

Finest 186

Chapter 186 The Proposal

The seven characters Lin Wanrong penned were, "Fog Dances Over The Horse Stable, Veiling My Abode". The phrase was already extraordinarily difficult to correspond with, but what made it even more challenging was that it was a homonym to the second phrase created by the professor, yet its artistic conception was a notch higher.

Luo Ning exclaimed in admiration, "Brother Lin, no one under heaven could surpass you with just this phrase alone." Qiaoqiao nestled closely against Lin Wanrong, clutching his arm with her small hand, her eyes shimmering with happiness.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "Miss Luo, please convey this phrase to your teacher. I do not desire to be exalted high in the tower. All I ask is that she refrains from speculating about others' thoughts at will."

Luo Ning nodded, "Brother Lin, your uniqueness never ceases to amaze me. I promise to deliver your message."

After exchanging some pleasantries, Luo Ning and Qiaoqiao both expressed surprise at his exploits in Hangzhou. Lin Wanrong recounted his journey and the trials he'd faced, particularly his confrontation with Tao Dongcheng at the Sunshine and Rain Restaurant. The tale had already made its rounds in the Jinling business community, but hearing it directly from him made it all the more thrilling.

The logic of washing hands with boiling oil left Luo Ning in awe, "Everything follows the laws of physics, which isn't wrong. However, knowing and mastering those laws is no easy task. Brother Lin, you indeed have a wealth of experience and knowledge. Tao Dongcheng, crafty and cunning as he is, was ignorant of these laws and thus, it's only natural that he suffered. By the way, Brother Lin, does the diamond brought by the Westerner truly hold such great allure?"

With a faint smile, Lin Wanrong retrieved the agate diamond given by Tavernier from his chest. Both Qiaoqiao and Luo Ning gasped in surprise, even Qingshan and old Dong, who were resting with their eyes closed, were left staring in disbelief.

The diamond was transparent and brilliant, radiating a splendid array of colors under the light. It was an absolute weapon against women. Even a disinterested lady like Qiaoqiao couldn't resist its charm. Luo Ning, despite being the most talented woman in Jinling, was also visibly excited, her eyes filled with affection for the gem.

"Big brother, where did you get this stone? I want to mine some too," Dong Qingshan drooled over the gem.

"You could try mining in South Africa," Lin Wanrong mopped his forehead in exasperation. He hadn't expected the diamond to have such an immense appeal, even to Qingshan. Revealing the diamond so early was a bit of a mistake. He only had this one diamond, but he was betrothed to three or four women. The allure of diamonds to women was undeniable. What would he do if Qingshan, Second Miss, and Qiaoqiao all wanted a diamond? Would they start a fight over it?

"Big brother, is this a diamond? It really is stunningly beautiful," Qiaoqiao said in a daze.

Lin Wanrong nodded, "Indeed. This gem is known as the Agate Diamond. It's extremely rare, even in the West. I only have this one piece."@@novelbin@@

Luo Ning sighed, "It truly is incomparably transparent and regal. As Brother Lin said, a diamond is forever, one gem is passed down eternally. There couldn't be a more fitting statement."

Seeing Qiaoqiao's love for the diamond, Lin Wanrong handed it over, "My darling, this diamond, I'll give it to you."

Qiaoqiao was stunned for a moment, forgetting even to chide him for flirting with her in public. She asked in a mix of surprise and joy, "Big brother, what did you just say? Are you really giving this to me?"

Luo Ning, who had heard everything, looked at the sparkling diamond with a hint of envy in her eyes.

Lin Wanrong nodded, smiling gently, "Yes, it's for you." Qiaoqiao was the first girl he fell in love with in this world, and she was so endearingly innocent and devoted. It was only fitting that the diamond was gifted to her.

A deep wave of joy flickered in Qiaoqiao's eyes as she snuggled against him, whispering softly, "Big brother, you're so kind."

She held the diamond in her hands, gently caressing it. A fleeting reluctance flickered in her eyes before she handed the diamond back to Lin Wanrong, saying firmly, "Big brother, I can't accept this diamond."

Surprised, Lin Wanrong asked, "Why?"

Blushing, Qiaoqiao looked at him and said, "Big brother, you said yourself there's only one diamond. I can't be so selfish. The diamond should be given to Sister Qingxuan. She's of noble birth, and this diamond suits her perfectly."

Touched, Lin Wanrong wondered where he could find another girl as adorable and considerate as Qiaoqiao. She was already looking out for her sisters, even before they were married. She was truly a gem.

Seeing Qiaoqiao's refusal, Luo Ning felt curious and asked, "Qiaoqiao, who is this Sister Qingxuan you mentioned?"

With a shy glance at Lin Wanrong, Qiaoqiao whispered, "She is big brother's intimate friend."

Luo Ning gave Lin Wanrong a look, murmured an acknowledgment, and then fell silent.

Lin Wanrong tightened his grip on Qiaoqiao's small hand, whispering in her ear, "My sweet girl, you don't need to worry. When the next batch of diamonds arrives, I'll save one each for Sister Qingxuan and Sister Yushuang. I promise they won't be any less beautiful than this one. This one is meant for you, and it carries a special meaning. You must accept it."

Tavernier had already left for Hainan with some Great Hua artisans, arranged by Xu Wei, to repair his ironclad ship. Lin Wanrong had already made arrangements with Tavernier to use Hainan as a port for exchanging silk, fabrics, perfumes, and soaps for diamonds. The remaining diamonds with Tavernier were small and nowhere near as good as this one. To find another diamond comparable to this agate diamond, they had to wait for Tavernier's next visit.

Finally, Qiaoqiao gave him a look and hummed softly in acknowledgment, her face blushing as she clutched the diamond tightly in her hand.

Lin Wanrong turned his head and addressed Dong Rende, "Uncle Dong, I have a favor to ask, I wonder if you could oblige?"

Dong Rende chuckled, "Wanrong, just speak your mind, why the formalities?" Ever since the rumors of an intimate relationship between Qiaoqiao and Lin Wanrong surfaced, he had dropped the formal address and had started to refer to him simply as "Wanrong".

Lin Wanrong then declared loudly, "I wish to ask for Qiaoqiao's hand in marriage, Uncle Dong. Please betroth her to me, with this diamond as the betrothal gift."

Qiaoqiao let out a small gasp, her face flushed like a red flame. She quickly lowered her head in embarrassment, not daring to look at him. Holding the diamond tightly in her hand, she nestled quietly against Lin Wanrong.

Their daughter had already run away with this man, what more could Old Dong say? Thereupon, he nodded with a smile, "This should have happened long ago. Now that Qiaoqiao has accepted the betrothal gift, is there any need for me to say anything more?"

Laughter filled the room. Qiaoqiao was already engulfed by a great wave of surprise and sweetness. Hearing everyone's laughter, she ran off like a startled rabbit, darting towards her room upstairs.

As Lin Wanrong watched Qiaoqiao's charming retreat, joy welled up in his heart. Turning to Old Dong, he said, "Uncle, after the New Year, I have to go to the capital. Consider today as the formal betrothal. When I return from the capital next year, I will marry Qiaoqiao."

A slight noise echoed from upstairs, as if something had fallen. Lin Wanrong hurried up the stairs, only to find Qiaoqiao clumsily cleaning up a broken tea cup.

Seeing him, Qiaoqiao could no longer contain her emotions. With a sob, she threw herself into his arms, murmuring, "Big brother, are you leaving?"

Lin Wanrong knew she must have overheard him downstairs, and her surprise had led to the broken teacup. Feeling both guilt and concern, he held her softly, whispering, "Silly girl, I'm not leaving until after the New Year. Why are you worrying so much?"

A sob caught in Qiaoqiao's throat, tears streaming down her face as she said, "Big brother, I'm afraid"

"Afraid of what?" Lin Wanrong asked, surprised.

"Afraid you won't want me anymore when you come back from the capital" Qiaoqiao choked, her face wet with tears.

"You silly girl, always overthinking things," Lin Wanrong kissed her forehead, whispering, "You're my little treasure, gentle and obedient. I barely have enough time to cherish you. How could I not want you?"

Qiaoqiao lifted her head to look at him, saying, "There are plenty of beautiful ladies in the capital, and you're so talented. I fear you won't want to come back."

"Silly girl, why would you worry about that? I've already asked your father for your hand today. You're already my wife. When I return from the capital, we'll get married." Wiping the tears off her face, Lin Wanrong smiled, "I'm going to the capital to find Qingxuan. Once I find her, I'll bring her back and marry both of you."

Qiaoqiao's face turned a shade redder. Nestling against him, she whispered, "Big brother, whether you come back or not, Qiaoqiao will always belong to you. In life and in death, I'm always yours, always waiting."

Touched and exasperated, Lin Wanrong gave her a light pat on the bottom, "You silly girl, stop spouting nonsense. What's all this about life and death? Do you think I'm that heartless? I might have a broad love, but my principle has always been to honor the old while welcoming the new. I'll never let you down."

Blushing, Qiaoqiao buried her head in his chest, whispering, "Big brother, I was wrong. You're always the best to Qiaoqiao. I'll always belong to you."

Even though Qiaoqiao was clever, her humble background made her feel inferior when compared to Second Miss Xiao and Xiao Qingxuan. Her deep love for Lin Wanrong had amplified her fears, making her worry he might not return.

Hearing Qiaoqiao's words, Lin Wanrong's heart surged with emotion. Gently lifting her chin, he leaned down and captured her rosy lips in a kiss. Qiaoqiao responded shyly, her heart pounding as they embraced tightly. Lin Wanrong slid his hand under her clothes, slowly tracing down her waist, continuing until he held her soft and round bottom, smooth and warm as jade. A slight tremor passed through Qiaoqiao's body, but she allowed him to continue without protest.

It was fortunate that it was only afternoon and Old Dong and Luo Ning were still outside. That was the only reason Lin Wanrong, reluctantly, had to stop his roving hands. After comforting Qiaoqiao, he felt a wave of relief. It was good that he had explained the situation to her beforehand; otherwise, if he had suddenly left for the capital, the poor girl might have been distressed enough to throw herself into the Qinhuai River.

When Lin Wanrong came out with Qiaoqiao, her face was still flushed red. Luo Ning looked at them with a smile, saying, "Congratulations, Brother Lin, and congratulations, Sister Qiaoqiao."

Shyly, Qiaoqiao replied, "Sister Ning, you're also teasing me."

With a charming smile, Luo Ning looked at Lin Wanrong, "Brother Lin, tomorrow is my grandmother's birthday. I hope you'll arrive early."

Chapter 187 The Birthday Celebration

Lin Wanrong paused at the mention of the birthday celebration, then quickly remembered. Both Luo Yuan and his sister had told him about it, and he'd promised to attend. But he'd been so busy these days with his business in Hangzhou and fighting against Tao Dongcheng that he had simply forgotten.

He smiled, saying, "Rest assured, Miss Luo. I will definitely go and wish the birthday elder well. I didn't see Luo Yuan today; is he busy with the preparations?"

Luo Ning nodded, "It's our grandmother's seventieth birthday. There's a lot to prepare, and my father has assigned many tasks to my younger brother. He can't get away. If it weren't for a letter from a friend of mine today, I'd probably still be busy at home."

Lin Wanrong laughed heartily, "Thanks to my presence, you have a legitimate excuse to be lazy. Shouldn't you be thanking me, Miss Luo?"

Luo Ning smiled gently, replying, "Brother Lin, you really have a way with words."

Noticing Luo Ning's radiant appearance - rosy cheeks, beautiful face, and sparkling eyes - Lin Wanrong's heart skipped a beat. He thought, 'This girl knows I'm not interested in her, yet she insists on smiling at me every time we meet. Is she trying to tease me? Damn it, my self-control is getting worse. Seeing a beautiful woman makes me lose my senses. How sinful.'

After parting ways with Luo Ning, Lin Wanrong considered the situation. He had a good relationship with the Luo siblings, and old man Luo was very decent. He decided to prepare a generous gift - a small diamond that he had traded with Tavoni. He was sure the elderly lady would give the diamond to her beloved granddaughter, thus indirectly fulfilling Luo Ning's wish to possess a diamond.

Early next morning, Lin Wanrong was still asleep when the Eldest Miss sent someone to find him.

When he arrived in the main hall, Young Master Guo and the Eldest Miss, both dressed in fresh new clothes, were already waiting for him. Seeing him still in his everyday outfit, the Eldest Miss frowned slightly and said, "Today is Governor Luo's mother's birthday, shouldn't you be in a new set of clothes?"

Suddenly remembering that the Young Master Guo and Eldest Miss had also been invited, Lin Wanrong slapped his forehead and laughed, "I'm just a humble servant. It doesn't matter what I wear. With the Eldest Miss here to represent our house and display our graceful image, it's more than enough. If I dressed up too handsomely and stole your limelight, I would be embarrassed."

"Stop it," the Eldest Miss said shyly but happily.

Young Master Guo, who had been saved by Lin Wanrong yesterday, clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Lin San, well done. I'm glad I didn't misjudge you."

The Eldest Miss glanced at Lin Wanrong, thinking to herself, 'His trick of playing dumb and cute could only fool my cousin.'

Young Master Guo and Lin Wanrong rode horses, while the Eldest Miss took a sedan. The three of them proceeded grandly towards the Governor's mansion.

Though Lin Wanrong had a good relationship with the Luo siblings and was acquainted with Luo Min, this was his first time visiting the Governor's mansion. Not far from the mansion, he saw a large gate painted red, with two majestic stone lions standing by its side. Above the gate hung a gold-inscribed plaque Luo Mansion of Jinling.

Still some distance from the mansion, the Eldest Miss alighted from her sedan, urging the two men to dismount. Lin Wanrong, puzzled, asked, "Miss, we're still a long way from the mansion. Why dismount so early?"

She gave him a look and said, "Can't you read? Can't you see for yourself?"@@novelbin@@

"See what?" Lin Wanrong was confused, and so was Young Master Guo.

The Eldest Miss sighed, "The plaque of Mr. Luo's mansion was bestowed by the Emperor himself. It is extremely prestigious. It is customary for scholars to leave their sedans and warriors to dismount when they pass this place. How could you not know this?"

Lin Wanrong let out a long, understanding 'oh.' 'Just because the Emperor inscribed the plaque, it even trumps traffic lights?' He looked around and indeed, those who came to celebrate the birthday all dismounted from their sedans or horses from afar and walked forward.

The governor's mother was celebrating a milestone birthday, a grand event indeed. Which officials in Jiangsu would dare to be negligent? They were all scrambling to present their generous gifts. As Lin Wanrong was talking with the Eldest Miss, several groups of officials passed by, each with their family members, carrying birthday gifts with great pomp.

The Eldest Miss whispered, "Lin San, you assaulted Young Master Hou. It was Mr. Luo who suppressed the matter. He has done our family a great favor, and we should not fail to repay it. The birthday gift cannot be light."

The Eldest Miss took out a box of longevity peaches, longevity noodles, and a large, sealed package from her sedan and handed them to Lin Wanrong, saying, "You should take care of these. Give them to the steward at the entrance later."

The package was quite heavy in his hand, yet compared to the large and small boxes carried by others, it seemed rather insignificant. Lin Wanrong didn't know what was inside. He laughed and followed the Eldest Miss and her cousin toward the entrance.

When they reached the gate, the Eldest Miss respectfully handed over her name card. The ceremonial officer accepted it with a bow and announced, "From the Xiao family of Jinling, one pair of birthday peaches, a load of longevity noodles, ten bottles of perfume, and a hundred bars of soap. Wishing the esteemed elder fortune as vast as the Eastern Sea, and longevity as enduring as the Southern Mountain."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback at the list of items, surprised that the large package contained all these things. Ten bottles of perfume and a hundred bars of soap, worth nearly two thousand taels of silver. All were priceless items in the market. Wow, Old Luo is making a fortune this time, he thought. Just by selling these gifts, he can easily make three thousand taels.

The Eldest Miss lightly tugged at Lin Wanrong, pulling him out of his astonishment. Fine, he thought, Old Luo may be a bit cunning, but he is a good official and has been kind to me. I'll let him profit from this.

The Eldest Miss asked softly, "Lin San, what's the matter?" Lin Wanrong gave her a thumbs-up, "Miss, you are truly sharp and generous. A true merchant at heart."

"Stop it!" The Eldest Miss blushed and huffed, then took the lead into the mansion.

Offering perfume and soap as birthday gifts was an idea unique to the Eldest Miss. Indeed, these gifts were carefully selected. Many offered jade and antiques, but the Xiao family's exclusive recipe for the perfume and soap, famous throughout Jiangsu, was priceless and unique. It served not only as a unique gift but also as a brilliant advertisement for the Xiao family. The Eldest Miss was indeed shrewd.

Upon their entrance, Luo Min, his face glowing, greeted them, "Miss Xiao, I apologize for my tardiness."

As a governor, Luo Min held an esteemed position, yet he had personally come out to welcome the Xiao family, a significant show of respect. The Eldest Miss was both flattered and surprised, "I am just a humble girl. I'm unworthy of such a grand welcome."

Luo Yuan, standing next to Luo Min, grinned at Lin Wanrong, "Big brother, you've arrived." He turned to Guo Wuchang, "Young Master Guo, it's been a while. Please, come inside."

As the three were escorted into the mansion, Lin Wanrong noticed the mansion's spaciousness, the courtyard was filled with tables and many local officials. They were surprised to see a merchant family being personally received by the governor and his son.

What was even more surprising was when Luo Min personally escorted the three into the main hall. This hall had only about ten tables, each occupied by the most prominent figures in Jiangsu. How could a merchant family sit alongside them? The Eldest Miss, though she had seen many things in business, had limited interactions with officials. Now, suddenly surrounded by so many high-ranking figures, she felt a bit anxious.

Lin Wanrong, noticing her unease, leaned in and whispered, "Don't worry, they can't eat us." The Eldest Miss cracked a small smile, her heart settling somewhat, and she took her seat.

Luo Yuan approached him, "Big brother, your status is not ordinary, please have a seat."

Lin Wanrong shook his head and chuckled, "I'm just a small servant of the Xiao family. My place is beside the Eldest Miss." He knew better than to draw attention to himself. Pretending to be a pig to eat the tiger, that was his best option.

In the grand hall, he recognized several familiar faces, one of whom was Tao Yu, a high-ranking official he had met just the day before. Tao Yu occasionally glanced at the Eldest Miss with anger in his eyes.

Another familiar face was the beaten Young Master Hou. In just a few days, the bruises on his face had faded, restoring his handsome, debonair appearance. He glared at Lin Wanrong, his teeth gritted and eyes spitting fire. But he was a weak scholar and dared not make a scene here. Moreover, he still felt some fear towards Lin Wanrong's ferocity.

Seeing Young Master Hou's constant glare, Lin Wanrong became impatient. He glared back fiercely, causing Young Master Hou to quickly lower his head. Seeing his cowardly reaction, Lin Wanrong snorted disdainfully, He's less of a man than a woman.

Speaking of women, Lin Wanrong suddenly thought of Tao Wanying, who had repeatedly stood up for Hou Yuebai. Despite being a woman, she had far more spirit than this monkey. On his way back to Hangzhou, he had teased the girl so much, he wondered how she was doing now. Surely she hadn't been so distressed as to take her own life? Guilty, guilty, he thought to himself, he had done nothing, it wasn't his fault.

At the head of the table in the center of the hall sat a man with a dark face and thick eyebrows, his presence intimidating. Cheng Ruinian, whom Lin Wanrong had encountered a few times before, stood beside him. Could this man be Cheng De? A chill ran through Lin Wanrong. In the territory of Jiangsu, the one who could sit at the head of the governor's banquet must be none other than Cheng De.

In secret, Cheng De and Luo Min had been battling each other relentlessly. However, in public, he was still controlled by Luo Min, and both men appeared harmonious. No one knew that these two men were like fire and water in private, utterly incompatible.

Just as Lin Wanrong was getting bored, the sound of drums and music filled the air. The master of ceremonies loudly proclaimed, "The auspicious time has arrived. Please welcome the birthday star."

Amid the drum and music, Luo Ning, dressed in a red shirt and with a blush on her face, slowly walked in, supporting an elderly woman with a radiant face and kind eyes. Luo Min and Luo Yuan followed them, revealing three generations of the Luo family to the onlookers.

"May the birthday star's blessings be as vast as the East Sea, and her life as enduring as the South Mountain." Everyone in the hall stood up and sang in unison.

Chapter 188 A Betrothal for the Talented Lady?

Luo Ning helped the elderly lady sit down on the large chair at the front of the hall. The old woman smiled and nodded to the crowd, saying, "Thank you all for coming. Please, take a seat."

Before anyone could reply, a servant rushed in, flustered. "My lord, the Emperor has sent a birthday couplet"

Before he could finish, a shrill, thin voice rang out from the entrance: "Celebrating Lady Luo's great longevity, the Emperor sends his congratulations, bestowing ten eastern pearls, a hundred taels of gold, and a thousand bolts of brocade."

A small eunuch in a yellow robe, holding the imperial edict, strode through the hall. The Luo family members quickly knelt and thanked in unison, "We thank His Majesty for his grace."

The eunuch stood in front of the hall and announced loudly, "The Emperor has decreed that in respect to the celebrant's advanced years, no kneeling is required. Lady Luo is celebrating her

seventieth spring. This is a blessing from the heavens, protecting our great nation. The Emperor has personally written a birthday couplet as a gift."

The Emperor's personal couplet was an immense honor. Everyone in the hall was filled with envy. Luo Min, holding the couplet high above his head, knelt to receive it. He unfolded it in front of everyone to reveal the imperial handwriting gleaming with gold: "Cranes signify a thousand years of longevity, pines symbolize eternal spring."

Luo Min quickly ordered it to be framed and hung up, then thanked the eunuch. Only then did the crowd dare to sit down. With the Emperor's gifts and the couplet, the old lady's face was flushed with joy and good fortune.

Luo Min knelt at the old lady's feet, respectfully saying, "Your son wishes you health and longevity, prosperity for a long life."

Luo Ning and Luo Yuan, brother and sister, knelt behind their father, chorusing, "Your grandchildren wish our respected grandmother eternal youth, and a longevity as long as a crane's." The old lady laughed heartily, nodded, and said, "Children, please rise."

In ancient times, birthday blessings were taken very seriously. After the filial son and virtuous grandchildren had paid their respects, it was the guests' turn. There were so many flatterers for Luo Min's mother's seventieth birthday, it was impossible to count them. The guests paid their respects according to rank. Cheng De, with a dark face, was first in line, and he stood up to say a few words of praise. This made Lin Wanrong, who was watching, secretly amused. Everyone in the hall paid their respects one after another. Only the Prefect of Jinling, Marquis Hou, remained unmoved, sitting steadily with a smile on his face, his thoughts unknown.@@novelbin@@

Among the crowd, the Xiao family, who held no official posts, naturally had Xiao Yuruo demurely placed last in line. It wasn't until the Eldest Miss had paid her respects and there was no one else in the hall that Hou Yuebai rose to his feet. He approached the old lady and respectfully kowtowed, "Yuebai and his father wish the long-lived one blessings of longevity and peace, to flow forever." While others had simply bowed in place, this young man went up to kowtow. It was clear he wanted to please Luo Ning.

The old lady laughed, "Young master and his father are too polite. Min, help Young Master Hou up." Luo Min, on behalf of his mother, helped Hou Yuebai up and said, "Nephew, please rise."

Hou Yuebai stood and said, "I learned that the birthday lady likes couplets. Today, being her auspicious birthday, I dare to present a personally written birthday couplet to express my admiration."

Suddenly, there was a loud applause in the hall, and everyone understood Hou Yuebai's intention. The reason why the Hou family was the last to pay their respects was to use this couplet as a grand finale. Most of the guests were officials who loved couplets and poetry, so this was considered very appropriate.

The elder lady of the Luo family seemed interested, "In that case, young master, please write quickly so this old woman can admire it." From the way the old lady spoke, it seemed she too was from a distinguished family. No wonder she was able to raise such talented children and grandchildren as Luo Min and Luo Ning.

A servant had already laid out paper and ink. Hou Yuebai bowed to the old lady and glanced at Luo Ning before he picked up the brush. After a moment's thought, he wrote, "The rarest of ages is respected, from now on we enjoy the remaining years."

The couplet subtly reflected the old woman's rare age, and was extremely appropriate. The old lady nodded and said, "Young master indeed has a good talent. This old woman is very grateful."

Luo Ning whispered something in the old lady's ear. The old lady laughed until she couldn't close her mouth, saying, "Young master, though this old woman is a mere woman, she is also a lover of couplets. Today, since the young master has this interest, this old woman will present an upper couplet for all the poetry friends in the hall to enjoy."

The birthday lady presenting a couplet was both flattering and pleasing. The crowd in the hall was filled with regret, wondering why they didn't have the thoughtfulness of young Master Hou to inquire about the old birthday lady's preferences.

The old lady thought for a moment and laughed, "Today, as you all celebrate this old woman's birthday, I will present a topic of crane longevity for the upper couplet 'Crane's age adds, decade opens clear and robust.'"

The birthday lady had offered the upper couplet, and it was a happy one at that. Most of the people in the hall were literati. Couplets and poetry were their strengths, and they immediately began to think hard. Hou Yuebai had started this couplet round to grab this opportunity. He smirked at Lin Wanrong and also began to ponder.

Lin Wanrong watched with amusement and leaned over to Guo Wuchang, whispering, "Young Master, can you match this couplet?"

The young master shook his head, "I haven't practiced this before, I can't think of it right now."

Lin Wanrong chuckled and whispered a few words in Guo Wuchang's ear. The young master's face lit up and he immediately stood up and said, "Old birthday lady, I have a matching couplet."

Hou Yuebai was startled, but when he saw that it was not Lin Wanrong who matched it, he relaxed. He knew Guo Wuchang's reputation, typically a good-for-nothing who ate well but didn't work, and doubted that he could come up with a good couplet.

Seeing everyone's attention on her cousin, the Eldest Miss was surprised and whispered, "Lin San, what did you teach my cousin?"

Lin Wanrong innocently said, "I didn't teach him anything. It's the young master's overflowing talent, he came up with it on his own."

The Eldest Miss glared at him, worried, but then heard Guo Wuchang recite, "Crane's age adds, decade opens clear and robust, deer carriage jointly pulls a hundred years of longevity."

Brilliant! Everyone in the hall sighed. Hou Yuebai did not expect Guo Wuchang to be so quick-witted. Now the spotlight was stolen by him, making him deeply regretful.

The Eldest Miss knew her cousin's weight very well. Seeing Lin Wanrong standing there with a smug smile, she knew it was his idea. She couldn't help but glare at him, but her face was full of smiles.

Luo Ning was also puzzled. When she saw Lin Wanrong, she smiled and spoke to her grandmother. The old lady glanced at the people from the Xiao family and laughed, "This young master has matched the couplet very appropriately. I feel delighted. Since today is for birthday celebration, this old woman will simply offer another couplet. Please, young master, try to match it."

Having come into the spotlight, Guo Wuchang was overjoyed and couldn't care less. He hastily nodded, "Please present the topic, old birthday lady."

Both Lin Wanrong and the Eldest Miss were surprised. They thought this kid, with his little wit, should have been content with the success he had. How could he wish for more?

The old lady slowly recited, "Sun and moon shine together, only the benevolent have longevity."

Guo Wuchang anxiously looked at Lin San for help. Lin Wanrong thought to himself, You deserved it for showing off. With so many people watching, how could I guide you?

Seeing Guo Wuchang's pale face, Hou Yuebai was secretly pleased. After a brief thought, just as he was about to speak, he heard Lin San call out, "Our young master has the matching line"

All eyes fell on Guo Wuchang again. Lin Wanrong walked over to him and laughed, "Sun and moon shine together, only the benevolent have longevity. Our young master's matching line is Yin and Yang combined, such virtue is rare since ancient times."

Guo Wuchang silently wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and nodded, "Exactly, exactly. Sun and moon shine together, only the benevolent have longevity. Yin and Yang combined, such virtue is rare since ancient times."

Luo Ning glanced at Lin Wanrong, covering her mouth to smile, obviously seeing through the trick. Hou Yuebai grew increasingly annoyed. Being outshone by Guo Wuchang twice was extremely frustrating.

The old lady nodded and laughed, "Indeed, it's very neat. Young master, your talent is admirable. This old woman thanks you for these two fine couplets." She glanced at Luo Ning next to her and suddenly laughed, "My little granddaughter Ning, has been outstanding in poetry since she was a child and has high standards. Today, as this old woman celebrates her birthday, let Ning present a few topics for all the young gentlemen present to discuss. What does everyone think?"

While the old lady's words were implicit, Lin Wanrong was shocked, Oh, this seems like a poetry competition for a marriage proposal. Crude, unbearably crude.

Everyone in the hall seemed to perceive the underlying meaning, causing a commotion. Especially the young masters, if they could win the favor of both the old lady and Miss Luo by taking this opportunity, it would naturally be much easier to accomplish something good.

Luo Ning didn't expect her grandmother to suddenly propose this idea. She blushed deeply and couldn't help but coquettishly say, "Grandma"

The old lady laughed and patted her hand, "Ning, just come up with the topics. Grandma will decide everything for you." These words set the hall bustling even more. Although the old lady didn't disclose anything, her words sparked endless speculations. Luo Ning hadn't considered the issue of choosing a husband yet, and she felt both shy and anxious, but she couldn't help but glance at Lin Wanrong.

Luo Yuan knew his sister's thoughts and quietly slipped to Lin Wanrong, grabbing his arm, "Big brother, I beg you"

Lin Wanrong was surprised, "Little Luo, what's the matter?"

Luo Yuan anxiously said, "Later when my sister presents her couplet or poem, you must be the one to respond. You absolutely cannot let anyone else take the opportunity."

Lin Wanrong was taken aback. Regardless of whether he could respond appropriately, he couldn't even if he could. He wore a distressed expression and said, "Little Luo, you know I'm not interested in your sister."

With an awkward expression, Luo Yuan replied, "I know, big brother. Rest assured, my sister is also only slightly interested in you. It's unlikely the two of you will end up together. But you must help with this. You know as well as I do, none of the scholars in Jinling appeal to my sister. I'm afraid if our grandmother is in high spirits today, in a fit of joy she might"

Lin Wanrong suddenly understood. Today, the old birthday woman was celebrating her big day and had been granted an imperial favor. She was in high spirits and also loved presenting these tricky couplets. If she got overly excited and betrothed Luo Ning, this joyous feast would probably turn into a funeral.

After Luo Yuan left, Lin Wanrong remained hesitant about whether or not he should help. The Eldest Miss at his side had heard their conversation and glared at him, "Lin San, you're not allowed to speak later!"

Chapter 189 Luo Ning's State of Mind

"Why so?" Lin Wanrong exclaimed in surprise.

"You're meddling in a poetry match designed to choose a suitor. What's your role in it?" The Eldest Miss glared at him, a blush creeping onto her face as she gently warned, "If you dare to speak out, I will ensure Yushuang ignores you forever. Let's see how you'll handle that."

'Good heavens! What a threat,' Lin Wanrong thought to himself, amused. 'The Eldest Miss's threat is weak at best. Does she really think that by uttering a single sentence, Yushuang would ignore me forever? I understand my little darling better than that. If anything, I would be surprised if I believed her. But if she indeed bad-mouthed me in front of Yushuang or instigated some other nonsense, it could become a problem. On one hand, I am bound by Little Luo's request to do whatever it takes for my brethren. But on the other hand, I'm dealing with Yushuang's sister. For the sake of a beautiful lady, am I supposed to stab my brethren in the back?'

Noticing his prolonged silence, the Eldest Miss snapped irritably, "Did you hear what I said? Are you, perhaps, smitten by Miss Luo's beauty? You...you" She clenched her teeth, grumbling, "Where do you place myour Xiao family?"

'Dear me, how does the Xiao family fit into this?' Lin Wanrong thought. 'You've had your say, both good and bad, how am I supposed to respond?' He managed a wry smile and softly explained, "Eldest Miss, there's something you don't understand. Miss Luo is a lady of high standards. None of the talented gentlemen of Jinling have caught her eye. Her grandmother's actions today stem from concern for her, but Miss Luo is not interested. She is simply looking for ways to reject these gentlemen. My relationship with Miss Luo is nothing more than cordial. However, she is a good friend of Qiaoqiao and has helped me in the past. One should never forget a favor, right? My presence here is purely out of obligation, a friendly cameo. You heard what Little Luo said earlier. Miss Luo and I are from two different worlds, utterly mismatched."

The Eldest Miss pondered for a long while before snorting, "Then you better not answer casually later. If someone wants to answer, you block them. If no one answers, you must keep your mouth shut."

'Good Lord! Does she think I'm a prodigy, capable of providing answers instantly?' Lin Wanrong forced a smile, "Eldest Miss, I might stumble upon an answer or two occasionally, but I can't promise to have all the answers."

She conceded the point. Although he had some scholarly ability, she had perhaps been overestimating him. With a small smile, the Eldest Miss fell silent.

As the two conversed, Luo Ning grew anxious. When she saw Luo Yuan turn back towards her and then glance at Lin Wanrong, who was smiling, she felt a bit more at ease.

Upon hearing that Miss Luo was seemingly choosing a suitor, the young men seated outside the hall hurriedly flocked in. Luo Min chuckled at the sight. Seeing his mother in high spirits, he didn't wish to dampen her enthusiasm, so he gestured grandly, inviting the young scholars and gentlemen to take a seat inside the hall.

"Ning'er, all the talented young masters from Jiangsu are here today. Go ahead and pose your question," the old lady said with a chuckle. Suddenly, the hall fell silent as everyone eagerly awaited Miss Luo's first question.

Luo Ning was both embarrassed and surprised, with no avenue of retreat. She bit her lip, looking towards the courtyard pond, and softly recited, "The green water is naturally calm; a wind ripples its surface." The metaphor mirrored her current state of mind having no intention to choose a suitor, but her grandmother's eager affection had disturbed the tranquillity of her life, like wind stirring a peaceful pond.

After hearing Luo Ning's words, the Eldest Miss let out a sigh of relief. Miss Luo truly didn't seem interested, and Lin Wanrong hadn't been dishonest. However, the other scholars and gentlemen had different thoughts. Upon seeing Miss Luo pose her question, they couldn't help but start thinking rapidly, especially Hou Yuebai, who saw this as a golden opportunity.

Yet, Lin Wanrong paid no attention to Luo Ning's posed question. Smiling, he said to Xiao Yuruo, "Eldest Miss, Miss Luo's main worry is likely that Young Master Hou. All we need to do is block him."

The Eldest Miss could understand Luo Ning's feelings, and she too couldn't help worrying for her. Seeing Hou Yuebai eager to answer, she pushed Lin Wanrong urgently, "Lin San, quickly answer". But as soon as the words were out, she regretted it, 'What am I doing?'

Seeing the Eldest Miss so anxious, Lin Wanrong thought something must have happened. He quickly stood up and said, "Miss Luo, I will answer." He glanced at Hou Yuebai in the distance, who was deep in thought, not ready to respond at all. 'What is the Eldest Miss up to? Isn't this just causing trouble for me?' He looked at Xiao Yuruo, who turned her head away, seemingly unwilling to pay him any attention.

'Damn it! You were the one who asked me to answer, and now you're the one who's angry. I'm really caught in the middle here,' he thought.

Seeing Lin Wanrong stand up, Luo Ning felt a thrill of surprise and quickly said, "Please, Young Master Lin, proceed." Luo Yuan secretly gave Lin Wanrong a thumbs-up. His big brother was truly reliable.

Feeling a bit embarrassed, Lin Wanrong scratched his head, "Miss Luo, there were too many people talking just now, and I didn't hear clearly. Could you repeat your question?"

At his words, both the Eldest Miss and Luo Ning almost fainted. Luo Yuan and everyone else in the hall were similarly dumbfounded. 'What kind of person is this? He didn't even hear the question clearly, yet he claimed he had an answer. He's clearly here to cause chaos. The Xiao family is so wicked to send a mere servant to ruin Miss Luo's event. This is just too much.'

The Eldest Miss was shocked but also couldn't help feeling a little delighted. She shot him a quick glance, her voice soft and chiding, "You... don't you see how beautiful Miss Luo is? You didn't even pay attention to her question. What's the point in standing up to answer? Isn't this damaging the reputation of our Xiao family?"

Upon hearing the Eldest Miss's words, Lin Wanrong broke out in goosebumps. 'It's true what they say, good men don't fight with women. Women are just too unpredictable. She's the one making all the rules.'

Frustrated, Luo Ning's cheeks flushed a bright red. Such a public affront was utterly embarrassing. Even the day when he harshly criticized her painting hadn't been this bad.

Looking at Lin Wanrong with a frosty expression, she gritted her teeth, and said word by word, "In that case, please listen carefully, Young Master Lin. The question I posed is 'The green water is naturally calm; a wind ripples its surface.'"

"Oh, it's this couplet" Lin Wanrong quickly contemplated. His eyes drifted past the door curtain to the lush green mountains in the distance. He smirked and said, "Miss Luo, here's my response to your couplet 'Green mountains are not aged by time; snow renders them white-haired.'"

Brilliant! It was unclear who first praised him, but soon the hall erupted with applause. This couplet, whether in terms of rhyme or imagery, was perfectly matched. Especially the latter half, which not only bore a beautiful meaning but also subtly implied a marriage proposal. It was indeed an exceptional masterpiece. It was astonishing that a mere servant of the Xiao family could exhibit such extraordinary talent. When someone brought up that this was the same Lin San who had

contended against the Tao family at Sunshine and Rain Restaurant in Hangzhou and made friends with Xu Wei, the entire hall gasped in awe. Even the learned scholar Mr. Wenchang looked at him with new respect this servant was profoundly unpredictable.

As Lin Wanrong recited the words, he realized his blunder. "Snow renders them white-haired." These words would clearly lead Luo Ning to misunderstand. 'Damn it! I didn't mean that. It was a slip of the tongue being too knowledgeable can indeed be a curse.'

Before his response, the Eldest Miss had been worried for him, but once he answered, his couplet seemed to be openly flirting with Miss Luo. Xiao Yuruo turned pale and turned her head away, refusing to look at him directly.

His couplet was full of ambiguity. Even Luo Ning, usually outgoing and bold, couldn't help but blush, casting a glance at Lin Wanrong, unsure of what to say.

"Good, good, very good." The first to speak was the birthday celebrant, the old lady. She held Luo Ning's hand, gave Lin Wanrong a smiling look and said, "Young man, your response was splendid. Ning, you should pose two more questions today. Let's see if these young gentlemen's talents can satisfy you."

Luo Ning dared not go against her grandmother's good intentions. She stole a glance at Lin Wanrong, her cheeks blushing, and softly replied, "Yes."

Lin Wanrong was in a tight spot, neither able to stand nor sit comfortably. Young Master Guo, who was straightforward, said to him, "Lin San, you should answer two more. Take Miss Luo home as a maid. Having a talented lady as a servant, you as the master, you can do whatever you want. It must feel great. Heh heh." Lin Wanrong wiped the sweat from his forehead. Young Master Guo's thinking was too modern and lecherous. 'I like it,' he thought.

The Eldest Miss glared at Guo Wuchang, who immediately blanched and fell silent. Just as Lin Wanrong was about to speak to Xiao Yuruo, he heard the Eldest Miss snort and turn her head away. @@novelbin@@

Luo Ning cast a glance at Lin Wanrong, her heart filled with an indescribable emotion. This man seemed to be talented yet not, crude yet not; it was difficult to read him. She sighed and gazed at the pond as she softly recited, "Autumn water reflects the silver hall, mandarin ducks share the same wing"

The first couplet showed some rejection towards a partner, but the tone had already changed in the second. Even Luo Ning herself probably didn't understand her feelings at this point. Lin Wanrong couldn't dare to respond casually this time; once could be considered an accident, but twice would be nothing less than flagrant flirting. After all, he had already helped once; this time, he wouldn't stick his neck out unless necessary.

Luo Ning noticed that everyone in the hall was deep in thought, while only Lin Wanrong was nonchalantly looking around, seemingly indifferent. She sighed silently, lowering her eyes and falling quiet.

In the midst of his contemplation, Hou Yuebai suddenly clapped his hands and shouted excitedly, "I have the answer! Miss Luo, I have the answer!"

Luo Ning softly sighed, "Has Young Master Hou figured it out? Then, please share. Luo Ning is all ears."

The Eldest Miss did not speak. Noticing Luo Ning's look of defeat and unwillingness, she felt a pang of sympathy. When she raised her head to see Lin San's indifferent attitude, she couldn't help but snap at him, "You bad man, didn't I ask you to keep an eye on that Hou fellow? How did you let him answer?"

Other than surprise, Lin Wanrong had no words to say. With women, there was never any logic to be had.

Chapter 190 The Young Prince

Seeing no one vying with him, Hou Yuebai was secretly pleased. Hastily, he recited, "Autumn water reflects the silver hall, mandarin ducks share the same wing; Azure sky meets the green water, playing the lute together." Though his couplet was quickly composed and met the standards of balance, the link between mandarin ducks and lute-playing was somewhat strained. It could barely be considered an average couplet.

Seeing the furrowed brow of Miss Luo, the Eldest Miss couldn't bear it. She couldn't help but ask Lin Wanrong, "Lin San, can you answer this couplet?"

Lin Wanrong, feeling somewhat apologetic towards Luo Ning for not keeping a better eye on Hou Yuebai, nodded and replied, "I should be able to."

"Can you do better than him?" The Eldest Miss asked again.

Lin Wanrong chuckled, "I'm self-taught, unrestricted and free-spirited. How could his couplet compare to mine?"

The Eldest Miss gritted her teeth and said, "If that's the case, then you should rise and respond. Suppress this monkey prince."

Startled, Lin Wanrong thought, "Did I hear her wrongly? Is the Eldest Miss delirious?"

Seeing his disbelief, Xiao Yurao said angrily yet embarrassingly, "Miss Luo has done us a favor. It's only right for us to repay her. But don't get any ideas. If you do, you will not only be betraying Qiaoqiao and Yushuang, but also the Xiao family and me."@@novelbin@@

Feeling dizzy from her words, Lin Wanrong thought that betraying Qiaoqiao and Yushuang made some sense. But betraying the Xiao family and her? The Eldest Miss blushed, huffed and stopped looking at him.

Seeing no one else answering, and that Lin Wanrong was having a lively chat with Miss Xiao, Luo Ning sighed softly. Just as she was about to speak, Lin Wanrong's voice sounded, "Miss Luo, I have a couplet too."

Delighted, Luo Ning was about to respond when Hou Yuebai quickly interjected, "This couplet was originally answered by me."

Annoyed, Lin Wanrong retorted, "Young Master Hou, don't be impatient. Listen to my couplet first. Miss Luo's couplet was 'Autumn water reflects the silver hall, mandarin ducks share the same wing,' and my response is, 'Heavenly wind under the jade universe, phoenix harmoniously chirps.'"

Everyone present understood that Lin San's lower couplet was more imaginative and apt than Master Hou's. Indeed, this time, the servant of the Xiao family was victorious.

Luo Ning, blushing with both embarrassment and happiness, gave Lin Wanrong a grateful glance. Beaming with pride, Lin Wanrong nodded at her, while the Eldest Miss next to him snorted, "Don't get too proud. Don't forget what I told you earlier. You cannot betray Yushuang."

Lin Wanrong chuckled in response. Meanwhile, Luo Ning, with a blush on her face, coyly put forth the third couplet, "On the branches of parasol trees, two phoenixes perch"

It seemed to continue from the previous couplet, both sharing the theme of romantic unity, whether it was the mandarin ducks or the perching phoenixes. Was this Eldest Miss really in love? Lin Wanrong looked at Luo Ning with puzzled eyes.

The Eldest Miss's face darkened considerably. The implication in Luo Ning's words was somewhat suggestive of courtship. Grinding her teeth, the Eldest Miss snapped, "Lin San, you don't have to worry about this couplet."

"Should I worry about the monkey prince?" Lin Wanrong asked.

The Eldest Miss said, "You don't need to worry about him either, leave him to me." No sooner had her words fallen than she stood up and said, "Miss Luo, I have the matching line to your couplet, 'On the branches of parasol trees, two phoenixes perch, amidst the lotus blossoms stand a pair of mandarin ducks.'"

"Wonderful, truly wonderful," Lin Wanrong started clapping, seemingly stirring up trouble. Both the Eldest Miss and Luo Ning, without any prior agreement, shot him a look of disdain. The people in the hall were excited to see Miss Xiao match the couplet; a face-off between the two legendary women of talent was not a sight easily witnessed.

Luo Ning, surprised to see that Xiao Yuruo had answered the couplet, blushed in embarrassment. She stepped forward, took the Eldest Miss's hand and said, "Sister Xiao, are you also teasing me?"

Xiao Yuruo, not wanting to offend someone with a laughing face, especially Luo Ning who was kind to Lin San, held her hand back and smiled, "Miss Luo, you've put forth three couplets, it's time to choose the one you like."

Luo Ning gave a light smile, intentionally or not, glanced at Lin Wanrong and giggled, "Of course I've chosen. I choose you, sister Xiao." Both women began to laugh and jest. Watching this scene, Lin Wanrong sighed. They had just been at each other's throats, yet now they were as amiable as ever. Indeed, women and tigers were the most fearsome creatures in the world.

Luo Yuan pulled Lin Wanrong to the old lady's side, affectionately introducing, "Grandmother, this is big brother Lin Wanrong, whom I know. He also knows father and is very close with my sister and me."

After bowing respectfully, Lin Wanrong stood up and asked with a smile, "Grandmother, is it your fiftieth birthday today?"

The old lady laughed, "What are you saying, child? I'm already in my seventies, not fifties."

Stunned, Lin Wanrong exclaimed, "But you look so youthful and vibrant, with such rosy cheeks and youthful hair, that you seem to be a fifty-year-old. I completely forgot it was your seventieth birthday. My apologies."

Luo Yuan sucked in a breath at Lin Wanrong's audacious flattery. The old lady, though amused by his extraordinary wit and talent despite being a mere servant, was pleased. She chuckled, "You sure know how to charm with your words, and you were quite clever and interesting with your couplet exchange with Luo Ning earlier. You should visit more often."

Blushing, Luo Ning quickly responded, "Don't worry, grandmother. I will certainly seek guidance from Brother Lin."

Lin Wanrong felt an icy glare from behind. He understood Hou Yuebai's resentment, but why was the Eldest Miss so infuriated? If anyone should be angry, it should be Yushuang. It was all too confusing.

Chuckling, Lin Wanrong said, "On your special birthday, I wish you eternal youth, good temper, healthy teeth, good appetite, fragrant meals, blooming flowers, a virtuous wife for your grandson soon, a good husband for your granddaughter soon, numerous descendants, wealth, and a house filled with blessings."

Upon hearing his lengthy blessing, the people in the hall were left either dazed or sweating profusely. They had seen shamelessness before, but never to this extent. They wondered from where this Xiao family's servant, who acted without the slightest regard for decorum, had sprung. The Eldest Miss found it both infuriating and amusing. But seeing how delighted the old lady from the Luo family was, she couldn't help but shake her head and smile. This scoundrel, blessed with the gift of the gab, seemed to be able to appease anyone in the world.

The old lady's spirits were lifted by his words. Laughing, she said, "Very well, reward him."

In his mind, Lin Wanrong was elated, My diamond hasn't been presented yet, and I'm already making money. He pulled out a small diamond from his pocket. It was only a third of the size of the one he'd given to Qiaoqiao, but it still caused a stir among the people in the hall.

The diamond was crystal clear, brimming with unique colors. One glance was enough to know that it was no ordinary gem. Those present, already aware of the story from Sunshine and Rain Restaurant, instantly understood that this was the famed diamond from the West. It was indeed an extraordinary piece of craftsmanship.

Luo Ning covered her mouth in surprise, staring at the gleaming diamond. She hadn't expected him to present such an extravagant gift. Although it couldn't compare to the one he had given Qiaoqiao the previous day, it was extremely precious. Few such diamonds could be found throughout the entire Great Hua.

The appeal of diamonds to women was undeniable. Luo Ning's heart pounded, while the Eldest Miss appeared dazed. This Lin San, always so generous, had never given her a diamond despite having some in his possession.

With a sly smile, Lin Wanrong presented the diamond to the old lady, "Elderly one, this diamond was acquired from a Westerner in Hangzhou. On the occasion of your birthday, I hadn't prepared anything better, so please accept this little stone as my token of respect. Given your graciousness, I trust you won't mind that it is a small gift."

The old lady inspected the diamond, her face bursting with joy. She chuckled, "You, child, have given such a grand gift and yet call it small. Luo Ning, I'm old. This diamond is a token of Brother Lin's affection. I'll give it to you. You should cherish it and not disappoint Brother Lin's goodwill."

Lin Wanrong nearly choked at the old lady's words. He saw the Eldest Miss's murderous gaze sweeping over him repeatedly. But how could he be blamed for this? The old lady, nearing her eighties, was indeed not as sharp in her thinking and speaking. It had nothing to do with him.

Understanding the implication of the old lady's words, Luo Ning was half embarrassed, half annoyed, and didn't dare to respond. However, she loved the diamond so much that she accepted it without a word, holding it in her hand and examining it closely.

Lin Wanrong's generous gesture didn't surprise anyone since they knew about his escapade in Hangzhou. But the sight of the Eldest Miss's sullen face did stir some curiosity. Yet, they could only keep their questions to themselves.

Ah, I always strive to keep a low profile, but I've never truly achieved it. Life is so frustrating, thought Lin Wanrong when he suddenly heard an announcement from outside the door, "His Highness Prince Chengs son, Young Prince Ning has arrived..."

The hall erupted into a low buzz as murmurs spread among the crowd. This young Prince Ning was apparently an important figure, and even the always-composed Cheng De and Tao Yu had looks of delight on their faces.

Upon hearing about some young prince or heir, Lin Wanrong felt a bit dizzy. "What nonsense," he thought, "riding on the coattails of their ancestors, swindling food and drink, showing off... Damn, I disdain you."

Luo Min had already gone out to welcome a newcomer into the residence. The man, in his twenties, wore a purple-gold crown and a yellow robe embroidered with dragons. His physique was slender, his face handsome. He carried himself with grace and elegance, his warm smile appearing even before he spoke, his demeanor refined. At first glance, one could tell he was no ordinary person.

Was this the so-called Young Prince Ning? The so-called prince, the dragon's grandson, did indeed look quite impressive. Suddenly, Lin Wanrong thought of the master of Tao Dongcheng, whom he had encountered at the White Lotus cult. Could this be the same person? Lin Wanrong promptly rose to his feet.