confidence in your ability to accomplish the task, one you are highly skilled at."

The thing he was most skilled at? The longest part of his body, he was quite aware of, but the thing he was most adept at, that he didn't understand.

"Brother Lin, let me tell you a story," An Biru sighed softly. "Once you hear it, you will understand."

"Once upon a time, there was a grand master renowned throughout the world. She had two disciples, both of whom were females, beautiful as fairies. They were exceptional at music, chess, calligraphy, painting, martial arts, and horse riding. Young heroes from all corners of the world yearned for them. The master was an unparalleled figure with immense prestige, revered by all. She

taught her two disciples equally, showing no favoritism. The disciples, who were as close as sisters, got along well with each other. However, one day, rumors began to spread that the elder disciple was a distant relative of the royal family with noble blood, while the younger was a wild Miao girl with a reckless appearance. From the day these rumors began to circulate, the master changed subtly and began to favor the elder disciple, teaching her exclusively. The younger disciple, perplexed, confronted her sister, but her sister manipulated the situation such that the master heard their confrontation. The master, in her anger, berated the younger disciple and stopped teaching her. On her deathbed, she entrusted her teachings to the elder disciple, instructing her to assist the current prince in ascension to the throne."

An Biru's expression was serene, her tone melancholic, as if she was recalling her past. Lin Wanrong kept silent. From the moment the story began, he understood that An Biru was narrating her own life story.

"Had it been a fair competition and the younger sister had lost, she would've had nothing to say. But the master was biased, losing her fairness. The younger disciple, having come from a Miao background, was naturally sensitive to her status, and when she saw the master treating her this way, she felt desolate. When the master passed away, she swore in front of the master's spirit tablet that she would defeat her sister and seek justice for herself. That day, many people came to mourn the master. The two disciples, both proud and haughty, quarreled, which led to a fight. Since they had grown up together and their martial skills were evenly matched, neither could overcome the other. However, a despicable person took advantage of the younger disciple's unpreparedness and launched a surprise attack, allowing the elder disciple to gain a slight advantage. Furious, the younger sister left the mountain despite her injuries, severing ties with her sister. The senior sister sided with the second prince, so the younger sister decided to aid the third son of the emperor. Neither of them gained any advantage from their secret fights. But the third prince, Prince Cheng was stubborn and did not heed advice at a crucial moment. He was betrayed and eventually defeated in the battle for the throne. Unwilling to fall into obscurity, the younger sister borrowed some power and established the White Lotus Sect, hoping to rise again—"

At this point, An Biru glanced at Lin Wanrong. Her face held a complex, unreadable expression. She whispered, "Given my previous disposition, I would have shown no mercy to anyone who interfered with my plans. But you... you're Xian Er's husband. Could this be my destiny?"

She heaved a long sigh, at a loss for words. Lin Wanrong grasped the gist of her story. Apparently, An Biru had failed in her contest with her senior sister for status. She had hoped to defeat her rival with the help of Zhao Kangning's father. But when Prince Cheng lost, in desperation, she formed the White Lotus Sect to oppose her sister, only to be unwittingly defeated by Lin Wanrong himself. By such calculations, their enmity was far from trivial.

"Miss An," Lin Wanrong attempted to console her, "it's been so many years, let go a little. Your senior sister merely had different views from yours. It's not a deep-seated hatred."

An Biru managed a bitter smile, her eyes welling with tears. "No hatred? All these years, I've been displaced, my home the four corners of the world. I've been shunned, humiliated. Who do you think is to blame? She, born of an esteemed line, can look down on the world, while I, a lowly Miao girl, can only be trodden underfoot. Are Miao girls inherently inferior?"

Lin Wanrong was at a loss for words. If An Biru's resentment had been simple envy, it might have faded over the years. But instead, her hatred had deepened. This was more than mere jealousy could explain. Perhaps the stark class disparity had triggered her. They were merely representatives of two different classes. With this in mind, he found nothing surprising.

"Don't cry anymore. I understand you. It's not your fault." Lin Wanrong reached into his robe to give her a handkerchief. But seeing it, he hastily tried to retrieve it. It was the Yunjin silk handkerchief left by Qingxuan.

An Biru snorted, snatching the handkerchief from him. She dabbed at her tears and chuckled. "What a miser you are, grudging even a silk handkerchief. Do you think these tears are manufactured?"

'Damn it, that's my token of love with Qingxuan. I usually can't bear to touch it. You're so ungrateful.'

Seeing his displeased face, An Biru sighed. "I've battled her for twenty years, lost time and time again, but I've always stood up again. Despite repeated failures, I've never been afraid. I must defeat her in this lifetime, I must!"

Her gaze fell on him, a faint smile at the corner of her mouth. Lin Wanrong was taken aback and hurriedly exclaimed, "Sister An, why are you looking at me like that? You're not expecting me to defeat her, are you? God, spare me! I haven't even had children with Xian'er yet!"

An Biru giggled. "What are you afraid of when I'm here?"

'Damn it, it's precisely because you're here that I'm afraid. Without you, the world would be at peace.'



"Do you think I'm asking you to fight her? Although you have those strange hidden weapons, even if you could catch her off guard, you wouldn't be able to harm her!" Sister An tittered, poking him on the nose with her slender finger. "You're so silly! Do you think I'd be that dumb? You might be a little foolish, but I haven't stooped to that level yet!"

She had just cried, her long eyelashes still wet with tear droplets, her cheeks slightly red. As her full bosom and curvaceous hips shivered slightly, her flirtatious poke seemed like a lover's coquettish tease, charm oozing from her very bones.

‘Damn it, she's trying to tempt me again. Even if she were naked, I wouldn't fall for it. I'm only good at martial arts in bed; let's leave the rest out of it.’ Lin Wanrong let his eyes wander unabashedly over her figure, snickering a few times but remaining silent.

"There are many ways to defeat a person. Defeating her through martial arts is just one of them. While it's simple and straightforward, it lacks much fun." An Biru smiled subtly. "You have many other methods at your disposal, like wisdom, scholarship, and others... Hehe, think about it yourself."

"You're not suggesting that I seduce her, are you?" Lin Wanrong declared steadfastly. "I warn you not to entertain that idea. I am an upright person. It's an insult to say such things in front of me—Is she as beautiful as you? Oh, I'm just asking casually. Don't get me wrong! I'm an upright person!"

"She's so beautiful that she could topple cities and kingdoms, even more so than Bao Si," An Biru replied.

"Damn it, if she's that beautiful, then let her topple cities and kingdoms. I still prefer those mature, thorny types. Hehe, don't get me wrong, Sister An, I'm not talking about you. You're so mature you're almost withering—"

Sister An shot him a flirtatious glance and said, "You'd better not regret it. Some say my senior sister is the Chang'e from the Moon Palace, an otherworldly fairy. There's no man under the heavens whom she has graced with a direct look. Would you say she's beautiful?"

"Chang'e? A fairy?" Lin Wanrong paused, suddenly recalling the ethereal lady he'd encountered outside the Jade Buddha Temple. ‘Good heavens, it couldn't be her, could it?’

If things were really as such, the situation seemed rather stimulating. Should he consider it? His heart pounded faster, and he stared blankly for a good while. Seeing his expression, An Biru chuckled, "Well, well, so you're tempted just hearing that she's pretty? Men really can't resist a lure."

Lin Wanrong, feigning deaf to her sarcasm, curiously asked, "Then could you tell me, Miss An, where does this goddess live? How can I meet her?"

"Want to see her? In this world, there are enough men who want to see her to form a line from the capital to Jinling. But how many have really seen my senior sister's true face?" An Biru shook her head, smilingly glanced at him. "Of course, you are an exception. As long as you accept these conditions and with my arrangements, you can see her as many times as you want. As for how to defeat her, that depends on your own abilities. Worst-case scenario, you're exposed, she kills you, hahaha."

Lin Wanrong, breaking out in a cold sweat, had initially been focused only on the thrilling aspect of the matter, overlooking the inherent danger. Luckily, this vixen pointed it out.

He was about to respond with a chuckle when he saw An Biru frown slightly, whispering, "Someone's coming..."

Lin Wanrong listened intently. There came the faint sound of footsteps from the corridor, seemingly from a woman. This woman appeared to be deliberately treading lightly. If one didn't listen closely, they wouldn't notice at all.

"Who—?" An Biru's eyes gleamed with mischief, and she suddenly asked out loud.

The woman outside the window paused, seemingly surprised that there was a female voice inside. She gritted her teeth, clenched her fists, and growled, "And who are you?"

"Hahaha, I'm Lin San's sweetheart—" An Biru gave Lin Wanrong a teasing glance.

"Are you out of your mind?" Lin Wanrong jumped in fright, hastily pulling An Biru towards him, his palm covering her cherry-like mouth, "Damn it, are you trying to get me in trouble? That's the Eldest Miss. Watch out, I might rape you and then kill you, look at what—haven't you been raped before?"

An Biru blinked her eyes, her long lashes trembling, a strange pink flush spread across her face. As her cherry-like mouth slightly parted, a fragrance akin to orchid musk reached his nostrils, "Are you afraid of her? That's even better. Agree with me or not—help, young mistress, help—"

"Damn you," Lin Wanrong forcefully covered her mouth, pushing her body harshly against the wall, the two of them pressing together.

"I'm warning you, I do what I want, and no one can force me. Don't overestimate your cleverness, I am capable of anything." He warned, his eyes menacing.

An Biru panted rapidly, her breath fragrant on his palm, stirring something in his heart. Lin Wanrong's leg pressed against her slender, round one, their bodies fitting together, looking into each other's eyes.

An Biru struggled a few times, fear flickered in her eyes, her ample chest heaving. Like a naive young girl, she stammered, "What... what are you doing? Don't come over."

"Damn you and your act," Lin Wanrong, fully aware of Sister An's coquettish tactics, was indifferent to her pitiful and frail appearance. He forcefully moved in front of her, looked at her long eyelashes, and her glistening cheeks, and sneered, "You don't know what I'm going to do—" His large hand reached for her chest, "Now you should know, shouldn't you?"

An Biru's face drastically changed color. Just as she was about to react, Lin Wanrong was faster. He leaned his body, pinning her against the wall, his hand already resting on her breast.

With just a slight touch, Lin Wanrong felt a thrill running through him. This softness was plump and upright, and even through her clothes, he could feel its smooth elasticity, as if it were pushing his palm away.

An Biru was more skilled in martial arts than him, but she had not expected this seemingly mild little brother to suddenly become aggressive. His demeanor drastically changed from his previous playful manner, and he was ruthlessly resolute. She was caught off guard and he succeeded in his move.

Her face turned pale and she angrily exclaimed, "How dare you insult me, I will kill you, ah—"

Lin Wanrong held her hands high above her head, pinning her down with his entire body. Looking at her jade-like cheeks, he angrily said, "Xian'er spends all day talking about killing. This is what you taught her, right? Since you're so fond of killing, then I'll kill you first."

His eyes were filled with anger, seeming to be on fire. An Biru was panting, her cherry lips opening and closing, eyes filled with both shyness and rage. The two stared at each other, neither willing to back down.

Their bodies were pressed tightly together, each able to feel the other's quickened breath, the heated atmosphere making their heartbeats accelerate.

The Eldest Miss outside the door, having not heard any response for a while, called out again, "Who are you? Speak up? How did you get in his room, Lin San, Lin San—"

Inside the room, the two were pressed tightly together, Lin Wanrong grasping her white wrist, feeling the softness against his chest. Looking at her immaculate face and neck gradually flushed, the air was filled with a tantalizing aura. The mature fragrance of the woman wafted into his nose, making his heart race countless times faster.

The thighs of the two pressed against each other were sweaty, wetly sticking together. Sister An had a slender figure, and being a martial artist, her legs were firm and full of elasticity. This touch made him feel refreshed. Lin Wanrong leaned further into her legs, letting out a comfortable hum.

An Biru's cheeks were bright red, a thin layer of sweat appearing on her delicate nose, her eyes teary and breathing heavy, she stuttered, "You, don't do this, I am Xian'er's master—"

It would have been better if she hadn't spoken those words. As soon as she finished, Lin Wanrong felt like a fire had been lit in his nose, and his whole body was burning hot. He swallowed and said, "You are Xian'er's master, and I am Xian'er's husband—"

"Ah—" An Biru's face turned as red as blood, and a strange feeling surged in her heart, as if she had broken some taboo. Despite her high martial arts skill, she was sweating profusely, her body covered in sweat pressing against Lin Wanrong's equally drenched body. They were like two wet figures stuck together, an unusual feeling surging within them.

Flames blazed in Lin Wanrong's eyes as he pressed closely against her smooth, rounded legs, his body slowly moving forward. The heated part of him, like a burning flame, was pressed against her lower abdomen, causing her dress to form a wrinkle, right at her delicate spot.

"No—" An Biru seemed to forget that she was a martial artist. Her delicate body twisted tightly, and she let out a soft, urgent cry. Her charming eyes were slightly closed, and her high, firm chest drew a wonderful wave. Her fragrant mouth exhaled an orchid-like breath, hitting his face with waves of heat.

‘Damn, this feels so good,’ Lin Wanrong thought to himself. This vixen was like a ripe peach, her mature and round legs tightly clamping him. The feeling of smooth tension coming from below her belly was like fresh tofu just out of the water. Even though they were separated by a thin layer of clothing, he could still feel her delicacy and fragility. ‘At this point, you still tell me not to, do you think I am a good man or a believer?’ He slightly pushed up, and both of them let out a soft gasp.

An Biru's heart was about to jump out. Suddenly, she punched him on the shoulder and sobbed, "What are you doing, don't bully me, don't bully me—" At this moment, she was not the Holy Mother of the White Lotus Sect, but an ordinary woman being bullied. It was natural for her to punch him twice.

Sweat, what was he doing? Seeing the tears in the corner of An Biru's eyes, Lin Wanrong sobered up a lot. He never played violent games.

"Lin San, are you in there? I'm coming in—"

Lin Wanrong was startled and hurriedly said, "Don't come in—"

He was about to separate from An Biru in a hurry. Sister An snorted and hugged his neck with a charming smile, "What's the matter, dare not continue?"

"Damn, what are you doing, let me go, let me go, help, rape—" Before he could finish his words, he heard a light sound, the door was pushed open, and the Eldest Miss was holding a few small dishes in her hand, about to step in. Seeing the situation in the room, her face turned pale, and she stood there in a daze.

"This, this, Miss, things are not what you think—hey, let me go, let me go—Miss, I was forced—"

There was a crisp sound, and the cup in Xiao Yuruo's hand fell to the ground and shattered. The exquisite dishes were scattered all over the floor. She looked at Lin Wanrong blankly, her eyes filled with tears. Suddenly, she turned around and ran out.

"Miss, Miss—" Lin Wanrong called out anxiously. But Xiao Yuruo was stubborn and wouldn't listen to his shouts. In a few moments, she had run out of sight.

An Biru let go of her arm around his neck with a giggle, "Alright, she's gone, you can go ahead with our business!"

Lin Wanrong snorted and ignored her. He was about to go find the Eldest Miss when An Biru quickly grabbed him, "Where are you going?"

Lin Wanrong said coldly, "Let go of your hand, or I can't guarantee what I'll do."

An Biru had only ever seen him cheerful and jovial, never this cold and detached. She barely recognized him, this wasn't the little brother she was familiar with. Unsettled, a sudden fear sprouted in her heart. She reluctantly let go of his arm and said softly, "Why so fierce? She ran away on her own, I didn't chase her with a stick."

'Bloody hell, is this witch even human? To say such things!' He thought to himself, exasperated. 'Forget it, I can't deal with you, nor do I want to.' Annoyed and worried about what foolishness Xiao Yuruo might get up to, he decided to ignore An Biru. He took a step towards the door, intending to leave.

Seeing his aloofness, An Biru sighed softly, "Forget it, forget it. I am just a lowly Miao girl, a witch who stops at nothing. Being bullied like this... perhaps I deserve it. Go find your Miss Xiao and bring her back."

As she spoke, she stole a glance at him. He seemed not to hear her, striding quickly towards the door. Within moments, he was gone.

He just left like that? An Biru stood there stunned for a while, then a blush crept onto her cheeks. She giggled, "You naughty boy, not taking hard or soft tactics, running off after taking advantage. What a character!"

Lin Wanrong stepped outside, first going to Eldest Miss Xiao's room to look for her, but it was empty. Just then, he spotted Eldest Miss Xiao's maid Huan'er coming in. He quickly grabbed her, asking, "Huan'er, have you seen Eldest Miss?"

"Eldest Miss?" Huan'er was puzzled. "Didn't she just go to deliver your meal? Knowing that you hadn't eaten tonight, she specifically ordered the kitchen to prepare a few dishes for you. Initially, she had asked me to bring them to you, but later, she decided to deliver them herself. Didn't you see her?"

"Ah, we must have missed each other!" Lin Wanrong awkwardly laughed, feeling uneasy. 'This girl always has a poker face in front of me, but it turns out she's so thoughtful. Tonight, I was tempted by that fox An. I almost took the bait, I really owe it to Miss Xiao. From now on, I must mend my ways... But then again, who could resist that fox's temptation? I showed more restraint than Liu Xiahui himself.'

With Huan'er, he searched high and low but found no trace of Miss Xiao. They asked the courtyard's staff, and someone had indeed seen Miss Xiao hastily leaving. But it was already late, and no one had noted which direction she had taken.

Lin Wanrong was anxious. This was the capital, not Jinling. It was late at night, and Eldest Miss barely knew anyone here, let alone any familiar places. Where could she have gone?

Upon hearing the news, Sister Song quickly came over, looking worried. She glanced at Lin Wanrong, "Brother Lin, if you don't mind me asking, did you have a falling out with Eldest Miss?"

Lin Wanrong gave a dry laugh, unsure whether to admit it or not. Sister Song sighed, "Brother Lin, it's not my place to say, but Eldest Miss cares about you a lot, even I'm envious seeing how considerate she is towards you."

Seeing his puzzled look, Sister Song helplessly shook her head, "Eldest Miss originally didn't want me to say anything, but if I don't, you will never know how good Eldest Miss has been to you. Take today's visit to the officials in the capital for example. She originally wanted you to go, but she said that you are prideful and seeing you try to please others would make you uncomfortable. Fearing you'd feel slighted, she asked me to accompany her and sent you to escort the Second Miss. When we met you outside the moat, we had seen you long before. Eldest Miss saw you in a daze and didn't want us to disturb you, so we waited there for you. She was also worried that you might unknowingly trespass into the forbidden area of the palace and cause trouble, so she especially asked me to bribe the soldiers by the moat, which allowed you to walk a few steps forward. Although Eldest Miss was angry with you in the evening, she also instructed me to make you some extra clothes, saying that you are reckless and unaware of the weather. If no one takes care of you, you could wear summer clothes in the winter. Although she verbally expresses annoyance towards you, she is also worried that you might go hungry, so she secretly ran to the kitchen and instructed the cook to make some dishes for you. I have been serving the Xiao family for several decades,

serving both the Madam and the young lady, but I have never seen Eldest Miss treat anyone like this. You, my boy, are in the midst of blessings yet do not know it."

"I'm not as terrible as she describes," Lin Wanrong's nose tingled slightly, and he abruptly stood up, "Rest assured, even if I have to die, I will bring Yuruo back."

## Chapter 290 Falling Into the Water

At some unknown point, a light rain had begun to patter down. Walking on the main street under the gloomy sky, the biting chill of early spring pierced through one's bones, causing cheeks to sting with cold. Countless households lit their lamps, casting a faint mist in the drizzling rain, as if they were flowers blooming underwater, indistinct, hard to discern. Several oil-paper umbrellas, held aloft, moved slowly. People's faces were obscured, only the canopy of umbrellas, like a swath of clouds, could be seen progressing through the darkness.

Lin Wanrong stood on this cold street, looking around, yet all he saw was an endless mist of rainwater. He didn't know where to start searching for Xiao Yuruo.

He had experienced such a search before. Last time, in Hangzhou, when the Eldest Miss was looking for the solution to her destined marriage divination, she had waited a whole day in Lingyin Temple. No one could match her piety, yet it was this dedication that led her into a deadlock. Fortunately, Lin Wanrong was quick-witted enough to solve the divination riddle, only then was the Eldest Miss able to set her mind at ease. Now, reflecting on the marriage divination, it seemed to have been specifically written for them. The cryptic divination had somehow become reality. Could it be that fate was at play?

Lin Wanrong sighed, feeling an increasing worry. Having spent a long time with Eldest Miss, he had come to understand her temperament deeply. This young lady was stubborn and resolute, never easily bowing her head. Now, having left in anger, in this unfamiliar capital city, who could assure what actions she might take under the weight of her sorrow and disappointment?

If something were to happen to the Eldest Miss, how could he face Yushuang and Madam Xiao?

He thought for a moment, his mind then shifted to An Biru. This wily fox, it was clear she came only to stir up trouble. She came in, caused havoc, and didn't even bother to close the door on her way out, wasn't she just giving the Eldest Miss a perfect opportunity to run? Dammit, if it weren't for the fact that she was Xian'er's master, he would have shot her down long ago.



"Uncle, have you seen a young lady about this tall, wearing a lotus-colored dress, and very beautiful, pass by here? Oh, she looks very well-matched with me—" He glanced around, truly uncertain of which direction to take, and in his desperation, he grabbed a passerby, a man in his fifties, to ask.

"Nuts! Plenty of women who match you can be found in the brothel ahead!" The old man gave him a glance and said disdainfully.

'Damn, are all the people in the capital this arrogant?' He raised a middle finger to the receding figure of the man, and then asked several more people, but either received no answer or met with a cold shoulder.

Strangely enough, he usually joked and quarreled with the Eldest Miss. There were many times when they didn't get along, but now that she had run away, he felt as if something was missing. Dammit, this must be the universal fault of men—being fickle!

The rain showed no sign of stopping, and the air became colder and colder. Considering the cold reception he had received while inquiring about one person in the vicinity, he couldn't help but worry about the Eldest Miss, a helpless woman alone in this night, and moreover in a state of heartbreak. What if she encountered some evil person? What then?

"Eldest Miss, Xiao Yuruo, where are you—" Overwhelmed by anxiety, he disregarded the strange glances of the onlookers. He cupped his hands around his mouth and began calling out loudly as he walked.

By the end of the street, his throat was raw, but the number of pedestrians had dwindled, and the surroundings were desolate. Where could he see Eldest Miss's figure? He wiped the rain off his face, the feeling of desperation intensifying within him. This road led to Jinghua Academy, the only place in the capital where Eldest Miss, a stranger with no relatives, had any connections—it was with the Second Miss in the academy. Left with no other choice, he decided to head there. If worst came to worst, he could ask Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan for help, mobilize their tens of thousands of soldiers, and turn the capital upside down until they found the Eldest Miss.

He had just walked this road not long ago and did not expect to return so quickly. He gave a bitter smile at the thought. He saw the foggy rain over the misty lake, void of any human figures, and without further delay, he was about to enter the academy from the main gate when he heard a splash from the lake, like the sound of something falling into the water.

His heart skipped a beat, and he quickly looked toward the source of the sound. Under the distant flickering lights, he made out the scene, and his mind went blank.

There, on the water surface near the shore, ripples were gradually spreading out. Floating on the water was a woman's long hair, bobbing with the waves.

"Eldest Miss—" He yelled, feeling as though his heart had been ripped apart. With tears in his eyes, he ran to the lake, not bothering to remove his clothes, and dived into the icy water.

The freezing lake water stung his skin, but his heart felt colder. He swam towards the floating hair while shouting, "Eldest Miss, Eldest Miss, where are you, you can't die—"

He was already a swift swimmer, and under this urgency, he swam even faster. In a few strokes, he reached the spot where the hair was floating. He reached out and grabbed at the water below but felt nothing. The water was empty. There was no trace of Miss. He hurriedly pulled up the clump of hair. It was light to the touch. Upon closer examination, it was nothing but a tangled ball of thread.

He was stunned for a moment. A cold wind blew, and he realized that he was drenched, his body icy cold. Who the hell was it, throwing a ball of thread into the water in the middle of the night for fun? He thought resentfully, yet there was also a touch of sadness. He murmured, "Silly girl, where are you?"

He was about to swim back to the shore when a thought struck him. This was clearly someone who had tied a stone to a ball of thread and thrown it into the water. But where was that person? Who had done it?

Frustrated, he wiped the water droplets off his face and paddled a few strokes in the water. He yelled, "Eldest Miss, I know you're here. Please come out. Things are not as you imagine. Please come out—"

He yelled several times, but the forest by the shore was utterly quiet. The only sound was the patter of the drizzling rain falling on the leaves. There wasn't a single figure in sight.

"Damn it, this is absurd! Where am I supposed to find the Eldest Miss now?" He shook his head in disappointment and began to swim towards the shore. As he neared the bank, before he could even stand up, a petite figure suddenly rushed towards him, brandishing a dry branch, and crying, "I'll kill you, you bully, you terrible person—"

The tree branch stung as it hit his head, but upon hearing her voice, he felt as though he were listening to the music of heaven. His heart bloomed with joy, barely noticing the pain. Overjoyed, he exclaimed, "Eldest Miss, you're really here."

Upon hearing him, Xiao Yuruo burst into tears, pushing him forcefully back into the water, sobbing, "Get away, get away, I don't want to see you, I hate you—"

Seeing her emotional turmoil, Lin Wanrong felt a twinge of guilt. He didn't argue, but swam a good distance away, floating in the water, and asked, "Eldest Miss, can I speak to you from here?"

The Eldest Miss covered her mouth, tears falling like rain, and squatted on the ground, too overwhelmed to speak.

Thinking back on their history, from the first time they met when she wanted to punish him, to later events like underwear development, perfume making, standing by each other in the White Lotus Cult, cleverly resolving their marital fate by the Su Causeway, comforting him softly when he went to the army... all these experiences flashed across Lin Wanrong's mind like a film — this girl really treated him well!

He sighed. His usually eloquent self didn't know what to say, seeing Xiao Yuruo crying so sorrowfully. Unsure how to comfort her, he said, "Eldest Miss, stop crying, I, I'm a little cold."

Remembering their experiences together, Xiao Yuruo felt as if she had been bewitched, step by step she fell into a trap she could not escape from. Hearing him speak, she wanted to laugh but found herself crying bitterly instead, "I wish you would freeze to death, I don't want to live either—"

Lin Wanrong mournfully replied, "There's no need for anything as troublesome as freezing to death. I can just die right now."

With that, he began to sink into the water like a stone tied with weights. His chin, nose, forehead disappeared one by one, until even the last strand of hair was no longer visible.

"Then go die!" The Eldest Miss, in her anger, picked up a small stone and threw it into the lake, causing a splash which slowly overlapped with the spot where Lin Wanrong had vanished, eventually disappearing.

Xiao Yuruo saw no sign of him and didn't bother looking, sobbing a few times. Her sense of grievance seemed to lessen and her mood calmed slightly. Suddenly, she felt something was wrong.

The drizzle on the lake made it as still as a mirror, not even a ripple disturbing its surface. Lin Wanrong's figure, like the moistening spring rain, had sunk into the water and disappeared.

A wave of panic swept over the Eldest Miss. Thinking about his usual behavior, something seemed different today. Could it be that her words had truly upset him, and he had— She didn't dare continue the thought. She stopped crying and called out tremulously, "Hey—"

The lake was serene, with not a sound to be heard. Her voice, gentle as the spring rain, fell back into her own ears, unadulterated by any noise.

"Hey, where are you—" Her heart fluttered in confusion, her voice raised a little, calling out delicately. The lake was peaceful, the sound of the drizzle falling into her ears, so palpable.

As time continued to pass, she suddenly felt frantic. She called out loudly in urgency, "Lin San, Lin San, where are you? If you don't come out, I'll never speak to you again—come out now!"

The surface of the water remained eerily quiet, with only her own breathing audible. Her face instantly turned as white as a sheet. Her vibrant red lips trembled slightly, tears rolling down her cheeks. Sobbing, she cried, "Lin San, you fool, you fool. I hate you. If you die, I won't live either —"

As soon as the words left her mouth, she closed her eyes and jumped from the shore into the lake.