

Finest 256

Chapter 256 The Xiao Mansion is Not My Home

Lin Wanrong looked toward the direction of the voice. The speaker had already sprinted toward him, and it turned out to be the Xiao family's servant, Si De: "Brother San, Brother San, you've finally returned"

Lin Wanrong smiled and said, "Si De, what are you doing out here this late instead of sleeping at home? Are you sightseeing?"

Si De quickly replied, "Brother San, it wasn't my choice to come here, it was the Eldest Miss who brought us."

"Eldest Miss?" Lin Wanrong paused, "Where is she?"

Si De pointed to the woman in the pavilion, "Isn't that Eldest Miss right there!"

Lin Wanrong focused his gaze on the woman standing in the pavilion. Her figure was elegant and upright, wasn't that Eldest Miss Xiao? Her face was slightly blurred in the dark night, her body seemed a bit thin, and she was looking deeply in his direction. Her body seemed to tremble slightly, her eyes shining brightly.

Si De's voice continued, "For some reason, Eldest Miss has been down these few days. She comes here every day after finishing her tasks, staying until dawn. No one knows what she is looking at. Even little Cui doesn't know."

Every day? Could she be waiting for me? Lin Wanrong thought smugly, he then turned to Xian Er, "The Eldest Miss is waiting over there, let's go and see."

An Biru had already caught up, and she chuckled, "So that is Eldest Miss Xiao, I have heard much about her. I'm curious to see her." The downfall of the White Lotus Sect started when this Eldest Miss Xiao was captured. It was Lin San who ruined their plans, naturally, An Biru wanted to see what this Xiao Yuruo looked like.

Lin Wanrong glanced at her, "Sister Master, look all you want, but don't start anything."

An Biru chuckled flirtatiously, "What, can't bear it? Xian'er is still here, and you've already started defending others. You heartless boy, Xian'er cares so much for you."

Against this Sister An, Lin Wanrong was utterly helpless. He let her words go in one ear and out the other. To Xian'er, he whispered, "Your Master is quite strange. Dear wife, better stay away from her. If she corrupts you, I'd be heartbroken." Qin Xian'er heard his instigation, but didn't reply. She merely pursed her lips and smiled in response.

After jesting with the two beauties, just as he was about to go meet Xiao Yuruo, he saw the Eldest Miss look their way a few times. Suddenly, she stamped her foot, turned and left the pavilion, quickly boarding a palanquin and commanded in a soft voice, "Return to the mansion!"

Although her voice was not loud, it was clear enough for them to hear. There seemed to be a hint of anger in her words. The palanquin then set off, leaving in a hurry.

Lin Wanrong was stunned and said in confusion, "Si De, the Eldest Miss wasn't here waiting for me, was she?"

Si De was also puzzled, "I'm not sure. The Eldest Miss has been waiting here every day. She's never returned this early before. It's not even the third watch, why did she leave?"

Lin Wanrong no longer bothered with these matters. He had fought hard in the war, nearly killed by a bombardment, and had narrowly escaped death to return. He certainly hadn't returned to accommodate her moods. Since he was back, he should quickly report to Madam Xiao, and then settle Xian'er and Sister An. That was the priority.

At that moment, Si De led the way, with Lin Wanrong and the two beauties following him, heading straight toward the Xiao household. The Eldest Miss's palanquin hurriedly sped ahead, seemingly trying to avoid them, growing farther and farther away.

Lin Wanrong, however, was unconcerned. After much difficulty, he had finally returned to Jinling, naturally in high spirits. Having conflicts with the Eldest Miss was not a new occurrence and it was nothing major.

Jinling was a major town in Jiangnan, endowed with remarkable individuals and natural resources. It was prosperous, rivaling the capital. Even though it was late, brothels and taverns were still brightly lit, beauties moving back and forth, a scene of bustling activity.

Ah, it was indeed comfortable staying in Jinling. Looking at the brilliant lights, Lin Wanrong heaved a sigh of relief, an indescribable sense of joy in his heart.

Qin Xian'er, returning to the old place, naturally felt nostalgic. She stayed close to her husband, not leaving his side for a single step. An Biru looked at the bustling night view of Jinling and couldn't help but sigh: "Jinling's beautiful scenery remains unchanged after so many years, indeed it's the capital of prosperity!"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Sister, you're only this young, where did all this sentimentality come from? Are you pretending to be worried like me?"

An Biru glanced at him, snorted, "You may mock me now, but there will be a time when I deal with you. At that time, Xian'er won't be able to protect you!"

"Master" Xian'er looked pitifully at An Biru, her face full of pleading. Sister An laughed, "Alright, alright, you girl, you just got married, and already you're siding with your husband. If you want me to spare him, you better control your husband. Today is your lucky day since I'm in a good mood. Otherwise, on a regular day, we, master and disciple, would take him down together, hahaha"

By the time she finished, she was already laughing, her face slightly flushed, her eyes seductively playful, her gaze rippling like water waves, full of charm and allure. Her mature charm made people's hearts beat faster.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "If you won't take me down, then I will take you both down. Xian'er, you have no objections, right?"

Xian'er giggled. An Biru gave him a glance, her laughter carrying a hint of flirtation: "Little brother, let's see if you can take us down then."

Si De listened and silently stuck out his tongue. Brother San's lady was extremely beautiful, but her master was extraordinarily seductive. Hearing their strange names for each other sister, master, wife it was all mixed up. Was Brother San planning to have his way with both the young and the old? Impressive!

"Brother San, let's walk faster. The brothers at home are eagerly waiting for your return. Maybe the Eldest Miss is leading everyone in a welcome line," Si De cheerfully suggested.

"There's no need for such grandeur. Just a line of men and women, some drums and firecrackers, and a welcome procession will do. I'm not much for formality," Lin Wanrong laughed.

"With your smugness, if I were Eldest Miss Xiao, I'd have kicked you out of the Xiao house by now. What welcome procession, you're dreaming," An Biru said. Lin Wanrong was used to An Biru's teasing. Finding nothing strange, he laughed and didn't speak. Soon, they arrived at the front door of the Xiao residence.

What was strange was that although they had just seen the Eldest Miss enter the house, in the blink of an eye, the Xiao house was shut tight. Even the night watchman at the door was nowhere to be seen.

Lin Wanrong looked around, puzzled. There was nothing unusual. How could this be? Didn't they know that Brother Lin had returned? Strange!

Qin Xian'er laughed, "Husband, is this what you call a warm welcome? I see very few people around."

"Oh, this... it could be that everyone was too overjoyed to hear of my return and forgot to open the door. It's understandable," Lin Wanrong replied with a forced laugh, giving Si De a meaningful look.

Si De hurried forward and banged on the door, shouting, "Who's on duty? Open the door quickly. Brother San is back. Open the door!"

The house remained silent. After waiting a while, still no one opened the door. Just as Si De was about to knock again, a woman's voice from inside said, "Si De, come in by yourself, I have some things to tell you."

Si De quickly acknowledged and slipped through a crack that opened in the door. Then the door creaked shut again.

Lin Wanrong was stunned. He had clearly heard the voice of Eldest Miss Xiao. She called Si De back but left him standing outside in the cold. What was this all about? Damn, he was still wounded, how could she treat him like this?

An Biru glanced at him and giggled, "General Lin, it seems Miss Xiao has quite the complaint against you. This Xiao family has treated you rather poorly. Why don't you follow me? I can restore the White Lotus Sect and make you a little Holy King, ensuring you live in luxury."

Damn it, she really was a notorious female bandit. Wanting to keep him as a kept man, did she think he was that easy? Lin Wanrong sneered, his gaze sweeping across her chest, in mock confrontation.

Qin Xian'er stared at the pitch-black door, her face angry, her small fists clenched, and her eyebrows furrowed, "This Xiao girl is too unappreciative. My husband went through great hardship to help her, even risking his life, and she treats us so poorly. Hmph, if one day she falls into my hands, she'll get what she deserves."

"I'm afraid someone can't bear it, Xian'er. Your husband is quite the ladies' man. I'm sure he and this young lady are very close--" An Biru, always one to stir up trouble, commented.

Lin Wanrong ignored her, about to knock on the door himself, when the door creaked open a crack. Si De, with a troubled expression, stepped out and called out timidly, "Brother San--"

"What is it, Si De?" Lin Wanrong felt something was wrong.

Si De made a face, "The Eldest Miss asked me to give you a message. She said, she said--"

Seeing Si De stammering, Lin Wanrong impatiently interrupted, "Just spit it out, what did the Eldest Miss say--"

Si De hesitated, glancing at Qin Xian'er and An Biru, "The Eldest Miss said, it's late and the dew is heavy, it's not convenient for the Xiao family to entertain female guests. She asks these two ladies to leave quickly, and then she'll come out to welcome Brother San back."

Damn, what kind of talk was that? Was she being disrespectful? He had been so eager to finish his duty that he rushed here with Xian'er, only for this girl to give him the cold shoulder. Qin Xian'er's lovely face instantly hardened, her eyes murderous. She pulled out a small sword from nowhere, causing Si De to let out a shout and retreat several steps in fright.

Qin Xian'er's fury surged, "This audacious girl! How dare she speak to my husband like this. I'll take her life!"

She swiftly brandished her short sword, executing a flourish of quick strokes that flashed and dazzled. Poised to charge inside, Lin Wanrong was alarmed and quickly restrained her. "Xian'er, what are you doing?"

Qin Xian'er fumed, "This girl insults my husband, how can I let her go? If I don't take her life, my heart's anger will not be quelled."

Sweating bullets at her intensity, Lin Wanrong hurriedly caught her hand. "Why would you kill her? That's just the way she is. Gentle as water when she's kind, and as stony-faced as a rock when she's stubborn. There's no need to take her seriously!"

Qin Xian'er pouted, tears welling in her eyes. "Husband, you stop me and speak well of her...could it be that you truly have some connection with this girl?"

An Biru chimed in, "I would say it's highly likely. General Lin, you've played the thief with the young lady, no wonder you're defending her so fiercely. So there are such interesting affairs going on, hehe, fascinating, utterly fascinating."

Between the master and disciple's dialogue, Lin Wanrong's face turned crimson. He had indeed stolen the heart of a young lady, but it wasn't this mysteriously eccentric Eldest Miss Xiao, but the recently matured Second Miss, whom Qin Xian'er had once almost struck down with her sword.

He had no idea which wire in Eldest Miss Xiao's head had crossed, creating such a chaotic situation. Lin Wanrong, already exhausted, no longer had the energy to deal with her. Thinking of all the experiences he'd had in the Xiao Mansion - the joy, the disappointment - his heart was filled with a complex mix of emotions. After a long silence, he sighed dejectedly, "This Xiao Mansion...it's not my home after all." With that said, he didn't linger. Grasping Qin Xian'er's hand, he turned and left.

Seeing her exuberant husband instantly turned desolate due to Eldest Miss Xiao's words, Qin Xian'er's heart ached. Biting her lower lip, she flicked her wrist and her short sword lodged firmly into the beam of the Xiao Mansion gate.

"Brother San, don't go! Miss, it's bad, Brother San is leaving" Si De exclaimed in a startled voice, nearly tripping over his feet.

The doors of Xiao Mansion flew open and Xiao Yuruo, holding up her long skirt, rushed out, shouting, "Lin San, Lin San, where are you going? Come back, come back quickly"

Lin San seemed not to hear her call, leaving arm in arm with the two beautiful women, not once looking back. He moved quickly, cutting through streets and alleys, and in a blink of an eye, he was gone.

"You come back to me, come back" Seeing his unwavering departure, Eldest Miss Xiao stomped her feet in desperation, crying out with all her might, tears welling in her eyes, her voice gradually weakening, "Who said this isn't your home? You arrogant man! I hate you"

In her irritation, she flung out the small booklet she had been holding. A gust of wind flipped open a few pages, revealing a vivid portrait that caught her eye. It was one of the three versions of Lin San's painting that she had confiscated when he first entered the mansion.

Eldest Miss Xiao clenched her teeth, her nose sniffled, and she bent down to pick up the small booklet. She gently brushed off the dust on it, staring at her own frowning face on the cover, she remained silent, seemingly lost in thought...

Lin Wanrong, full of emotions, walked swiftly, ignoring the Eldest Miss' calls from behind. Qin Xian'er followed him quietly, seeing his melancholic expression, she felt a pang of sadness. She gently held onto his sleeve, cautiously asking, "Husband, where are we going?"

Lin Wanrong paused and looked around. In his rush, he hadn't paid attention to his direction, and unknowingly had ended up at the edge of Xuanwu Lake. The place where he now stood was exactly where he first met Xiao Qingxuan. It was here that he first encountered Xiao Qingxuan, and a series of stories that followed completely changed his life.

Sighing softly while looking at the tranquil lake, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but think, 'I was really screwed over by fate.'

Qin Xian'er nestled by his side and softly said, "Husband, let's not think about that detestable Eldest Miss Xiao anymore. Shall I tell you a joke?"

"My little darling knows how to tell jokes?" Lin Wanrong showed interest and said, "Oh, let me hear it."

Qin Xian'er smiled, "Once, a turtle and a rabbit were racing. The rabbit quickly took the lead. The turtle could only crawl slowly behind. On the way, it saw a snail moving very slowly and offered, 'Climb on, I'll carry you.' Then, the snail climbed on. After a while, the turtle saw an ant crawling slowly and invited it too. After the ant got on, it greeted the snail. Husband, do you know what the snail replied?"

"I can't guess," Lin Wanrong shook his head.

"Little brother, how have you become so dull? The snail said, 'Hold on tight, this turtle is so fast, hehe...'" An Biru interjected, laughing.

Well, these two women are really trying to stump me with a tricky question. Looking at Xian'er's caring and gentle face, he was moved. He embraced her delicate waist and rubbed his head on her beautiful hair, "Xian'er, my good wife, you're really great."

As Qin Xian'er felt her husband's hand roaming over her chest and leg, a rush of heat surged within her. Her lips parted slightly, panting, "Husband, don't... Master is still here..."

Lin Wanrong lifted his head and looked at An Biru discontentedly, "Master Sister, my wife and I have some business to attend to. Could you please leave us for a moment?"

"You're really dull. You were so melancholic just now, and after Xian'er comforted you, you're eagerly taking advantage of her. It really lacks taste," An Biru said, unfazed.

"Hey, sister, I'm not in a good mood today. Don't provoke me. Otherwise, be careful, I might strip you naked, tie you up, and spank you. I'm capable of anything," Lin Wanrong threatened fiercely.

An Biru snorted through her nose, and said disdainfully, "Look at your behavior. Just now, you didn't show this kind of arrogance in front of Eldest Miss Xiao. Now you're acting tough with me. Humph, do you think I'm afraid of you? If you've got the guts, just try and see what you can do. Let's see who ends up getting tied up and spanked." As she spoke, a strange smile spread across her face. She looked him up and down, seemingly confident that she had him figured out.

Dammit, Lin Wanrong thought, somehow, he had suffered the ill fortune of being defeated twice by women in one day. He kept his mouth shut, choosing a clean spot on the shore, and flopped down. Qin Xian'er nestled against him and asked, "Husband, where shall we lodge tonight? You've just recovered from serious injuries; rest is essential."

Returning to the Xiao family's residence was out of the question, and he didn't have the audacity to invade Qiaoqiao's space with two women at such a late hour. As he pondered, he clapped his hands and asked, "Xian'er, doesn't your Miaoyu Pavilion own a pleasure boat?"@@novelbin@@

Qin Xian'er nodded, "Yes, husband, what do you want to do?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Let's find a boat. Just us two- oh, the three of us- will drift on Xuanwu Lake overnight, and sleep there too. Roaming around Xuanwu Lake at night, sipping fine wine, and observing the beauty; what a carefree existence."

Qin Xian'er clapped her hands, laughing, "Well, Husband, since you're in such high spirits, I will accompany you. Master, the three of us will rest on the pleasure boat. You help take care of my husband for a moment while I arrange everything."

With her swift nature, Xian'er gave her husband a quick smile and rushed off to secure the boat. An Biru laughed, "This child, all in an effort to please her husband, she's even assigned her own master. The foundation I worked so hard to build has become a plaything she gave to you. Mr. Lin, General Lin, your ability is too great."

"Oh, that, I'm quite surprised too." Lin Wanrong sighed, "I thought I had to support my dear Xian'er, but it turns out she's wealthier than I am. It's as if I've picked up a golden ingot."

"Of course." An Biru said proudly, "My White Lotus Sect has been operating for many years. Though now in decline and not as lucrative as before, the income from just this brothel is enough to keep Xian'er prosperous for ten lifetimes. If you mistreat her, I won't spare you."

Lin Wanrong chuckled twice, pretending not to hear her words. He thought, Damn, it's not like I married into her family. I have plenty of money too; I don't need you nagging.

"Little brother," An Biru changed the topic, noticing his silence, "You risked your life rushing back to Jinling, was it to be rejected by Eldest Miss Xiao? She's quite heartless. How about I use some means to capture her and let you have your way with her? I have plenty of tricks that can turn a virtuous lady into a libertine. You can have your way with her, get bored, discard her, and I'll find

you someone new, maidens from prestigious families. You'd like to see these normally proud and chaste ladies turned into used goods, wouldn't you?" An Biru's eyes swirled with seductive intent, a charming smile played on her face, her cherry lips parted slightly, and her words were shockingly bold. Lin Wanrong broke into a cold sweat listening to her. This enchanting and attractive sister, was she really a woman?

"Heck, you needn't worry about Xian'er. These women are just for fun, not to marry. I promise Xian'er won't be jealous. In fact, she'll delight in seeing you torment this lass. Whatever you want to do, Xian'er will obediently comply with you. I guarantee it, in the name of her Master."

Defeated, Lin Wanrong sighed, "Master Sister, there is no woman in this world more eccentric than you."

"Really? I like being eccentric!" An Biru's eyes sparkled with a captivating light as she lightly licked her bright red lips. She lifted her chin, as smooth as jade, and her beautiful, spring-flower-like face gradually moved closer to his. Lin Wanrong could feel her hot, fragrant breath lightly brushing against his face, causing his cheeks to burn.

"Stop, stop, sister, if you have something to say, just say it. Don't frighten me anymore." Lin Wanrong bitterly laughed. His arousal was akin to a flagpole standing tall, painfully hard.

"Little brother, you really are smart, and you're also very well-endowed!" She glanced at his lower body, a flirtatious gleam in her eyes, "Hehe, my Xian'er is indeed fortunate do you want to break the Love Bug on Xian'er?"

At the last sentence, his arousal twitched, and Lin Wanrong felt his heart jolt. He knew this Master Sister all too well she would never let him gain the upper hand without a catch.

"Master Sister, please be direct, state your conditions!" Lin Wanrong said with righteous indignation.

"You little rascal-" Sister An gently tapped his forehead with her delicate, leek-like finger, giggling, "I knew you were smart. Sister wants you to do something advantageous. Will you do it?"

"Sigh, I'm a very upright person, I only occasionally do advantageous things- why not tell me what it is? I'll consider if it's morally justifiable or not."

"To you, it won't be unjust, but it will be very... stimulating. Truly very stimulating," An Biru lightly licked her red lips and seductively said.

Damn, nothing could be more stimulating than you seducing your disciple's husband, Lin Wanrong thought as he swallowed hard.

"Husband, Master, it's time to get on the boat-" Qin Xian'er's voice carried from afar. A pleasure boat was slowly approaching the shore, with Xian'er waving from the bow, smiling...

Chapter 257 The Poetry Contest

Although General Lin was feeling melancholic that night, a boat ride on the lake, under the hazy night sky with a beautiful woman by his side, managed to lift his spirits. As an inherently free-spirited man, a few sips of fine wine, the taste of Xian'er's soft lips, and a playful banter with his Master Sister seemed to have eased his mood. He could no longer remember what had upset him.

Awakening the next morning, the day was already bright. Golden sunlight streamed through the ornate windows of the pleasure boat, casting shimmering pools of light on the floor - a sight of sublime beauty. The couple in bed, bathed in the golden light, felt a warmth and comfort beyond words.

"A brand new day!" exclaimed Lin Wanrong, full of life, a beaming smile on his face. He stretched his arms and neck, causing the blanket that had been draped over him to slide off.

Xian'er, nestled in his arms, moaned softly. Her long eyelashes quivered as she slowly opened her beautiful eyes. Her pretty face was flushed, and her white arm reached out, wrapping tightly around his neck. "Husband," she breathed out sweetly, "it's still early. Let's sleep a bit more."

Lin Wanrong, running his hand over her softness, chuckled, "The day's plan lies in the morning, and a touch of Xian'er brings spring. No more sleep, we'll bask in the sun."

"Stop it!" Xian'er squealed, blushing, but her eyes revealed her delight. "Husband, are you feeling better?"

"Of course, I am. What could possibly be wrong with me?" Lin Wanrong responded with a laugh.

"Husband, I admire your fearless nature the most," Xian'er said, giggling.

Lin Wanrong whispered in her ear, "Sweetheart, should I bring Qiaoqiao over? You two can take care of your husband together tonight."

"You're always teasing me!" Xian'er responded, her face flushed crimson, unable to utter another word. Although she was not one to share her husband with other women, she didn't harbor any resentment towards Qiaoqiao. Perhaps, it was Qiaoqiao's gentle and adorable nature that won her over.

After a round of playful banter, seeing her husband's high spirits compared to his despondency the night before, she felt a sense of relief. She obediently helped him dress and bathe.

Surveying their opulent pleasure boat, Lin Wanrong nodded and said, "Xian'er, your dowry is indeed abundant. When I get some free time, I'll buy some properties here in Jinling. We can live in a few, and the rest we can lease out. We'll drive up the prices in Jinling's real estate market and make a fortune."

Xian'er giggled and asked, "Husband, do you have that much money?"

"You dare to underestimate me, huh?" Lin Wanrong chuckled, giving her soft hips a teasing pat, "Your husband is rich, you know. My wealth is just deposited with the Xiao family for now. In a few days, I'll start buying properties. Then I'll marry a few more wives, have a bunch of kids, and lead a carefree life like a deity."

"How many wives do you plan to marry? I won't let them in," Xian'er protested.

Whether you let them in or not is not up to you, thought Lin. The couple continued their playful teasing, and as they left the cabin, they saw An Biru standing at the bow of the boat, brandishing a treasured sword in the wind, with the elegance and power of a dragon. Her sword technique was fierce, creating a gust of wind with each move.

"Excellent technique, excellent technique," Lin Wanrong applauded, "Sister, you've truly mastered the art."

An Biru sheathed her sword and stood still, noticing the mischievous smile on Lin Wanrong's face. She knew well that he was up to no good. Smiling in response, she said, "My swordsmanship surely can't compare to your mastery in 'mischief'. You are the real master, the lovable rogue."

Lin Wanrong was at a loss for words with her. Qin Xian'er, her lips curled into a soft smile, asked, "Husband, didn't you mention you had urgent business in Jinling? What is it that you need to do?"

At her reminder, Lin Wanrong suddenly remembered that it was the day of the poetry contest's opening. He had promised Luo Ning that he would attend, but he didn't even know where the contest was being held. As for the sponsorship, Qiaoqiao had always been assisting Luo Ning, and he hadn't involved himself.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe it," Lin Wanrong sighed. "Actually, I rushed back to Jinling to attend the poetry contest."

"Pfft." Qin Xian'er and An Biru both laughed delicately. Xian'er managed to retain her composure, while An Biru couldn't help but tease, "A poetry contest? Little brother, do you have such refined interests? I don't mean to underestimate you, but do you know how to compose poetry?"

"I'm a natural at it," Lin Wanrong gave a dry laugh, his face scrunching up. "I know I'm not good at it, but someone insisted I come. Once I've given my word, I must keep my integrity, it's my principle."

"Husband, the person you promised must be a woman. Otherwise, you wouldn't have rushed back risking your life," Qin Xian'er pouted.

Xian'er knows me so well, thought Lin Wanrong, grinning widely. "Well, I'll tell you later. For now, I need to go out. Xian'er, would you come with me?"

Qin Xian'er bit her red lip and huffed, "You're going to meet your sweetheart, what am I to do there? Wouldn't I just upset you? I also have errands to run today. You can frolic around outside, but do not bring that woman home. Our Lin family has a high threshold, not every woman can enter."

Upon hearing her fiery reply, Lin Wanrong could only laugh. The disciple truly mirrors the teacher. Finding Xian'er uncharacteristically nonchalant about not accompanying him, he felt something was amiss. He wondered what could be more important to her than her husband.

He moored the pleasure boat and disembarked, bidding goodbye to Xian'er and her teacher. Only when the two women were out of sight did he nod to himself. Upon his return, he decided to let Qiaoqiao buy a few villas in Jinling. He didn't need too many rooms for his wives and sons, just a hundred would suffice.

He had left Jinling on the third day after marrying Qiaoqiao. A month had passed without sending her a single letter. After returning yesterday, feeling distraught, he spent the night in Xian'er's arms. He felt guilty, realizing he had been unfair to Qiaoqiao. So, he headed straight toward the restaurant.

As he walked down the street, he was surprised to see banners of the poetry contest everywhere, each adorned with the "Food for Immortals" logo. True to his expectations, there were advertisements everywhere.

The inns on either side were filled with scholars from all over, not only were the food and lodging fully booked, even the businesses along the Qinhuai River had seen a surge in profits, doubling their usual takings. The veteran brothel keepers were beaming, their delight giving life to the old adage of prosperity through vice. The streets bustled with diverse intellectuals. Some had resided for a few days, while others had just arrived from afar, their reunions punctuated by gasps of surprise. The scholars greeted each other with eloquent language and poetic verses. For a time, the city of Jinling resonated with the sound of poetry.

Could this poetry competition in Jinling have such enormous allure? Even the literati along the Yangtze River, from Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, all the way to the capital, all who could recognize a few characters, had seemingly arrived. The atmosphere was extraordinarily fervent.

He pondered over this briefly then chuckled, the more the merrier. His aggressive marketing campaign was not for naught, as the second restaurant in Jinling was about to open. In a few days, he would discuss plans with Qiaoqiao to open several branches in the capital, find Qingxuan, resolve the love bug on Xian'er, and realize the dream of reuniting the family in the capital.

Walking forward gleefully, he arrived at the restaurant only to find no trace of Qiaoqiao. Even Dong Qingshan and his father-in-law seemed to have disappeared. After asking a few of the restaurant's staff, he found out that due to the large number of participants in this year's poetry competition, the preparations for the sponsors had significantly increased. From yesterday, Qiaoqiao and the others had been dispatched to arrange things at the competition.

So, that was it. Lin Wanrong sighed in relief. A single poetry competition had attracted such a swarm, these scholars really knew how to create a scene.

Lin Wanrong didn't have much interest in this grand poetic event. If not for Luo Ning's genuine concern, he wouldn't have bothered with it. However, now that he was back, he should at least check it out. Whether he could write poetry was another matter altogether, as the old saying goes, participation is key!

After descending the stairs, he was clueless about where to go. Where was this poetry competition being held? All along, he knew of the event but had no idea where this grand literary event was taking place. This realization brought a blush of shame to his face.

Just as he was about to ask someone, he heard a gong sound, and two teams of public officials, each with over fifty people, carrying various banners side by side, advanced in a spectacular procession. One of the leading officers struck a gong and announced loudly, "The grand event of the literary world, held in Jinling. The poetry competition in Jinling, its fame spreads across the great Hua Dynasty. Governor Luo of Jiangsu and Prefect Hou of Jinling welcome scholars from all over to grace us with their presence."

These officials, dressed in bright red uniforms and marching in a lengthy procession, were quite an eye-catching sight. Lin Wanrong chuckled to himself, it was just a poetry competition, but this old Luo had advertised it everywhere, fearing people wouldn't know. He was quite a show-off. There were hundreds of these officials, and looking at this striking red procession, he suddenly thought of Tao Wanying. In such a lively scene, why hadn't she appeared? Could it be that she had a date with Young Master Hou?

"Hey, brother," Lin Wanrong caught hold of a passing servant. This blue-clad figure looked quite amiable. Servants were always a good source of gossip, which was why he chose this individual, "I'm Lin San, may I ask..."

"Snort" The servant sneered at him, "With your appearance, you dare impersonate Lin San, the idol of our Jinling servants? You should take a good look at yourself. I saw Brother San at the Xiao family last month and even drank with him. He has a handsome face and a myriad of charming manners that a kid like you could never imitate"

"Oh, yes, yes. Brother San is so tall and gallant, so charming, and something I could never pretend to be. I got it wrong. My name is San Lin. I was just wondering, dear brother, what's so special about this poetry competition? Why is it so lively?" Lin Wanrong replied humbly.

The servant nodded in satisfaction, patting him on the shoulder. "You must have just arrived in Jinling?"

"Indeed, indeed. Brother, you truly have an insightful gaze," Lin Wanrong said, giving a thumbs up.

"Naturally, I drank with Brother San." The servant swelled with pride, "Our Jinling has always been rich in resources and full of talented people. Miss Luo, the number one beauty and talent in Jinling, and our Brother San, are among the finest."

Lin Wanrong hurriedly interrupted him, "Brother, could you please focus on the poetry competition? Why are there so many talented individuals participating?"

The servant glanced at him, "Miss Luo Ning is not only the number one talent of Jinling, she's also the number one beauty, and the daughter of the governor of Jiangsu, Luo Min. She's of high birth and as beautiful as a flower. If she's choosing a husband, wouldn't the talents from all over the world rush to compete?"

"You're saying that Miss Luo might choose a husband through this poetry competition?" Lin Wanrong asked. He had heard this news before he left but wasn't certain of it then.

"Not might, definitely. The announcement has been made, and everyone in Jinling knows it," the servant said.

An announcement? Poetry competition to choose a husband? That's a high-difficulty task. He can't do that. Miss Luo has high standards, and Governor Luo came up with such a weird idea. Father and daughter, both are eccentric.

"What does the announcement say?" Recalling the scene of Luo Ning's farewell on the hilltop before he joined the army, his heart warmed up again, and he eagerly asked.

"The announcement states that Miss Luo is in her twenties, loves poetry, and has a deep admiration for scholars. She wishes to use this opportunity of the Jinling poetry competition to choose a suitable partner. Anyone of the appropriate age and who thinks they are a scholar can sign up. That's why talents from all over are rushing hereeh, you're not here to participate in the poetry competition, are you?" the servant asked.

"How could I? How could I? I can barely recognize a few characters, wouldn't participating in this poetry competition just be embarrassing?" Lin Wanrong quickly said.

"Well, that's true. The competition only hosts scholars from various places. If you sign up, I'm sure people would laugh their heads off. Do you think it's easy to pass Miss Luo's test? There are three conditions she set: one, to be talented; two, she must like you; even if you meet these two criteria, she will personally test you. Only if you pass, can you pair with her. Do you think you can do that?" The servant looked at him with disdain.

Being a man, what couldn't he do? Lin Wanrong chuckled twice, patting the servant's shoulder. "Thank you, brother. I'll have Brother San treat you to a drink another day."

After learning these details, though Lin Wanrong was still puzzled, he was no longer completely in the dark. He walked a few steps forward and saw a sign that read - "Poetry Competition Reception". A few scholarly-looking men were sitting straight-backed. Seeing him approach, they quickly stood up and said, "Please give us your number and name card, sir!"

Number and name card? What number? Lin Wanrong was confused, and the scholar explained, "Oh, it's the number issued to you when you passed the preliminary round. Please show it."

Preliminary round? Damn, when did he go through a preliminary round? Miss Luo didn't mention this. Seeing that he could not produce a number, the scholar's face changed, "Another one trying to bluff his way through. Get lost, I don't have time to deal with you"

Damn, you eat and drink on my dime, and you treat me like this? I'll fire you. He was about to explode when someone sneaked over and pulled him aside, "Brother, need a number? A number for ten liang silver, the lowest price in the city, fair and square, guaranteed no deception."

Lin Wanrong was stunned for a moment, then immediately understood. This was the legendary scalper. No matter how difficult the ticket, they could get it. Seeing his hesitation, the man said, "Brother, I hired several scholars to queue up and write a few poems to pass. I had to establish connections and give gifts during holidays, this price is very fair. Hundreds of scholars enter the city every day, not all of them can pass. These numbers are hot commodities, hurry up, the poetry competition is about to start. If you're any later, Miss Luo might end up in someone else's arms."

The last sentence was damn crucial. Lin Wanrong, being a big bull himself, gritted his teeth, "Three liang of silver, take it or leave it!"

The man reluctantly said, "Alright, you're so straightforward, so be it, three liang." Lin Wanrong took the number card, which was in the form of an invitation. The most eye-catching symbol on it was that of 'Food for Immortals', which didn't seem counterfeit.

Heh heh, not bad, the printing is pretty good, Lin Wanrong handed over the silver and was about to move forward when someone else pulled him aside, whispering, "Brother, need a number? Lowest price in the city, one liang of silver, eight qian is also acceptable"

Damn it! Lin Wanrong roared, turned around to find the other man, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Today's venture started on an ill note, already having been fleeced before even entering the arena, and Lin Wanrong was not pleased. With a gloomy face, he walked towards the reception.

It was the same two scholars, seemingly unaware that they had met him before. They took the number card from him, glanced at it, and smiled sycophantically, "The number card is correct. Please give us your name card, sir, so we can log you in."

Name card my ass. Lin Wanrong took out a pencil and wrote two characters, stating, "This is my name, a local."

"San Lin? Oh, so you're the Third Young Master. We've long heard of your reputation. Here is your competition number that corresponds with your name. Please keep it safe." Goddamn, even this could warrant a reputation? Lin Wanrong pocketed the number without even looking at it and strode inside.

"Hold on, hold on--" One of the scholars hurriedly stopped him, chuckling, "Third Young Master, according to the rules of this competition, please do us a favor--"

"Favor? What favor?" Lin Wanrong asked, puzzled.

"Uh--" The scholar pointed behind him. Lin Wanrong turned around to see a large sign: "Contestants, please prepay five liang for tea."

Damn, daylight robbery, Lin Wanrong recoiled, turning back, "What's this about? Isn't 'Food for Immortals' sponsoring the poetry competition? Why are you charging again? Is there no law left?"

The scholar sneered, "Whether they sponsor or not, we don't know, but this is a rule set by relevant parties of the competition. If you wish to participate, you must comply. We're only in charge of collecting the money; for anything else, you can consult the relevant parties."

Speechless. Miss Luo was quite skilled at milking money. Heh, you've squeezed eight liang out of me today. I will surely make you pay back manifold in the future.

"Take it, no need for change." Lin Wanrong flicked his wrist, and a piece of silver, gleaming in the light, fell into the scholar's hand. With that, he proceeded inside, leaving the scholars behind.

The scholars exchanged looks as they held the silver, thinking: You gave us exactly five liang, what change were we supposed to give?

Chapter 258 A Cup of Wine Bolsters Courage

Upon entering, Lin Wanrong found that the place was right next to the Qinhuai River, with a pavilion several miles long built along the river, divided into several sections.

As Lin Wanrong entered, a page boy led him to the center of the pavilion, presenting him with a cup of tea and some pastries before respectfully taking his leave. The hospitality was quite commendable, Lin Wanrong thought to himself as he picked up a pastry to nibble on.

The pavilion, constructed entirely of bamboo, was built along the river. The surface of the Qinhuai River shimmered in the sunlight, with small boats zipping back and forth, presenting a truly captivating scene. Sitting in the pavilion, with the reflective water surface and gentle breeze, was quite serene.

There were already forty to fifty scholars gathered in the pavilion, each one looking vibrant and full of confidence. Lin Wanrong took a chance to ask a somewhat modest scholar sitting nearby: "Brother, how does this poetry competition work?"

"You don't know the rules of the poetry competition?" The scholar looked at him curiously, saying, "That is indeed interesting."

"I'm afraid my literary talent is lacking," Lin Wanrong hurriedly replied, "I came here more for the experience, not so much concerned with the rules. But I'd appreciate it if you could enlighten me. Oh, and my name is San Lin, may I ask your name, brother?"

"Yan Shenghui," the scholar replied, nodding, "so you are Brother San. The rules are rather simple. In the pavilion, we are divided into groups of ten, and we randomly draw a poem topic. Within the time it takes to finish a cup of tea, each person composes a poem on the same topic. The top two of each group advance automatically. After the poems are written, those who feel they are not up to par may withdraw. If there is a dispute, three renowned judges will decide. For fairness, these three judges vote individually, and a contestant can advance only if all three agree. The ones who advance get to board a decorated boat and enter the Qinhuai River. That is where the true gathering of talent takes place."

So it's a preliminary selection and then judging, Lin Wanrong thought. This was equivalent to selecting the top contenders from each region, and then proceeding to the final competition. It was a classic talent show style, indeed straightforward and practical. Ten people working on the same topic, the competition seemed fair, leaving no room for cheating.

"For those who do not advance," Yan Shenghui added, "they have one more chance to re-enter a group of ten and compete again. But if they are eliminated a second time, they must leave."

This was the revival round. Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly. This was a clever trick indeed. "That seems fair," he said. "Oh, and Brother Yan, have you competed yet?"

Yan Shenghui gave a wry smile, "I have to admit to Brother San that I did not perform well in the previous round. I ranked third in a group of ten, losing my opportunity to advance. Now, I'm waiting for my last chance."

Third among ten? That was indeed a disheartening ranking. Lin Wanrong shook his head sympathetically, "Brother Yan, don't be so despondent. I believe you'll advance in the next round."

After chatting for a while with Yan Shenghui, Lin Wanrong realised that he wasn't too clear about the procedures after the advancement. However, this first round seemed the most critical.

Lin Wanrong chuckled inwardly, appreciating the well-organized poetry competition. This young woman, Luo Ning, indeed had a knack for promotion.

Just as Lin Wanrong had suspected, every item in the pavilion, even the tables and benches, was branded with the mark "Food for Immortals". The eliminated scholars each received a commemorative item sponsored by "Food for Immortals" - a paper umbrella.

Based on his own abilities, Lin Wanrong estimated that he'd likely be eliminated in the initial auditions, but he was rather unconcerned. Luo Ning had merely asked him to participate, without specifying that he needed to progress in the competition. As long as he gave it his all, it was enough. He sat there leisurely drinking several cups of tea, even taking a nap. Watching as the other contestants either advanced or were eliminated, he finally saw a break in the action, and joined Yan Shenghui to make up a team of ten.

One person from their group was delegated to draw the test topic for their round. The man tasked with this was so nervous he was practically drenched in sweat, his walk unsteady. Lin Wanrong watched with a shake of his head, wondering how someone with such poor nerves could participate in such a competition.

A thought occurred to him, and he patted Yan Shenghui on the shoulder. "Brother Yan, I've heard that Hou Yuebai, the top scholar of Jinling, is also participating in the competition. Is this true?"

Yan Shenghui nodded, "Indeed, it's true. Master Hou is quite smitten with Miss Luo, he wouldn't miss this opportunity. He is also a strong contender to win the poetry competition. But he's not in our district. With his abilities, advancing shouldn't be a problem."

Lin Wanrong had heard that this Hou Yuebai was a studious recluse, and wondered what he had learned to feel confident enough to vie for the championship. However, Yan Shenghui shook his head. "I don't think Master Hou will win."

"Oh? Why is that?" Lin Wanrong asked, curious.

"Because of Miss Luo's matchmaking, this poetry competition is attracting talented individuals from all over. Although Hou Yuebai is recognized as the top scholar of Jinling, there are countless other talented individuals, not just from the provinces of Anhui and Zhejiang, but also many from the capital. It's not certain he will succeed. Moreover, I've heard that Prince Cheng's son, Zhao Kangning, is fond of Miss Luo and is also participating in this competition. With his participation, Master Hou's chances of winning are even slimmer," Yan Shenghui said.

So Zhao Kangning is also here, well that's going to make things exciting, Lin Wanrong chuckled. He has to address me as a teacher. However, he couldn't help but wonder what exactly Old Luo was planning with all of this? Gathering all this attention here, what was his endgame? His eyes scanned the area and suddenly his face paled, Oh no, Old Luo is making his move.

This thought filled him with both excitement and worry. Was Old Luo playing a joke on everyone, using his daughter as bait to draw everyone's attention, all the while planning something in secret? That was a bold move.

As the man drew the topic for the round, Yan Shenghui turned to Lin Wanrong, his voice tinged with nervousness. "Brother San, this is my last chance. I don't know if I can make it."

Lin Wanrong patted his shoulder, "Relax, Brother Yan. What's meant to be yours will be yours. Nobody can take that away from you. If it's not meant for you, you can't force it to be."

As they spoke, the man who had drawn the topic revealed the slip of paper, his trembling voice reading, "Compose a seven-character quatrain on the theme of...of...of spring and summer!"

Lin Wanrong shook his head internally, Can't you read it fluently? Writing a seven-character quatrain on the theme of spring and summer was a challenging task for him, but it wasn't unattainable as he had feared.

As soon as the topic was announced, the ten scholars got to work. While the old saying of composing a poem within seven steps was a bit exaggerated, creating a poem within the time it takes to finish a cup of tea was not an easy task.

"I've got it, I've got it!" Yan Shenghui was the first to exclaim loudly. The other scholars were startled by his outburst, those with weaker mental fortitude breaking out in a cold sweat.

"What's all the commotion?" A woman's voice drifted over. It sounded familiar to Lin Wanrong. As he lifted his gaze, he saw an old woman seated on the judging panel, her face full of anger, glaring in their direction. Oh dear, how was it her? Lin Wanrong nearly jumped to his feet.

"Oh, isn't this the renowned scholar Mei? How come you haven't returned to the capital yet? How have you been lately? Have you been plowing the fields again?" Lin Wanrong's mind raced, even as he put on a seemingly pleasant face. This was truly a terrible day. Not only was he being slaughtered, but he had also encountered this insane woman on the judging panel. Oh, Miss Luo, don't blame me for this.

Mei Yanqiu, who was judging at this station, was already quite weary and had yet to notice Lin San beforehand. Seeing him suddenly pop up before her eyes, she was startled and stood up abruptly. "You... you... what are you doing?" she stammered.

"What am I doing?" Lin Wanrong smiled. "Isn't it obvious? I'm here to participate in the poetry competition. Since you're a judge, you should be kind to me."

When she heard he was participating in the competition, Mei Yanqiu regained some of her confidence. "That will depend on your abilities," she said haughtily.

"Don't you already know about my skills, Teacher Mei?" Lin Wanrong squinted, slowly extending one finger and laughing. "This skill of mine is known as 'One Yang Finger,' a secret family technique. You witnessed it that day, didn't you?"

Mei Yanqiu's face turned pale, and she sat back down on her chair, too scared to say a word. Yan Shenghui, in awe, grasped Lin Wanrong's arm. "Brother San, you actually know renowned scholar Mei?"

"I do, somewhat. She has a very strong impression of me." Lin Wanrong laughed, casting a teasing glance at Mei Yanqiu.

"Time's up!" another judge shouted. The remaining scholars were sweating profusely. This group, all eliminated in the first round and hoping for a second chance, were already under tremendous psychological pressure. Hearing the announcement, some were pale and unsteady. Lin Wanrong, by choosing to join this group, had deliberately taken advantage of the situation.

"Since you've completed your poem, let's hear it," a judge said to Yan Shenghui.

"Yes. The theme is spring and summer. My poem is: 'Melons float on cool water to beat the summer heat, lotus layered on a tray of ice to ward off the chill. Near the steps, crooked stones with dense bamboo shoots, in the small pond, lotus leaves emerge.' " Yan Shenghui, beads of sweat dotting his forehead, recited hurriedly.

"Good poem, good poem!" Even before the judge had time to speak, Lin Wanrong began clapping and laughing.

Yan Shenghui shot a grateful look at Brother San, whom he had just met. He was self-aware enough to realize that his seven-character quatrain was just passable: coherent in wording, balanced in rhyming, barely qualifying as a mediocre work, and far from being a great poem.

The judges nodded to each other, discussed for a while, and simultaneously held up signs saying, "Satisfactory. Advance to the next round!"

Overwhelmed with excitement, Yan Shenghui screamed, throwing his arms around Lin Wanrong. "Brother San, I made it. I made it to the next round."

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Congratulations, Brother Yan."

The judges glanced around and called out again, "Who else has completed their poem? Please, step forward quickly."

The remaining candidates wore troubled expressions, none daring to speak. The judges shook their heads in disappointment, "If there's no one else, we will"

"Damn, these guys," Lin Wanrong thought to himself, "They must have spent all their time chasing after women, even I am better." He chuckled and said, "Wait, wait, if no one else has a poem, I, despite being unremarkable, have one to share. Please, esteemed judges, correct me if needed. 'The chilled, green pool of ice bites the teeth, teeth soaked in fresh spring dew in the cold day. Fragrance drifts in the quiet wind, clear as silk, listening to cicadas through the paper window.'"

"Great poem, great poem!" Yan Shenghui echoed in enthusiasm, shouting aloud.

Lin Wanrong gave a small smile and raised a finger to Mei Yanqiu, "Renowned scholar Mei, this gesture is known as 'One Yang Finger,' a secret family technique, it's quite powerful"

The color drained from Mei Yanqiu's face as she trembled, raising the card in her hand

Meanwhile, on a large flower boat in the Qinhuai River, Luo Ning leaned on the railing, gazing at the scholarly men bustling on the neighboring boats. She sighed softly, "Standing alone by the railing, autumn river's misty rain seems cold. The wind suddenly rises, yet the person is not back!"

She coughed lightly, hurriedly covering her small mouth with her hand. Her face turned a shade of red. Dong Qiaoqiao, who had just come out from the cabin, gently patted her on the back, "Sister

Ning, why have you come out again? You have been working too hard these days, the doctor told you to rest."

It wasn't overwork, Luo Ning thought with a bitter smile. She grabbed Qiaoqiao's hand and asked, "Qiaoqiao, Brother Lin promised to come back today. Do you think he will lie to me?"

Qiaoqiao gently patted her hand, "Sister Ning, don't worry. If Brother Lin promised to come back, he will definitely return. Brother Lin never breaks his promises."

After coughing lightly, Luo Ning looked at Qiaoqiao, her face filled with envy, "Brother Lin is your husband, of course, you would be protective of him."

Qiaoqiao giggled, "Sister Ning, what do you want Brother Lin to hurry back for? He likes to wander around. Even if he's back now, he's probably sitting in a pavilion somewhere having tea with others, treating this poetry competition as entertainment. Sister Ning, among the scholars now, many are handsome and talented. Which one do you like? We could let Governor Luo speak to them for you."

Luo Ning's face turned a deep blush. She softly said, "Dear sister, can we be sisters for a lifetime?"

"Of course, we can," Qiaoqiao replied with a sweet smile. "But first, you need to take your medicine and rest properly. Otherwise, when it's your turn to perform, the scholars will see a pitifully sick beauty instead."

Luo Ning stared at the calm river and sighed softly, "If he does not return today, I will have no desire to live!" Qiaoqiao froze, exclaiming, "Sister." She saw Luo Ning's eyes filled with tears, staring blankly into the distance. Her frail figure looked so desolate in the wind, it filled one's heart with pity

"There's no need to raise it..." Lin Wanrong suddenly waved and shouted.

"Why?" A judge called out loudly.

"Isn't this simple?" Lin Wanrong laughed. "According to the rules, the top two from each group will automatically advance. Among the ten of us, only Brother Yan and I have created a poem, so doesn't

that mean we have advanced automatically? Esteemed judges, perhaps it would be best not to raise the cards. I fear it might damage the confidence I have barely managed to establish."

The two judges nodded, their faces breaking into smiles. "You're certainly modest. Even if you have advanced, we still need to raise the cards"

Simultaneously, they flipped their cards: "Advanced" "Advanced"

Left with no other choice, Mei Yanqiu gritted her teeth and raised her card: "Advanced"

Upon seeing all three judges unanimously raise their cards, Yan Shenghui exclaimed excitedly, "Advanced, Brother San, you've also advanced."

Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Brother Yan, don't get too excited. This was expected." Yan Shenghui thought for a moment and had to admit, Brother Lin was right. The judging was essentially meaningless. He bowed and said, "Brother San, your calmness and wisdom surpass us all. I admire you greatly."

Seeing how easily Lin Wanrong and Yan Shenghui had advanced, the others regretted their hesitation. If they had known this earlier, they wouldn't have worried about producing mediocre poetry and losing face. They would've spoken up without hesitation, but now it was too late.

The first round was over. Lin Wanrong and Yan Shenghui walked arm in arm onto the showboat, sailing straight towards the Qinhuai River. The scholars who passed the first round split into two flower boats, each carrying fifty to sixty people the elite chosen from the masses.

The flower boat they were on paled in comparison to the one Xian'er had stayed on the previous night, but it was still extraordinarily luxurious. There were pens, inks, papers, inkstones, chess, and paintings everything one could need. A few famous performers sat in the middle of the stage, plucking the strings of the qin and singing softly. The scholars below the stage clapped in rhythm, sang along, and cheered loudly. It indeed felt like a gathering of scholars.

"Gentlemen" A man who looked like a steward stood up. "Today's poetry competition is all about the joy of drinking and composing poems. The fact that we can gather here today is a great fate. Please, let us all drink a toast to thank the destiny that brought us together."

"Cheers" The scholars downed their drinks in unison, adding to the jovial atmosphere.

The steward continued, "Since you all have passed the first round, you are all undoubtedly learned men. The second round is fairly simple. We, more than fifty people, will be divided into five groups. Each group will take turns giving a drinking command. This command must match one word to the previous command. Those who fail to match will kindly move aside to enjoy their drink while the others continue. The last one standing will be the victor."

Lin Wanrong vaguely understood the rules and thought it was interesting. This method seemed fun. Ten people were giving drinking commands, from one command to multiple commands. It was less about talent and more about wit and drinking capacity.

He picked up a teacup and found a spot near the railing to sit, looking out over the river. He noticed two other painting boats floating nearby but couldn't identify which one Luo Ning was on. While he was idle, he saw a small boat rowing towards them in the distance. On the boat were two men, one a tall, dark figure, and the other a middle-aged man with a clean-shaven face. They stood close together, whispering about something.

"Oh damn, am I seeing things?" He rubbed his eyes vigorously and let out a gasp of surprise. He tossed away his teacup and called out loudly, "Brother Du, Brother Hu"

The ship was quite far away at first. They couldn't hear his call, but as they got closer, they heard his voice. The two men on the ship looked over and were taken aback upon seeing Lin Wanrong's silhouette. They were overjoyed instantly. Hu Bugui, a towering figure, with tears streaming down his cheeks, shouted, "General Lin. General Lin, you're alive, damn it, you're alive!"

Lin Wanrong burst into laughter, wiping his nose, and leapt towards the edge of the ship, about to jump into the river. Yan Shenghui quickly grabbed him and asked, "Brother San, what are you doing?"

Lin Wanrong replied, "A few of my brothers are over there, and I want to go see them. Damn, I missed them."

Yan Shenghui said, "Since your brothers are within sight, why worry about this short amount of time? It's winter now. If you swam over there, you would catch a chill, and that wouldn't be worth it. Wait until this poetry contest is over, then you can have a good drink with them. Wouldn't that be beautiful?"

True enough, why was he in such a rush? Lin Wanrong grinned sheepishly, waving wildly at the two men. Hu Bugui and Du Xiuyuan understood his gesture and quickly stopped the small boat that they were rowing. They waved vigorously at him, hopping excitedly on the boat. Their joy was indescribable.

Basking in the warm sentiment, Lin Wanrong was just in time for the drinking game. He eagerly joined a group of ten unfamiliar faces. Unfazed, he raised his cup and drank two rounds, still basking in his joy.

The others were stunned, looking at this madman who'd appeared out of nowhere and chugged two cups without a word. They all secretly stuck out their tongues.

No one knew each other, anyway. It was all about outdrinking and outsmarting each other, and Lin Wanrong had never been afraid of a challenge. He was slightly red-eyed, his excitement couldn't be concealed.

"Drink up!" the first person proclaimed, draining his cup.

"Drink up!" echoed the second person, also draining his cup.

"To the wind and flowers!" the third person declared.

"Drink freely!" the fourth person said.

When it was Lin Wanrong's turn, he had already downed two more cups. Someone ahead had proposed "Deep affection under the moon", and he laughed heartily, declaring loudly, "Endless love in a dream. You drink, and I drink too"

All ten people finished the first round without any dropouts. Lin Wanrong drank freely, not caring who was next, draining each cup as it came.

The second round required six-word phrases.

"Drunkenness easily reveals beauty"

"Don't speak of sorrow in the scent of wine"

The longer the sentences, the harder it was. Before this round was over, four people were already out. When it was Lin Wanrong's turn, a scholar before him recited, "Breathtaking beauty, exquisite wine, at a beauty's lips."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily and responded, "Bronze skin, iron bones, a heroic horse, in front of the general's formation." He tilted his head back and gulped down the strong liquor as if it was water, not even changing color. Seeing his bravado, a few scholars were impressed. He was no weak scholar, but a man of genuine mettle.@@novelbin@@

By the end of the third round, there was no one left to compete with him. Lin Wanrong's eyes were slightly red, his body swaying, yet he remained standing. He sang out, "Brothers are born of the same flesh, their heroic spirit fills the universe. Who dares to laugh at my battlefield drunkenness? In armor, we harbor grand ambitions. Here's a toast to the heroic with a cup of wine. Please, gentlemen, let us drink three hundred more cups!"

Who could follow up on that? Everyone else had already conceded defeat, their faces filled with admiration and respect for Lin Wanrong. Seeing that no one else could continue, Lin Wanrong felt a tinge of disappointment. He picked up two cups from the table and, bending his elbows to the left and right, drained both in one go. Yet, he seemed not quite satisfied. He smashed the cups on the ground and, lifting the bottle, took a hearty swig. With a few gulping sounds, the clear liquor dripped from the corners of his mouth.

Everyone around was stupefied. These were all learned scholars, well-versed in poetry and literature. They had never encountered such a wild and unrestrained character. Whether it was his drinking or his poetry, both were flamboyant and free-spirited, with a hint of an invigorating murderous aura that left everyone awestruck.

Over there, Yan Shenghui had already stepped down, showing signs of drunkenness. Seeing Lin Wanrong in this state, he suddenly shouted, "Brother San, well done! Life should be lived as you do, half awake, half drunk, carefree, and expressive. Bring on the wine"

With one hand on the bottle, he tried to mimic Lin Wanrong's actions, gulping a few times. However, before he could take more than a few sips, he suddenly collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

"Ding!" The gong rang out, struck by the officiating officer who then boomed, "The winners of the first group of the wine-poetry challenge have been decided. Gentlemen, you have employed your love of wine and words to create an entertaining spectacle. Please, indulge yourselves and drink heartily!"

The drinking challenge, though seemingly simple, was far from it. Firstly, one had to have a tolerance for alcohol. Secondly, one had to have the scholarly ability. Each command was a poem and after a round of these, the one who persevered to the end would have recited at least four to five poems. Lin Wanrong, groggy and oblivious to the complexity of the task, simply found it enjoyable, saying whatever came to mind. It was only after winning first place in his group that he sobered slightly, still feeling immense pleasure.

As per the rules, the winner of each wine-poetry group could advance to the next round. The rest would lose the privilege to enter the main ship. While it might have been a disappointment, they could still indulge in the poetic arts on the flower ship, using predetermined lyrics and verses to hold their poetry gatherings. There was no need for them to worry about advancement anymore. Surrounded by fine wine and food, they would be free to let loose and recite their poetry in an unending flow.

The officer summoned the five winners aside, bowed, and congratulated them. "Congratulations, gentlemen. Winning this round allows you entry into Miss Luo's flower ship to exchange verses with her. If you manage to win her favor, you may take the beautiful woman home. Great success awaits you."

Lin Wanrong, with the effects of the alcohol still lingering, laughed, "Simply writing a few verses could lead to success? This is truly amusing." The other scholars glared at him upon hearing his dismissive words, but seeing his slightly drunk state, they chose not to argue.

The officer continued, "The five gentlemen from the other ship have also advanced successfully. In addition to our own Young Master Hou Yuebai from Jinling, there is Young Master Zhao and the most famous scholar from the capital, Wu Xuean. While you may not have as notable names, I can see your scholarly abilities are equally extraordinary. There's no guarantee you cannot surpass them. Shortly, someone will escort you to the main flower ship. I wish you all good luck."

Under the influence of the alcohol, Lin Wanrong paid little attention to who the others were. Under these circumstances, making it to the top ten was a considerable achievement.

Yan Shenghui, who had drunkenly fallen over, wobbled over to him, grabbing his hand. "Brother San, I'm sorry I cannot accompany you further on this journey. You must win Miss Luo's hand and restore some pride for us powerless scholars."

This Yan Shenghui was a man of integrity. An idea came to Lin Wanrong. He could introduce him to Xu Wei; it could be a good opportunity for them to meet. He slapped Yan Shenghui on the shoulder, laughing, "Brother Yan, wait for my good news."

As they were talking, the flower boat they were on drew close to Luo Ning's boat. Drums and gongs were sounding, firecrackers exploding, a carpet was laid across the gangplank bridging the two ships, inviting the qualifying scholars onto Miss Luo's boat.

The remaining scholars, mostly humble literati, admired the scene. They applauded and cheered, offering encouragement to those they were acquainted with who had made it to this stage.

On the ship, aside from Yan Shenghui, Lin Wanrong did not know anyone else. Nevertheless, the other nine competitors in the same group were impressed by his courage. They waved frequently, saying, "Brother San, you must come back victorious." Lin Wanrong returned their salute with a small smile and followed the others over the footbridge.

The majesty of Luo Ning's flower boat was truly magnificent. Flying eaves and walking walls, carved railings and jade masonry, red lanterns and green hangings, the boat was bustling and filled with color. The five scholars from the other boat were already waiting for them. Lin Wanrong glanced around and indeed saw the Young Prince Zhao Kangning smiling at the head of the group. But his gaze did not waver, he hadn't even given the other five a glance. Behind him was a young man also smiling, very handsome, swaying a folding fan with grace and elegance. He seemed to be chatting with Prince Zhao, ignoring the others.

The long-absent Master Hou Yuebai stood third, his gaze riveted on the two men in front, apparently viewing them as his most formidable opponents. The others simply didn't enter his sight.

Walking at the end of the group, Lin Wanrong went unnoticed by the trio of Zhao Kangning. The ten scholars were divided into two groups and proceeded inward.

Upon entering the main gate, they saw a screen with a small door in the center that could accommodate one person at a time. They didn't know who should enter first. This was called "entry", a deliberate obstacle to test the scholars. The order of entry didn't matter in theory, but the proud scholars wouldn't easily give way. They needed a contest.

Zhao Kangning, leading the other group, smiled and said, "There is a wall in front of us, with a door in the middle. If I don't go in first, it will be like a dog climbing the wall."@@novelbin@@

The scholar leading Lin Wanrong's group blanched. Zhao Kangning was metaphorically berating them, implying that anyone who dared enter before him was a dog climbing the wall. Intimidated by Young Prince Zhao's power, the scholar didn't dare to retort, and Zhao Kangning smirked, ready to enter.

"Hold on, hold on," Lin Wanrong stepped forward, laughing, "Young Prince, do you still recognize me?"

Zhao Kangning glanced at him, his face instantly changed, "You, you... weren't you killed in that massive explosion?"

Lin Wanrong's expression darkened. So, it was this bastard who was backing Tong Cheng. He smiled ominously, "Young Prince, are you that eager for me to die? Ha, I, Lin San, have nine lives. No one can just take it away with a little scheme."

Laughing heartily, Lin Wanrong recited loudly, "I'll climb the wall if I need to, I won't be as reckless as you. If the teacher hasn't entered, you should go home and ask your mother!"

Zhao Kangning had once said that he would treat Lin Wanrong as his teacher if they met again. So, how could he enter before his teacher? Despite Lin Wanrong's sarcastic verse even scolding his mother, he was in the right. Zhao Kangning's face turned from red to white, but with so many witnesses present, he couldn't argue.

With a disdainful snort, Lin Wanrong was about to step in, but he heard the handsome man behind Zhao Kangning say, "Wait"

Lin Wanrong turned to look at him, and the man saluted, "I am Wu Xue'an from the capital. May I know who you are?"

"Wu Xue'an?" Lin Wanrong frowned, "I've never heard of you. I am known as Lin San."

"You're Lin San?" Wu Xue'an was surprised. He glanced at Zhao Kangning, who remained silent, then coldly said, "You're too arrogant. Do you really think you, a commoner, have the right to lecture the young prince?"

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Whether I can or cannot, it's not for you to decide. The young prince should speak for himself. Isn't that right, young prince?"

Zhao Kangning clenched his teeth. He had harshly reprimanded Tong Cheng, even suggesting to kill Lin San amidst a sea of bullets to appease the prince, but unexpectedly, while Tong Cheng had become a ghost, Lin San was still standing alive right before him.

Zhao Kangning remained silent, but Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "All this fuss over who goes first through a door. What does it matter if I let you go first? The Great Wall still stands today, yet the Emperor Qin who built it is long gone. Isn't that right, Brother Wu Xue'an? The process of entering the door is like seeking the truth. Even though you've entered, you haven't found the truth, so your reading of poetry and books is in vain. Let me give you the honor of going first."

With that, he stepped back with a laugh, yielding the doorway. Wu Xue'an glanced at Zhao Kangning, unsure what to do. Young Prince Ning gritted his teeth and said, "Mr. Lin, after you."

With a slight smile, Lin Wanrong turned to the man leading the group and said, "Brother, let's go in."

"Sister Ning, the newly chosen ten scholars will be here soon, you should go take a look." Qiaoqiao spoke to Luo Ning, who was daydreaming in front of the mirror.

Luo Ning shook her head, "Why should I look at them? This is all just a farce arranged by my father, it has nothing to do with me. He even made me keep it a secret from everyone, causing Brother Lin to misunderstand me. He hasn't been willing to come, he must be angry with me. Qiaoqiao, what should I do?"

Qiaoqiao looked at Luo Ning up and down, biting her red lips, "Sister Ning, could it be that you have feelings for Big brother?"

"No, Qiaoqiao, don't get me wrong. Brother Lin and I are just good friends. We haven't..." Luo Ning's face turned red as she said this, feeling uncomfortable to deceive her close friend.

Qiaoqiao sighed lightly, "Big brother may seem shrewd on the surface, but he is clueless about a woman's feelings."

Luo Ning snorted, "He's not clueless. He knows exactly what he's doing, but he pretends not to. He's extremely annoying and detestable."

Qiaoqiao shook her head and laughed softly, "Regardless of whether he's truly clueless or just pretending, he's the bane of us women. When I first met Big brother, I loved listening to him talk. Even though he never spoke seriously, I enjoyed his company very much. Every day, I thought of him and worried about him, and I could only sleep well after seeing him. Sister Ning, do you feel the same?"

"Exactly... no, no..." Luo Ning hurriedly denied it, her face turning crimson. Embarrassed, she lowered her head shyly.

A slight bitterness filled Qiaoqiao's heart as she forcefully held back the tears welling up in her eyes. "Sister Ning," she said, "If Big brother knew how much you cared about him, he would be overjoyed. Even at the cost of his own life, he would surely rush back."

Hearing a choke in Qiaoqiao's voice, Luo Ning quickly raised her head to see the young girl's eyes brimming with unshed tears. She was biting her lip in a desperate attempt to keep them from falling. "Qiaoqiao, what's wrong?" Luo Ning asked hurriedly.

Qiaoqiao let out a sigh. "Big brother, he really has caused so much trouble. Sister Ning, if you truly love him, I can have a serious talk with him. He might act tough, but he has a soft heart. I guarantee he will fulfill your wishes."

Unable to respond, Luo Ning leaned closer to whisper a few words into Qiaoqiao's ear. Qiaoqiao blushed in surprise, covering her cheek with her small hand. "Sister Ning, you're terrible. How could you eavesdrop like that? I absolutely despise Big brother!"

Bitterness and sorrow filled Luo Ning's heart. Angrily, she retorted, "Doing such wicked things in my own bedroom, Brother Lin must be the worst man in the world."

So this was the venue for the grand finale? As Lin Wanrong entered the main cabin of the painted boat, he carefully observed the surroundings. Hanging lanterns illuminated the colorful murals on the walls. The room was already filled with the elite and influential figures of Jinling City. A large charcoal furnace in the center warmed the fine wine, while servants hustled back and forth, making the place extremely lively.

A steward announced, "The top ten scholars of the Jinling Poetry Contest have been selected. Please take your seats"

At the swish of the door opening, all eyes turned to the entrance. The scholar leading the group had never seen such an assembly of eminent figures. The weight of their collective gaze made his hands tremble unconsciously. Lin Wanrong, who was fifth in line, wasn't frightened by the scene; he had faced such situations countless times before. Moreover, his battlefield experience had bolstered his courage. It should be the others who were afraid of him.

"Brother Lin, Brother Lin" A woman's coarse voice called out. Lin Wanrong turned his head to see that it was none other than Liu Yue'er, who had once helped the Xiao family in Hangzhou City. She was now waving vigorously at him, looking happier than when she herself had entered the competition.

"Sister Liu" Lin Wanrong greeted back with a wave and a slight smile. If the Liu family was invited, then the Xiao family must be here as well.

As he surveyed the crowd, he heard someone call out, "Lin San, Lin San" Looking in the direction of the voice, he saw Young Master Guo standing on a chair in the second-to-last row, frantically waving at him. The excitement on his face was hard to miss.

Smiling broadly, Lin Wanrong walked over and asked, "Young Master, what brings you here? Weren't you also participating in this poetry contest?"

Guo Wuchang answered regretfully, "Don't even mention it. I bribed the judges in my section with a hundred or so taels of silver to get onto this flower boat. But then I lost in the first round of the wine command. Ah, if only I'd known... I should have just stuck with you. I could have at least made it into the top ten."

Lin Wanrong chuckled. Speaking with Young Master Guo felt like a return to old times, except now Xian'er was his wife and Eldest Miss was drifting further from him. Life truly was full of unexpected changes.

"Lin San," Guo Wuchang leaned in closer, whispering confidentially, "I heard you upset cousin Yuruo last night?"

"No, it's just a personality clash, a temporary separation. We all need to cool down a bit," Lin Wanrong said with a chuckle.

Guo Wuchang sighed lightly, "My cousin's temperament is indeed a bit too strong. She dares to scold anyone. Considering the immense contributions you've made to the Xiao family, I really don't know what the consequences will be if this continues. How could my cousin be so confused?"

Lin Wanrong sighed gently, "Let's not talk about this. How's the Second Miss doing?"

Guo Wuchang said, "Cousin Yushuang has been hoping for your return every day. But as soon as you returned, you argued with Yuruo, and she had to keep it a secret from her. Poor Yushuang, marking off the days on the calendar, unaware that you're just outside the door. How did things become like this?"

A sour feeling arose in Lin Wanrong's heart. Glancing at the empty seat next to Guo Wuchang, the Young Master seemed to understand his thoughts. "This is Cousin Yuruo's seat. She said she would come, but we have yet to see her despite the time. We had no idea that you made it to the top ten of this poetry competition, otherwise I would have brought Si De, Xiao Feng, and everyone from the mansion here to cheer you on."

Despite his lack of education, Young Master Guo's words warmed Lin Wanrong's heart. Lin Wanrong gave him a light pat on the shoulder, cast a glance at the vacant seat beside him, sighed silently, wondering how things got so out of hand.

"Lin San, you must give it your all, marry this talented woman of Jinling, make her serve tea, wash clothes, cook, and give her a good torment. Show her we men are not to be underestimated," Young Master Guo grumbled.

Lin Wanrong chuckled. Before he could reply, someone shouted, "Big brother, Big brother--" The excited voice of Dong Qingshan came from the side. Looking over, he saw Qingshan and Luo Yuan racing towards him.

Lin Wanrong stepped forward, "Qingshan, Little Luo, how are you?"

Dong Qingshan embraced him, "Big brother, brother-in-law, you're finally back."

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Qingshan, where's Qiaoqiao? Why don't I see her?"

Qingshan replied, "My sister is helping in Miss Luo's room. Miss Luo has been overworked these days and is somewhat ill." Luo Ning was sick again? Ah, women are prone to illnesses when they have too many worries.

Luo Yuan said, "Big brother, where have you been these days? You've gotten much darker."

Lin Wanrong laughed, "I went to do something very important. Little Luo, how's your sister?"

Luo Yuan shook his head, "Not great, she's been frowning all day. My father is too much. Knowing my sister's standards are sky-high, he still arranges such a vulgar poetry contest for a marriage proposal."

Qingshan added, "Exactly. Miss Luo is like a celestial being, far beyond the reach of these impoverished scholars. Brother-in-law, I think you should put in some effort, defeat these guys, marry Miss Luo and also become Little Luo's brother-in-law."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily. This Qingshan, always so blunt. The three brothers were laughing when an official called out, "The top ten scholars, please come forward and take your seats."

Lin Wanrong walked up to the front of the stage and took a vacant seat. Looking down, he saw the eyes of all the prominent figures of Jinling focused on the individuals on stage. Among them, Zhao Kangning, Wu Xue'an, and Hou Yuebai were undeniably the most eye-catching. As for Lin Wanrong, this dark horse, only Young Master Guo and Liu Yue'e had confidence in him; others naturally regarded him as mere accompaniment.

An official stepped forward and announced loudly, "The Jinling Poetry Contest, the grand duel of verses, is about to begin. Present today, in addition to Jinling's notables, we also have Governor Luo, Commander-in-chief Cheng, and the Educational Commissioner Tong from Jiangsu, along with other local officials."

Glancing around, Lin Wanrong indeed saw Luo Min seated on a high platform in the distance, smiling at him. Next to Luo Min was Cheng De, his expression unreadable under his stern facade.

The official continued in a booming voice, "In this duel of verses, the format is as follows: from ten, six will proceed, then four, then two, with the two finalists competing against each other. A total of four elimination rounds." This arrangement made sense; there was no second place in the literary world, and in martial arts, there was no first. The pursuit of this poetry duel was to emerge as the ultimate victor.

"For the first round, Educational Commissioner Tong will set the theme," the official loudly announced, and applause echoed through the crowd.

Commissioner Tong stood up, bowing to the crowd, "Today, we gather many talents, a grand event for the literary world. I shall put forth a challenge to start the poetry topic. Among the noble four: plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, the plum takes the lead. I invite the talents here to compose a verse on a plum in the snow."

Many of those present had a decent knowledge of literature. Upon hearing that the first round was about a plum in the snow, they inwardly groaned. This was because the number of famous classic poems on the plum was countless, and surpassing a classic was always a challenge. Composing a fine verse on the plum in such a short time was indeed difficult.

After a moment of thought, the Jinling scholar Hou Yuebai was the first to stand. "This student, Hou Yuebai, presents a verse on the plum: 'The warmth startled the plum, spreading fragrance first, a myriad of spring treasures following the night. The remaining winter snow, meeting the warm air again, beautified the famous garden.'"

"Good!" No sooner had Hou Yuebai finished his verse than an approving "Good" exploded from the crowd. Being the first to recite and a local of Jinling, Hou Yuebai was naturally given due respect.

Young Prince Zhao was not to be outdone and stood up to recite his verse, "This student, Zhao Kangning, also presents a verse on the plum: 'Spring's chill locks the courtyard, a few plum trees lament the east wind, clear buds yet to bloom, its hidden fragrance distant.'"

"Good!" This time, it was the stern-faced Cheng De who shouted approval first. Luo Min beside him couldn't help but chuckle. This stern man, who could hardly recognize a few characters, where would he understand the underlying meaning?

The talented scholar from the capital, Wu Xue'an, was already prepared and was the third to stand. "This student, Wu Xue'an from the capital, presents a verse on the plum: 'Heaven frowned at the snow's pallor, casually embroidered a plum blossom. When winter arrives next year, it will bloom again in the same place.'"

The first three people were indeed well-known for their talent. Their verses on snow and plum were expertly composed, not quite masterpieces, but certainly excellent lines. The rest, having witnessed their performances, felt somewhat ashamed. Of the remaining six, only three followed the previous scholars with their verses on the plum, but their efforts paled in comparison. The remaining three could not produce any lines, and needless to say, they were eliminated.

Lin Wanrong sat respectfully at the end of the table, his head heavy from the wine. He was now a little drowsy, yawning continuously on this stage. Everyone watched, stifling their laughter. If this scholar didn't have a world-shocking talent, then he certainly had a world-shocking ailment.

Young Master Guo and Dong Qingshan, among others, watched with increasing anxiety. This was an elimination round! Regardless of whether he could craft a timeless masterpiece, at the very least, he should be able to recite a poem about a plum blossom!

The other nine had finished their turn, and lastly, it was Lin Wanrong's turn. He glanced over at the seat next to Guo Wuchang, but it was still empty. He sighed silently in his heart and rose to his feet.

"Sister, sister--" Luo Yuan ran into Luo Ning's room panting, announcing loudly, "Good news, good news--"

Luo Ning was gazing at her reflection in the mirror, sighing quietly. She seemed not to hear his words. Instead, it was Qiaoqiao who asked, "Luo Yuan, what's the good news--"

"Big brother Lin, he--"

"What happened to Brother Lin--" Luo Ning's hand mirror crashed to the ground at his words. The two women exclaimed in unison, "What happened to Big brother?"

"Big brother participated in the Poetry Contest and made it into the top ten!" Luo Yuan announced loudly.

"Big brother--" The two women gasped simultaneously, tears falling down their cheeks. Supporting each other, they hurried outside.

They were just outside the room, still behind the curtain, when they heard Lin Wanrong's voice saying, "As for composing a poem that involves the word 'plum,' I am incapable--"

"Big brother--" Upon hearing these words, Luo Ning stiffened and fell backward, fainting on the spot.

Chapter 260 The Four Rounds of Poetry Contest (Part 2)

"Sister Ning, what's wrong with you?" Qiaoqiao was startled and quickly held her, gently kneading her Renzhong acupoint.

Luo Ning took a deep breath, slowly opened her eyes, and said weakly, "Qiaoqiao, big brother did big brother lose?"

Before Qiaoqiao could shake her head, they already heard heckling from outside, "If you can't compose a poem, then step down quickly, don't impede others' competition."

Zhao Kangning and Wu Xue'an saw that Lin San showed signs of weakness in the first round, and their faces immediately displayed a trace of disdain. Only Hou Yuebai was puzzled; the Lin San he knew wasn't someone who admitted defeat easily. Or rather, he had never lost before.

Lin Wanrong glanced at the hecklers, smiled, and said, "I cannot compose a poem with the word 'plum', but that doesn't mean I can't write about plums."

He drained the wine in his cup, paced a few steps, and, with a slightly drunken tone, recited, "Thousands of ridges and mountains carry my white hair, heaven blesses me with rouge lightly applied to my cheeks. Asking from afar where spring lies in orchid and bamboo, from the jade bone and icy skin comes a hidden fragrance."

"Bravo" This time it was Luo Yuan, Qingshan, Guo Wuchang who led the cheers. The hall was filled with connoisseurs, and immediate applause erupted.

The educational commissioner nodded in approval and said, "From distant to close, good use of metaphor. The whole sentence has neither snow nor plum, but it praises the plum in the snow. There is indeed some cleverness. This poem about plum should be considered the best."

The faces of Zhao Kangning and Wu Xue'an were unpleasant. They hadn't expected Lin San to take the lead in the first round. They dared not underestimate him again. Remembering his reputation for couplets, Zhao Kangning berated himself for his stupidity. How could a person good at couplets not be skilled in poetry? Only Hou Yuebai, who was accustomed to Lin San's exceptional abilities, was not greatly surprised.

Hiding behind the curtain, Luo Ning lightly patted her chest and complained, "Big brother scares people to death, I will ignore him"

Qiaoqiao giggled and whispered, "Ignore him? I wonder who will be the quickest to see him afterward?"

Blushing, Luo Ning retorted, "He is your husband, of course you speak for him. On the wedding night, I didn't see you laughing at others."

The two women giggled together. Qiaoqiao said, "Sister Ning, big brother despises this type of poem. It was not easy for him to write this today, and especially to take first place in the first round, but it was all for you. Now you can rest assured, no need to faint again."

"Annoying." Luo Ning's cheeks turned pink as she whispered, "Qiaoqiao, don't misunderstand. Big brother and I didnt, didnt, didnt" She became too embarrassed to continue. Denying it further would convince no one, not even a fool.

Qiaoqiao laughed, "Sister Ning, if you have these feelings, you should have told me earlier. It would have saved a lot of trouble and spared you some hardship. Don't you know big brother? If you show him a bit of kindness, he will repay you a hundredfold."

Luo Ning gave a small nod, too embarrassed to speak. Qiaoqiao sighed lightly, her heart filled with a touch of sadness.

The first round of the 'top ten to six' competition was completed. Lin Wanrong took first place. Zhao Kangning, Wu Xue'an, and Hou Yuebai, along with the other two talents, all made it into the top six.

Everyone was taken aback as the most underestimated young man had unexpectedly become a dark horse, naturally, this caused a wave of surprise, and people began to inquire about his identity. When they learned that this man was Lin San, the servant from Xiao mansion who had bested the king of couplets at the Luo family banquet, they were astounded. This servant truly had talent, managing to break into the top six of the Jinling poetry competition as a mere servant, how could that not amaze people?

The second round was a competition to narrow the field from six to four. The two talents seated next to Lin Wanrong had just scraped through the first round. After witnessing the performances of others, they became disheartened, acknowledging that their knowledge was indeed inferior to the four ahead.

Seeing their despondency, Lin Wanrong understood their feelings and chuckled, "Gentlemen, don't be disheartened. Poetry, after all, is meant to be playful. If you take it too seriously, you will lose the joy of it."

Upon seeing his unconcerned demeanor despite his seeming intoxication, and his friendly attitude toward others, the two men genuinely admired him. They raised their glasses in respect, drank the wine before them in one go, and found their spirits uplifted.

The educational commissioner announced loudly, "Only four talents can advance in this second round. I invite Commander-in-Chief Cheng De of Jiangsu to set the topic!"

Cheng De, a man with a dark complexion, stood up and announced loudly, "I, Cheng De, am a simple military man and not proficient in poetry. I find it challenging to propose a topic today. Seeing the fine wine and food on this boat, why don't we take 'wine' as the topic?"

The assembled talents understood that this topic given by Commander-in-Chief Cheng was broad, leaving ample room for creativity. Whether a poem would be good or not would depend on the intended mood.

For this round, young master Zhao Kangning was the first to stand up and say, "My name is Zhao Kangning, here is my poem about wine: 'Inebriated but not sleepy, petals stain my green robe. Waking up to see the creek's moon, birds have flown, and people are scarce.'" Zhao Kangning's

wine poem had some flavor, describing the beauty of drinking by a flowered creek at night. It was quite decent.

Hou Yuebai also stood up and said, "I also have a poem about drinking wine: 'Desiring to pick pear blossoms to make new wine, the smoke and waves of Qinhuai never cease in the rain. Applying makeup in front of the mirror as the wind rises, half of the face is hidden, and it signifies parting sorrow.'" This poem was a love lament, with an unconventional conception, even stronger than Zhao Kangning's by a few notches.

Wu Xue'an smiled slightly and recited loudly, "The flying rain hits the chessboard near dusk, the light clothing and delicate dance become common dust. Let's drink while the jade flute is playing, sit in seclusion under the moonlight that shines on the soul."

The educational commissioner and Luo Min nodded in agreement, judging by momentum and conception, among the first three people, Wu Xue'an was the best.

Everyone's gaze then naturally fell on Lin Wanrong, this servant held many surprises, and nobody knew what he would come up with. Lin Wanrong stood up and smiled, "Could someone please pass me some paper"

A young servant was already eager to hand him paper and a writing brush. However, Lin Wanrong casually put the writing brush and inkstone aside, pulled out a pencil, and swiftly wrote a few words: "During the Qingming festival as the rain pours down heavily, travelers on the road feel their spirits breaking, asking where there might be a tavern, a shepherd boy silently points towards Apricot Flower Village."

When the servant hung up the scroll, everyone curiously looked at it, some even quietly reading it out loud.

Luo Ning pulled back the curtain, sneaking a peek at the scroll. She frowned, contemplating for a long time, then suddenly clapped her hands joyfully and exclaimed, "I get it! My big brother has won again."

Qiaoqiao asked with a puzzled look, "Big brother won? I didn't see how."

Luo Ning whispered a few words into her ear, and after a closer look, Qiaoqiao saw it too. She was overjoyed and said, "Big brother loves to play these odd tricks, always keeping us guessing."

Lin Wanrong looked around, his gaze falling on Wu Xue'an. He said with a smile, "Young Master Wu, you're a scholar from the capital, could you do me a favor and recite this poem for me?"

Wu Xue'an scornfully replied, "That's hardly a challenge.

Rain during Qingming, it falls,

On the road, in profusion, it calls.

Soul-breaking is the human's hall!

Where, pray tell, is a tavern tall?

Where can a shepherd boy be found?

Towards Apricot Flower Village, he's bound!

Your poem, though it has some flavor, still doesn't surpass mine."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Those who can't appreciate poetry naturally find this poem ordinary."

He pulled out a pencil and marked punctuations in the middle of the poem, then turned to Young Master Guo with a smile, "Young Master Guo, could you please read it now?"

Seeing Lin San marking punctuations and then calling out his name, Guo Wuchang immediately stood up, full of pride, and read out,

During Qingming festival, rain pours down,

On the road, travelers' spirits drown.

Where might there be a tavern found,

A shepherd boy points, no sound, to Apricot Flower's ground.

Everyone in the hall was stunned for a moment, then erupted in applause. The poem turned out to be a suspended verse. The different punctuations made two completely different poems. The more amazing thing was that both versions were extremely rhythmic, far from ordinary. This way, Wu Xue'an was outdone.

Having suffered such an embarrassment, Wu Xue'an's face turned red as a pig liver. After a while, he said, "Resorting to such tricks is not what a scholar should do."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "I wish to compete in a hundred poems, sleeping in a pub in Jinling City. The Emperor calls me but I don't board the ship, for I call myself a wine fairy! What's the difficulty in reciting a hundred poems about drinking wine? It's just that I disdain to win over you with such means." Only Lin Wanrong himself understood this statement, while others did not.

Everyone heard him casually reciting good sentences, who could deny his talent? Young Master Guo and others were already clapping so hard the tables echoed with noise. Lin San was truly a blessing to the Xiao family. In this round of the competition, Lin Wanrong was undoubtedly the winner.

Luo Ning's little face turned bright red in excitement, her eyebrows forming a flower-like smile. Qiaoqiao mimicked her tone, "Big brother and I really have no, no, no relationship"

"You naughty girl, making fun of me like this," Luo Ning gently patted Qiaoqiao, her eyes full of charm.

Qiaoqiao sighed softly, "Sister Ning, don't get it wrong. Big brother is my husband. If you want to enter my house, you must first pass this little sister's test."

Luo Ning's face turned as red as her neck, she whispered, "Who wants to enter your dear sister, I forgot about the good things you and Big brother did in my boudoir. Please spare me, alright?"

The third round, the four to two, was the crucial stage. Judging by the previous two rounds, Lin Wanrong had outshone everyone and had already evolved from the dark horse to the hot favorite. Aside from Lin Wanrong, the remaining competitors were the three scholars.

The official said, "The third round of the poetry competition begins. This round, please Governor Luo Min propose the topic."

Governor Luo Min slowly rose, patting his large belly as he spoke, "Today's poetry competition has showcased the brilliance of so many heroes and talents, truly a splendid display. As the Governor of Jiangsu and head of the province, I am deeply gratified to see such a multitude of talent emerge from this competition. Coincidentally, my daughter Luo Ning has just turned twenty and has a fondness for poetry. I also wish to use the occasion of this poetry competition to find her a good family, fulfilling my long-held wish."

Upon hearing Luo Min mention the legendary matchmaking event for Miss Luo, everyone immediately became excited. This was the main highlight of the poetry competition, a tale of a scholar and a beauty was about to be born. Although most scholars could only watch the spectacle, to witness such an event was a fortune in itself.

Luo Min continued, "There are two criteria for my daughter's future husband. First, he must be extraordinarily talented, and second, my daughter must approve of him. She will personally set and assess a test, only then will he be considered eligible. As for my daughter's virtues and looks, I need not say more, the citizens of Jinling City can testify."

"Hey, Governor Luo, can you please set the test quickly? I'm getting hungry," Lin Wanrong interrupted Luo Min's lengthy speech with a laugh, eliciting laughter from the crowd.

"Big brother is always so naughty..." Luo Ning, watching Lin Wanrong from behind the curtain, said, her cheeks reddening.

Luo Min said, "Very well, I will not waste everyone's precious time, here is the test. This is a chain poem and palindrome poem called 'Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter.' Each line should sing of a season. I will recite the first line.

Orioles cry, riverside willows play in spring's sunny day, moonlit night is bright.

Upon hearing this line, all the scholars' expressions changed. Not only was it a palindrome poem about spring, but it also contained a seven-character verse. If you read it separately and add a palindrome, it became,

Orioles cry, riverside willows play in spring's sunny day;

willows play in spring's sunny day, moonlit night is bright;

bright moonlit night, sunny spring plays with willows;

sunny spring plays with willows, on the riverside, the oriole cries.

Lin Wanrong also secretly stuck out his tongue, This old Luo, writing a line of poetry, with so many tricks inside, damn, clearly he didn't want anyone to answer. But I won't let you have your way.

Following Luo Min's line, the next line should be about summer. But this poem was indeed difficult. Wu Xue'an and Zhao Kangning looked at each other, not daring to answer. This Luo Min, truly deserving of a top scholar's talent.

Governor Luo glanced around and chuckled, "Gentlemen, can anyone continue?" Seeing no one answering, he asked again, his smile deepening.

Backstage, Qiaoqiao anxiously said, "Why did Governor Luo set such a difficult question? Doesn't he want to find a husband for Sister Ning?"

Luo Ning also stomped her foot and said, "What is Father doing? It's clear that I don't want to get married. He forcibly brought me here. Now that Big brother has made it to the final four, he is making it difficult for him with such questions. It's infuriating!"

Qiaoqiao stuck out her adorable little tongue and laughed inwardly, 'Governor Luo is not just making it difficult for Big brother. Why don't you say that?'

Luo Ning sighed softly, "Qiaoqiao, the matter is not as simple as you think. After my grandmother's birthday celebration, Young Prince Ning, surprisingly, sent someone to propose marriage"

"Propose marriage?" Qiaoqiao exclaimed. "Did you accept, sister?"@@novelbin@@

Luo Ning gave her a bitter smile. "Silly girl, if I had agreed, would we be holding this matchmaking event?"

Qiaoqiao nodded. "I see. So, you're using this poetry contest to reject the young prince."

Luo Ning softly replied, "That's part of it. There are more complexities in the background, those are for my father to deal with, not something we women should concern ourselves with. After my father announced the matchmaking event, I was kept in the dark. In my opinion, I would never be willing to be part of such an uninteresting affair. But father had his considerations, and in the end, he promised me that the selected groom would be the one I chose."

"I understand. That's why you insisted that big brother must attend this poetry contest. Whether he's talented or not, whether you like him or not, it's all up to you." Qiaoqiao said, realization dawning on her.

Blushing, Luo Ning nodded but dared not say more.

"Is there any gentleman who can complete this verse?" Luo Min asked again with a smile.

The crowd exchanged glances. They had been looking forward to a fierce competition in the second round of the four, but they didn't expect that the governor's question would stump all the talents. Not only Young Prince Ning and Wu Xue'an were left speechless, but even the dark horse Lin San fell silent. If it went on like this, wouldn't it be impossible for anyone to advance?

"Big brother, hurry up" Luo Yuan and Qingshan were secretly anxious, urging continuously.

Seeing Luo Min's self-satisfied expression, Lin Wanrong couldn't help but smile. Seeing the hall so silent, he stood up and said with a smile, "Governor Luo, I would like to recite a poem."

The crowd was in an uproar when they saw someone stand up, especially because it was Lin San, who had been advancing through all the rounds. But when they heard he was going to recite a poem, some felt disappointed. This was a game of chain verse, why was he reciting a poem? If he couldn't continue Governor Luo's poem, the contest would be unnecessary.

Wu Xue'an, who had been embarrassed in the last round, held a grudge against Lin San. Hearing his words, he couldn't help but sneer, "This is a chain verse, what's the use of your poem?"

Lin Wanrong laughed loudly, "Whether it's useful or not, you'll know after you hear it."

Luo Min glanced at Lin Wanrong and laughed, "Mr. Lin, what good poem has inspired you? Please recite it for us to hear."

Lin Wanrong nodded and recited aloud,

Fragrant lotus stirs the emerald waters in the cool breeze,

Waters stir in the cool breeze as the sun and moon endure;

Enduring sun and cool moon stir the breeze across the waters,

Cool breeze stirs the water, carrying the fragrance of the emerald lotus.

The crowd hadn't yet understood, but Wu Xue'an's face had turned pale. Zhao Kangning and Hou Yuebai immediately understood, their faces filled with disbelief.

Luo Ning silently repeated the verse twice, then suddenly exclaimed, "Big brother Lin has won."

"Shush" Qiaoqiao raised her slender index finger, signaling her sister Ning to listen in secret and not let anyone know. She was already used to her big brother's extraordinary abilities, so she didn't ask any more questions. Instead, she giggled and said, "Sister Ning, you can rest assured now. I told you, big brother never disappoints."

Luo Min clapped his hands and laughed, "Good, good, young master Lin indeed possesses extraordinary learning. You're the only one who passed this round."

Apart from a few individuals, most of the attendees didn't understand the knack of it. A young man from the audience stood up and asked, "Governor Luo, why did Lin San win this round? I don't quite understand."

Luo Min smiled and said, "Well, let me explain it to you all. The first line I posed was about spring, so the second line should be about summer. The lines recited by Young Master Lin are the reverse of the original poem. His verse about summer is

Fragrant lotus stirs the cool breeze over the emerald water as the sun and moon endure."

Upon further reflection, the crowd understood. Suddenly, applause broke out like a tidal wave and continued for quite some time. The difficulty of the challenge posed by Luo Min was clear, and this servant Lin San's abilities were indeed impressive.

Lin Wanrong stood up, made a polite salute to the crowd, and laughed, "A fluke, a fluke."

The poem about the four seasons was supposed to be in four lines, and now there were only verses for spring and summer, with none for autumn and winter. It was indeed a pity that the other three couldn't continue. Lin Wanrong saw Luo Min's gaze wandering, frequently drifting towards him. Could this old man be hoping for him to complete verses for autumn and winter? Please, don't toy with me, he thought anxiously. Out loud, he hastily asked, "Governor Luo, who won this round?"

Given that he was the only one who answered the chain verse poem, the outcome was obvious. What was initially a four-to-two playoff turned into a one-to-win scenario, hence prematurely ending the contest. Naturally, there were those who were discontented with Lin San claiming the laurels.

Just as Luo Min was about to reply, Cheng De rose and said, "Hold on, Governor Luo, gentlemen, we agreed on four rounds of competition. How can it end after just three rounds? In my humble opinion, for the sake of fairness, we should have another round. It would also provide us with a chance to feast our eyes on the talent of these young scholars, don't you agree?"

Everyone present didn't want such an exciting poetry competition to end prematurely. They readily agreed, causing Luo Ning backstage to stomp her foot in frustration, "These people, how can they go back on their words?"

Luo Min looked at Lin Wanrong as if seeking his opinion. Lin Wanrong thought resentfully, This old man, does he not care about his daughter's happiness? Why is he hypocritically asking me?

Zhao Kangning sent a signal to Wu Xuean, the scholar from the capital. Wu Xuean then stood up and said, "Thank you, Commander Cheng and Governor Luo, for giving us scholars another opportunity. On behalf of Young Prince Ning and Brother Hou, I would like to challenge Mr. Lin."

Just as Hou Yuebai was about to speak, Zhao Kangning shot him a stern glance. Fearing Young Prince Ning's power, Young Master Hou dared not speak and was naturally represented.

Lin Wanrong chuckled and said, "Young Master Wu, this poetry competition is fair in itself. In this final round, you all yielded, allowing me to win. Young Master Wu, you have already lost your chance, how can you challenge me?"

With their defeat witnessed by the crowd, Wu Xuean was left speechless by Lin Wanrong's words. The onlookers became restless, shouting, "Another round, another round"

Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "However, since everyone is so enthusiastic and Brother Wu is so sincere, it would be against my nature to refuse. But rules are rules, they cannot be broken. How about this? I propose a compromise. Brother Wu, pour me a cup of tea, hand it to me personally, call me Teacher Lin, and then we can have another round."

This proposal was to force Wu Xuean to concede and honor Lin Wanrong as his teacher. Even if Wu Xuean managed to turn the tables in the final round, he would still not truly win, having already paid respect to Lin Wanrong. Scholars held themselves in high esteem, and right now, in front of an audience, it was a battle of poetry. How could Wu Xuean lower his head? He snorted but said nothing.

The audience below wasn't pleased. Luo Yuan started chanting, "Pour the tea, pour the tea"

The atmosphere below the stage was heated. Luo Min stroked his beard, smiling, while Cheng De kept his face dark and silent. Zhao Kangning was constantly giving Wu Xuean eye signals. Finally, Wu Xuean, feeling helpless, gritted his teeth, stood up, poured the tea, and handed it to Lin Wanrong, saying, "Teacher Lin, please have tea."

Lin Wanrong sat carelessly in his chair, didn't stand up, took the tea cup, and nodded like an old scholar, saying, "A promising youth indeed."

The master of the ceremony loudly announced, "This is the final round. The two scholars can choose their own topics."

Wu Xuean gritted his teeth in frustration, waved his hand, and said, "No need for that. I will write one poem with the time to finish a cup of tea as the limit. Mr. Lin, please respond with a poem of your own. If you answer correctly, I will admit defeat."

Everyone knew the most critical moment had come. It seemed that this scholar from the capital was completely infuriated, and the drama was about to unfold. Everyone held their breath, waiting for him to set the topic.

Wu Xuean took a few steps in the hall, thinking of the humiliation he had experienced that day, and his heart was filled with indignation. He recited loudly,

"Even with wood, it's a game of chess; without wood, it's still part of it.

Remove the wood from the chess, add a lack, it becomes deceit.

Dragons swim and prawns play in the murky waters,

A tiger in the open field is bullied by dogs."

This was a true portrayal of his mood today. He was a famous scholar in the capital, invited to participate in this poetry competition in Jinling. He thought he would be greatly glorified, but first he misread a poem, and then he publicly acknowledged Lin San as his teacher. For a proud and arrogant scholar like him, with a reputation outside, it was unbearable.

As soon as Wu Xuean's voice fell, someone in the hall began to applaud. His poem was implicitly insulting but also showed great wit. He was indeed a scholar from the capital, truly knowledgeable. Lin Wanrong glanced at the hall, seeing those who applauded were surreptitiously eyeing Zhao Kangning. Clearly, they were the Young Prince's spies. Damn, you want to play this game with me? When I was playing this game, you were still playing in the mud and urine, Lin Wanrong sneered.

Boosted by the audience's encouragement, Wu Xuean felt the "humiliation" he had previously suffered had lessened. He mustered up the courage and loudly said, "Mr. Lin, the time to finish a cup of tea is almost up. Can you come up with a response?"

Lin Wanrong laughed and said, "This is merely a poetry contest, purely for entertainment. Brother Wu, you need not take it too seriously. I will not respond to this poem."

Overjoyed, Wu Xuean asked, "How so? Could it be that you, Brother Lin, are admitting defeat? This is indeed a rare sight!"

"Admit defeat?" Lin Wanrong snorted coldly. "Brother Wu, I must tell you, the word 'defeat' does not exist in my dictionary. I'm afraid that if I were to respond to your poem, it would cause you too much embarrassment."

Zhao Kangning stood up and said, "Lin San, stop spouting nonsense and recite your poem. If you can't respond, just step aside."

Lin Wanrong's eyes widened in anger, and he shouted, "Lin San is a name you can call? Young prince, have you forgotten the promise you made?"

Zhao Kangning's face turned red with anger, and he gritted his teeth, "Then please, Teacher Lin, recite your poem."

Many in the hall knew the story behind their exchange, but the majority were confused. However, seeing that even the young prince did not dare to retort after being reprimanded by Lin San, they were utterly surprised.

Lin Wanrong laughed. "Since Brother Wu and the Young Prince insist, I will give it a try. Brother Wu's poem was indeed interesting, with dragons and tigers, shrimps, and dogs, truly mighty. It seems as if scholars from the capital like you are dragons and tigers, and us scholars from the south are mere shrimps and dogs in your eyes. This severely underestimates us, the scholars of the south."

Wu Xuean's poem was meant to mock only Lin Wanrong, but Lin Wanrong had cleverly expanded it to insult all the Southern scholars. Many in the hall were Southern scholars. Now, Lin San had become their representative, and Wu Xuean's insult had backfired terribly.

Wu Xuean hadn't considered any of this when he recited his poem. He hadn't expected Lin San to be so cunning as to rally the Southern scholars to his side. Wu Xuean wiped the cold sweat off his forehead and dared not speak again.

Lin Wanrong chuckled. "Since Young Master Wu looks down on us Southern scholars so much, I will not be polite. Today we are here on the Qinhuai River, so I will use flowing water as the theme:

With water, it's a brook; without water, what is it?

Remove water from the brook, add a bird, and it becomes a chicken.

A satisfied cat is mightier than a tiger,

A plucked phoenix - not as good as a chicken."

"Bravo, bravo" Thunderous applause filled the hall, echoing across the Qinhuai River. It was a genuine expression of admiration. In this final round, Lin Wanrong showed great composure and not only stood up to Wu Xuean, the scholar from the capital, but also gave him a taste of his own medicine, which was brilliantly done.

Wu Xuean turned pale, and Zhao Kangning's face was ashen. They were both speechless.

Lin Wanrong wiped the cold sweat off his forehead. Damn, composing these damn poems was more exhausting than fighting a battle. For this girl Luo Ning, this scholar had truly put in a lot of effort.

Luo Min clapped his hands and laughed. "Excellent, excellent! The poetry contest has successfully concluded in four rounds. Young Master Lin's talent is extraordinary, and it is well-deserved that he stands at the top."

Lin Wanrong was calm inside. Besides winning, which was unexpected, everything else was within his expectations, with nothing to be surprised about.

Guo Wuchang was cheering for Lin San, but a servant from the Xiao family rushed over, whispered something in the young master's ear, and Guo Wuchang dropped his tea cup in shock.

"Governor Luo, may we ask for Miss Luo's opinion of our Young Master Lin?" someone in the hall shouted, causing a wave of laughter. The hall was filled with uproarious noise. This was the highlight of the poetry competition. How could it be overlooked?

"Well" Luo Min stroked his beard and smiled. "The matter of choosing a suitor ultimately lies with my daughter. Servant, please invite the young lady"

Before Luo Min had even finished speaking, a young maid walked out from behind the curtain, holding a hibiscus tent and an embroidered handkerchief adorned with mandarin ducks. She approached Lin Wanrong, bowed gracefully, and said with a smile, "Young Master Lin, these two items are gifts from my young miss. She also asks if you could compose a poem using them."

What did this mean? Lin Wanrong looked at the hibiscus tent and the mandarin duck handkerchief as if seeing the blushing face of Luo Ning peeking at him from behind the curtain. He grinned roguishly, his heart pounding with excitement. This girl was interesting. Even a fool could see her affection. Clearly, she was expressing her feelings for him, yet she still wanted him to express his feelings for her. Ah, women, their skins were much thinner than his.

At this moment, Lin Wanrong was feeling inspired, and composing a few lines was not an issue. He swiftly grabbed a brush and began to write. But before he could finish, he saw Young Master Guo Wuchang, his face filled with urgency, rushing towards him. Guo Wuchang whispered something in his ear.

"What?" Lin Wanrong dropped the brush in surprise and headed towards the cabin door as swiftly as a bird in flight.