

All Hail 11

Chapter 11

Cousin from Youzhou

Yu Shuangbai, who was nine years old and a month younger than Yu Youyao, went up to Old Madam Yu. "Grandmother, do you remember who I am?"

Madam Yao scowled at her. "Don't speak nonsense in front of Grandmother."

Ignoring Madam Yao's rebuke, Old Madam Yu laughed and pulled her second eldest granddaughter to sit down beside her. "How could I forget you? You're as mischievous as your big sister."

She turned around and took a palm-sized sandalwood box from Nanny Liu and put it into Yu Shuangbai's hands.

Yu Shuangbai stuck out her tongue cheekily and handed the box to her maidservant. She smiled and blinked at Yu Youyao.

She had a lively personality and was very similar to Yu Youyao. In the past, when the two of them were together, they would climb trees, dig bird nests, play with soil, and catch crickets with each other.

Yu Youyao blinked back at her.

After greeting the Old Madam, Madam Yao held Yu Youyou's hand affectionately. "You're looking quite energetic, and your complexion is good. It seems that you've recovered, although you've lost a lot of weight. You have to nourish and take good care of yourself."

With that, she instructed her maidservant to hand over a stack of medicinal herbs and supplements to Chun Xiao.

Yu Youyao quickly thanked her.

Even Old Madam Yu also nodded. "You're very thoughtful."

Her second daughter-in-law was a magnanimous and proper person, and she'd managed to raise such well behaved and mannered children. With such a good and virtuous wife, it was no wonder that her second son was so successful, and continued to rise in the ranks.

Old Madam Yu glanced at Yang Shuwan and placed her teacup down.

Although the position of Imperial Censor sounded glamorous, it did not have much prospect for promotion. Actually, it would be almost impossible unless the emperor was exceptionally gracious. He probably would not rise any further for the rest of this lifetime.

As daughters-in-law, they inevitably felt some competition with each other. After receiving Old Madam Yu's praise, Yang Shuwan's expression did not look too good. She looked like she was about to tear her handkerchief apart.

Even Yu Jianjia couldn't help but think to herself that Second Aunt was really great in every way, and she couldn't help but feel a little envious.

At this moment, Yu Zongzheng and Yu Zongshen entered together.

Yu Zongzheng was in his thirties and looked decent. He exuded a strong and imposing aura. In comparison, the second uncle seemed more refined and sophisticated.

The two of them greeted Old Madam Yu respectfully. Then, Yu Zongzheng's gaze landed on Yu Youyao. "Yaoyao, you're not young anymore. How can you stay in your grandmother's room all day? How many days do you study? 'Women's Analects', 'Lessons for Women', 'Female Virtue', needlework, and the four arts. How much have you learned?"

Yu Youyao stared in a daze.

The Yu Residence had hired a female teacher to teach the young ladies in the residence, and Yu Youyao had started studying at the age of seven. However, she had such a lively and active personality, and was not someone who could study calmly. She was always busy climbing or running about. In the past three years, she hadn't really learned anything seriously.

This also gave her grandmother quite a headache, who, for a long time, had tried forcing Yu Youyao to learn properly, but without much success. Seeing that her Yao Yao indeed wasn't material to be a "gifted female scholar", she no longer tried to force her.

Therefore, ever since she had fallen sick previously, she had not studied for a long time.

Old Madam Yu's heart hurt for her granddaughter. Her expression darkened. "What are you saying? It's rare that you're having some free time right now, but you only know how to lecture your daughter. Is this how a father should behave? I didn't see you show any concern when Yao Yao was seriously ill a few days ago. Don't act so officious at home."

After being reprimanded in public, Yu Zongzheng felt a little embarrassed and said disapprovingly, "Mother, don't spoil her too much. She's growing to be more and more unbecoming..."

His words were clearly referring to something else.

Anyone present who wasn't stupid would understand that this was a reference to Yu Jianjia's fall.

"Pa—" Before he could finish speaking, Old Madam Yu slapped the table harshly. The teacup on it clanged with a clear, crisp sound.

Yu Zongzheng was shocked. Just as he was about to continue saying something, Yang Shuwan tugged at him in fear, preventing him from continuing.

Old Madam Yu stared at Yang Shuwan with a sharp gaze and said coldly, "Speak, let him speak. I want to hear what you've been telling him, such that even an Imperial Censor who's in charge of being the Emperor's eyes and ears can become so mistaken and confused."

Yang Shuwan's expression changed instantly. She quickly shook her head and said, "Mother, you've misunderstood. I..."

Yu Jianjia tugged at her mother's sleeve, hinting for her to stop explaining in case she made things worse and embarrassed themselves in front of the people of the Second Mansion.

Yang Shuwan came to her senses and lowered her head, not daring to say anything more.

The atmosphere in the room became very somber.

Yu Youyao sat beside her grandmother dejectedly. Her father had always been very strict with her while he doted on her third sister, Yu Jianjia.

Although she was used to it, it still made her a little sad.

In her dream, she was locked in the small courtyard of the Marquis Residence of Zhen. Her father had not cared about her, and it was as if she wasn't even his daughter. She started to feel even more upset, and tears streamed down her face.

At this moment, Yu Zongshen smiled and said, "Yao Yao has just recovered from a serious illness, and her body is still weak. She can go to school when the weather gets warmer. She's a girl, and she doesn't have to take the imperial examination, nor to carve a career for herself. There's no need to be so strict."

"Jia Jia has also just recovered from a major illness, but she's been schooling at home right from the first few days of recovery..." Yu Zongzheng frowned. Jia Jia was a year younger than Yao Yao and had been suffering from heart disease since she was young, but she had already resumed homeschooling shortly after her illness.

Both were his daughters, but Jia Jia had always been smart, obedient, and understanding since she was young.

On the other hand, Yao Yao was stubborn by nature and never learned. Although it was the servant's fault that Jia Jia had fallen and was startled badly, it was still Yao Yao's fault for acting haughtily.

These words made Old Madam Yu frown. Just as she was about to reprimand him, Yu Zongshen changed the topic. "It's getting late. Ling Huai should be here soon."

Just as he finished speaking, Nanny Liu led the two men into the house.

Yu Youyao quickly lowered her head and dabbed her face all over with her handkerchief, trying to wipe the tears off her face. Then, she quickly lifted her head, and immediately, she met a pair of dark eyes.

Their eyes met, and Yu Youyao was suddenly stunned.

The fourteen or fifteen-year-old youth had a pale face and a gloomy, sickly expression. He was dressed in a green jacket with dark patterns. He was skinny and looked rather scrawny, but his back was like a broad mountain, tall and striking, revealing a hint of danger and ruggedness.

He was sitting on a bentwood chair, being pushed by a tall, skinny teenager in a gray suit. The two big wheels rumbled softly as he was being pushed.

This cousin of hers was really good-looking. He was even better-looking than her brothers at home. It was just that... Yu Youyao looked at his legs with curiosity in her eyes.

The house was silent for a moment.

All eyes had landed on the young man who had just entered the house, and upon noticing his legs, had inadvertently revealed their looks of curiosity, scrutiny, sympathy, pity, and regret.

The young man lowered his eyelids. His hands, which were rested on the arms of his wheelchair, trembled slightly and clenched up gradually.

It was here that he heard a soft, pleasant voice ask, "Grandmother, is this boy my cousin?"

Chapter 12

Cousin Zhou Linghuai

Patting her granddaughter's hand, Old Madam Yu looked at the young man evenly.

The young man raised his head again and said respectfully, "I'm the son of the Zhou family in Youzhou, named Linghuai by my father. Nice to meet you, Grandmother. It's inconvenient to move with my legs, please understand and forgive me."

With that, he handed the palm-sized ebony box that was resting on his knees to Nanny Liu.

Nanny Liu received it and turned around to hand it to Old Madam Yu.

Old Madam Yu gently stroked the embossed peony on the box with inlaid gold and jade. She looked full of nostalgia. "This was the box I had given to Miaofu when she had gotten married far away in Youzhou. I didn't expect that she'd still kept it after so many years."

The atmosphere in the house was a little heavy, and everyone felt a little anxious.

Yu Miaofu was Old Master Yu's biological sister. When Old Madam Yu was younger, she had a good relationship with her eldest sister-in-law.

Later, Yu Miaofu got married to a Guard Commander in Youzhou.

Youzhou was a little far from Jingzhao, so she had returned to her maiden home less than five times since she married there. Although the two families had always maintained contact, their relationship inevitably became distant over time.

Thinking about the past, Old Madam Yu's eyes were a little moist. She pinched her handkerchief and dabbed the corners of her eyes. "The last time I saw her was more than 30 years ago. I didn't expect that that farewell would actually be..." Separation forever!

Three years ago, when The North was invaded, the King of the You prefecture had failed to defend, and they lost three cities in a row, with countless deaths.

Later, the Imperial Court uncovered that the You King had been corrupted, colluded with The South, and plotted a rebellion. The Emperor was furious, and the You King's entire family was executed. All the officials in the You Prefecture were either killed or exiled.

The Zhou family was stripped of their official positions, and their relatives and friends avoided them like the plague. Not long after, only Yu Miaofu and Zhou Linghuai were left at home.

Not long ago, even Yu Miaofu had passed away.

Yu Youyao glanced curiously at Zhou Linghuai. Seeing that his head was lowered and she didn't know what he was thinking, she moved closer to her grandmother to see what was in the box.

Old Madam Yu opened it. There was a letter inside and a vivid red bloodstone seal that was the size of a thumb. It was exquisite and looked very elegant.

The word “Yu” was engraved on the seal. When she flipped open the bottom of the seal, there was a light red ink pad with the word “Miao” engraved on it.

It was Yu Miaofu’s private stamp.

It was given to Yu Miaofu by her father, Old Master Yu, when she got married. His daughter was marrying far away, and he was worried for her. He had engraved the seal for her personally, and in the process, he also put in all the love and affection that the Yu family had for her.

Old Madam Yu was stunned for a long while, then she sighed faintly. Without even reading the letter, she closed the box. “Miaofu had really suffered all these years.”

The Zhou family had been discharged from all their official positions. In fact, the reason they weren’t imprisoned, beheaded, or exiled was because of mediation from the Yu family, and it was already the best outcome they could help mediate for them.

Even then, Yu Miaofu’s life in Youzhou was not easy.

The Emperor was very bothered about the Youzhou situation. Even if the Yu family wanted to help, they couldn’t do much. As a result, in the past three years, contact had become completely cut off with Yu Miaofu, and they had become completely unaware of the situation on the other side.

It was only yesterday that the gatekeeper had received Zhou Linghuai’s greeting card. The Yu family then sent someone to the inn to find out more. Only then did they learn that Yu Miaofu had passed away a few months ago due to an illness. Her grandson, Zhou Linghuai, had yet to reach the age of adulthood and was not of high status. He could only bring his servants into the capital to seek refuge with the Yu family.

This was also why the entire Yu family had gathered together—for Zhou Linghuai’s visit.

Fortunately, three years had passed since the incident, and the situation in Youzhou had stabilized a little. Furthermore, nobody was too bothered about an orphan in a wheelchair.

Old Madam Yu looked truly emotional. It wasn’t just a polite look of sympathy. Zhou Linghuai looked down. “Grandmother left very peacefully. Grandaunt, you don’t have to take it to heart.”

After weighing it in her mind, Old Madam Yu said to Zhou Linghuai, “Just stay with us, don’t worry.”

Zhou Linghuai replied softly, “Thank you, Grandaunt.”

He was calm and composed, his demeanor was refined, his words were neither servile nor overbearing, and he knew when to speak and when to recede. Seeing this, Old Madam Yu felt yet a stronger sincerity toward Zhou Linghuai.

Next, Nanny Liu brought Zhou Linghuai around to greet everyone properly. As elders, Yu Zongzheng and the others couldn’t help but say a few words of encouragement.

This scene was so boring that Yu Youyao started feeling a little sleepy.

After he had finally finished acknowledging his elders, it was time to greet his cousins.

Nanny Liu looked up in Yu Youyao's direction. "This is the Eldest Miss of the residence. Her name is Youyao, and her nickname is Yao Yao. She's nine years old this year. Her biological mother is Madam Xie from the Xie family of Quanzhou Prefecture."

Yu Youyao, who happened to be covering her mouth and yawning, shot up from the couch at once. She touched the corner of her mouth and heaved a sigh of relief—thankfully, she hadn't drooled.

Zhou Linghuai noticed this small action of hers and nodded slightly at her. "Hello, cousin."

This little girl in front of him was a little chubby, but she had decent proportions, and she looked healthy and vibrant. Her small round face was charming and adorable, and she had attractive eyes. They were the perfect size, and they resembled phoenix eyes, with corners that were slightly raised, like the tail of a phoenix. Her eyes looked smoky while her gaze looked sentimental, like she was brooding and happy at the same time.

She was a natural beauty, and her charm was already beginning to shine through.

Yu Youyao bowed and said gently, "Hello, Cousin."

The little girl tilted her head and beamed brightly, her smile clean and clear. Zhou Linghuai handed over the gift he had prepared. "I don't have anything much. I can only express my sincerity by personally penning some calligraphy. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no," Yu Youyao said. She could not wait to receive the calligraphy, and opened it on the spot.

Beside her, Old Madam Yu's eyes couldn't help but widen and stare.

On the quality white paper, there were rows of small words written in Chinese characters. They cascaded like flowing water, with strokes that looked natural and elegant, yet strong and bold at the same time.

Just this handwriting alone was simply outstanding, and showed that he was most likely very learned and educated.

On it was written the "Sutra of the Medicine Buddha". There were elders in this household who paid respects to Buddha, so it was definitely a right move to gift these scriptures.

Before Zhou Linghuai prepared the gift, he must have inquired a little about the Yu Residence.

From this, it could be seen that not only was he a stunning talent, but he was also meticulous and thoughtful.

It was a pity that people with a disability were not allowed to become officials. Old Madam Yu looked at his leg and felt a sense of regret.

Yu Youyao saw that one of the scriptures looked very familiar, so she couldn't help but read it immediately. "May the body be clear as lapis lazuli, bright inside and out, clean of impurities, bright and boundless, majestic with virtue. May it live in peace, stay in good health."

It was the same scripture that she had seen in her dreams. She loved this passage.

Zhou Linghuai couldn't help but look up at the little girl, a trace of surprise flashing across his eyes.

“Cousin’s handwriting is really beautiful.” Yu Youyou held the piece of calligraphy preciously. Even though she didn’t know much about calligraphy, she could tell that the handwriting was wonderful. Thinking of her own handwriting, she couldn’t help but blush sheepishly. “Get someone to hang it in the room tomorrow.”

Chapter 13

Cousin, Does Your Leg Still Hurt?

Zhou Linghuai lowered his eyes and said, “Cousin, you flatter me.”

Yu Youyao rolled up the piece of calligraphy carefully and handed it to Chun Xiao. “Cousin, don’t be modest. If only my handwriting were half as good as yours.”

Zhou Linghuai was speechless for a moment. Looking at the girl’s round and chubby little face, his fingers suddenly felt inexplicably restless.

On the other hand, when Old Madam Yu saw her granddaughter’s envious and abashed expression, she couldn’t help but tease, “If you want to compare with your cousin, you have to write properly first. I’ve never seen such a big girl with handwriting that looks so much like a dog’s.”

Yu Youyao’s face reddened and she couldn’t help but stomp her little foot as she felt upset and frustrated. “Grandmother, you’re making fun of me, and in front of Cousin right now. Can’t you save me some face?”

Old Madam Yu couldn’t help but laugh aloud.

The others in the house also raised their handkerchiefs and covered their smiles. No wonder the Old Madam favored the Eldest Miss, as she was such an entertaining and vibrant character—who wouldn’t like her?

Even Zhou Linghuai couldn’t help but smile. He was a little curious about how ugly the handwriting of this little cousin of his was.

Nevertheless, after this little commotion, the tense and civil atmosphere in the house had become much more lively.

Then, Zhou Linghuai greeted Yu Shuangbai and also gave her a calligraphy piece that he had written. Yu Shuangbai accepted it happily, but as she wasn’t much interested in calligraphy, she handed it straight to her servant girl.

Next, it was Yu Jianjia’s turn.

After the two of them greeted each other, Yu Jianjia glanced at Zhou Linghuai’s leg and accepted the gift with a smile. “Thank you, Cousin.”

Zhou Linghuai nodded indifferently and turned around to continue greeting the others.

It was such a harmonious scene in the room.

Then, Yu Zongzheng patted on his shoulder and asked, “What happened to your leg?”

Old Madam Yu frowned. Her eldest son often said that Yao Yao did not have a sense of propriety. Meanwhile, he was already in his thirties or forties, yet he himself didn’t seem to have improved.

He had asked about something so sensitive in front of the whole family, even though Zhou Linghuai had just met everyone today. Didn't he know how to consider whether it was the appropriate place and time?

Couldn't he have asked anytime in the future when Zhou Linghuai was living in the Yu Residence?

He was too straightforward and tactless, causing unnecessary unhappiness.

In the Great Zhou Dynasty, there was a clear rule that Imperial Censors could not be punished for their speech. Hence, with his character, he simply had to remain in the Imperial Court of Censors.

Yu Zongshen also had the same thought, so he smiled and changed the topic. "Linghuai has traveled all the way from Youzhou to the capital. It's better for him to settle down first."

Yu Zongzheng realized that he had misspoken and felt a little awkward.

"Actually, I don't mind talking about it." Zhou Linghuai couldn't help but tighten his grip on the armrests of the wheelchair. He looked before he continued in a respectful tone, "Three years ago, I was having fun with my friends and accidentally fell off a horse. My leg was broken by the horse."

It was such a brief statement, and it seemed like he was merely stating a simple fact.

But none of those present were stupid.

Three years ago, the Zhou family had gotten involved with the You King and was implicated in a serious matter. The Zhou family was demoted and had lost their power. Since the start of time, there had always been people who just had to kick others when they were down. The incident with Zhou Linghuai's legs might not have been an accident.

Clearly, it was a traumatic memory.

There was silence in the room for a moment.

At this moment, Yu Youyao squatted beside Zhou Linghuai and looked up at him evenly. "Does your leg still hurt?"

Zhou Linghuai was stunned for a moment before shaking his head. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

"Cousin, don't be sad." For a second, Yu Youyao didn't know how to comfort him. Her eyebrows furrowed and she thought for a while before saying, "That Men-something man, what was his name?"

She frowned and looked slightly troubled, then tapped her little head with her small fist. For the first time, she truly felt the importance of being well read, and regretted having insufficient wisdom. "Anyway, he's said that whenever Heaven invests a person with great responsibilities, it first tries his resolve, exhausts his muscles and bones, starves his body, leaves him something something, and, and..."

Yu Youyao tried her best to squeeze the whole thing out, but after a long time, she still had nothing. Instead, she only turned beet red in the process.

Old Madam Yu guffawed until she almost fell over.

The others in the house also couldn't help but burst into stitches. It seemed like Missy's three years of homeschooling were wasted.

Only Yu Zongzheng had a sullen expression on his face. He felt that this daughter of his was ignorant and incompetent. She was simply an embarrassment. Just as he was about to open his mouth to berate her, he heard a hoarse voice. "In this way, his patience and endurance are developed, and his weaknesses are overcome. Words in 'Suffering is living, happiness is death' by Mencius."

It was Zhou Linghuai's voice.

"Yes, yes, yes, that's it." Yu Youyou's eyes lit up. She looked at her cousin with sparkling eyes full of admiration. "Cousin, not only do you write well, you're also good at reciting. You're really impressive."

The girl's innocent words were clear and frank. Just as the Medicine Master's Scripture stated, "May the body be like glass, clear inside and out, pure and unblemished."

"Thank you," said Zhou Linghuai.

After this commotion caused by Yu Youyao, the awkward air that was in the room was now mostly gone.

Zhou Linghuai had come into the capital with a servant called Chang An and another older servant called Uncle Sun, who was said to have some medical skills, and was guarding at the inn to look after luggage.

Butler Wu gathered a few capable servants and headed to the inn to bring over Zhou Linghuai's belongings.

Meanwhile, Nanny Liu brought Zhou Linghuai to the Lotus Pavilion to settle him down.

"Grandmother, I'll go over to take a look too." Before Old Madam Yu could agree, Yu Youyao had already skipped out.

Old Madam Yu shook her head but did not stop her.

After being sick for so long, this girl had become much more obedient than before, and it had been a while since she had played around. Although she had really grown a lot, her lively nature had not changed.

The Lotus Pavilion was the courtyard where Yu Miaofu used to live. It had been empty since she had gotten married, as there weren't many people in the residence. Yesterday, after receiving Zhou Linghuai's greeting card, Old Madam Yu ordered someone to tidy this place up.

Yu Youyao raised her little head to look at the plaque on the door. She frowned. "Nanny, Cousin is a man. The name 'Lotus Pavilion' isn't good. We have to change it."

Nanny Liu was stunned for a moment, as she hadn't expected this at all. "Oh, it's my oversight. What name does Young Master want? I'll get someone to change the name on the plaque."

Zhou Linghuai felt his heart skip a beat. He turned to look at his thoughtful cousin. "What do you think?"

Yu Youyao didn't know how to hold back, and instead suggested eagerly, "You're wearing green clothes today. How about naming it The Green Room!"

Nanny Liu's mouth twitched a little as she thought about how casually Eldest Miss was taking this.

"Cousin, cousin, let's call it The Green Room." Yu Youyao felt that this name sounded great. In her moment of excitement, she pulled on Zhou Linghuai's sleeve and shook it gently, her face filled with anticipation.

Zhou Linghuai had never liked to interact with others much. Just as he was about to quietly pull back his sleeve, he saw the little girl's chubby white fingers gently pinching a corner of his sleeve. For some reason, his arm stiffened for a moment, then he nodded. "Then let's call it the Green House. Thank you, cousin."

However, Zhou Linghuai had forgotten that in this world, there was such a thing called "pushing one's luck".

Chapter 14

Hit Them Hard

"Let me show you around the courtyard, Cousin."

Without warning, Yu Youyao pushed Chang An, who was behind the wheelchair, aside. She held onto the armrest of the wheelchair and gave it a push, but she was too weak. Again, she pushed as hard as she could, but it still did not move.

A corner of Zhou Linghuai's lips lifted slightly. "Let Chang An do it. He's used to it."

But Yu Youyou was unwilling to concede. "Cousin, don't underestimate me. I eat a big bowl of rice every meal and I'm very strong. I can definitely push you."

She had been drinking a drop of Spirit Dew every day and had become much stronger.

Chang An crossed his arms and watched with a cold expression, full of derision, while she pushed as hard as she could with a reddened face. How strong could a girl under the age of ten be? Not just anyone could push the Young Master.

And yet!

The very next instant, it was like he got slapped in the face.

Seeing that the little girl could not manage to push him forward, Zhou Linghuai touched the wheels on both sides and secretly exerted some strength.

At the same time, Yu Youyao had held her breath and pushed with all her might. To her shock, the wheelchair ran into the gate and hit it with a loud clang.

"Cousin..." Yu Youyou's face turned pale.

Caught off guard, Zhou Linghuai fell forward and almost fell out of his wheelchair.

Chang An, who had been behind him, immediately pushed Yu Youyao away and stabilized the wheelchair. “Young Master, how are you? I’ll go get Uncle Sun...”

“I’m fine.” Zhou Linghuai’s forehead was covered in sweat, and his face was getting paler. He held onto the wheelchair’s armrest, the veins on the back of his hands bulging, and his knuckles white.

Yu Youyao, who had caused this trouble, stood rooted to the ground at a loss. She wanted to step forward, but she did not dare to. Her eyes welled up with tears, but she did not dare to cry.

She had almost caused her cousin—who was such a dashing and magnificent young man—to fall from his wheelchair to the ground in a sorry state.

Zhou Linghuai slowly adjusted his clothes and looked at the little girl whose face had turned pale from fright. His eyes were as deep as an abyss, revealing a trace of gloom and coldness.

After causing trouble, she was now quiet and obedient. Her little head drooped as she looked listless and at a loss for words.

Suddenly, the anger in his heart had inexplicably dissipated.

On the other hand, after confirming that Young Master was fine, Chang An was furious. He glared at Yu Youyao and said, “Miss Yu, please be careful in future. My Young Master’s health isn’t good. He can’t handle your mischief. If you want to mess around, go find someone else.”

Zhou Linghuai frowned and chided, “Chang An, don’t be rude. Apologize to her.”

Chang An straightened his neck. “She was the one who had misjudged the situation, and almost caused Young Master to fall over. If anyone should apologize, it should be her apologizing to you.”

Zhou Linghuai’s voice turned sterner. “Do my orders mean nothing to you now?”

Chang An hung his head and his lips moved slightly.

“Cousin, I’m sorry. I didn’t do it on purpose.” Yu Youyao felt utterly ashamed. After saying this, she quickly turned around and ran away.

Zhou Linghuai pursed his lips as he watched her retreating figure.

“Young Master...” Chang An was a little anxious. The Young Master seemed to treat Eldest Miss Yu differently.

Zhou Linghuai retracted his gaze and said coldly, “Go in!”

Yu Youyao felt terrible. She ran back to the north courtyard. As she ran past a low wall, she saw two older maids sitting in the side courtyard, munching on melon seeds and chatting.

“That Young Master is really handsome. It’s a pity that he’s a cripple.”

Yu Youyou suddenly stopped in her tracks. She heard one of them continue, “He will be a Young Master in this residence from now on. Watch your words. Have you forgotten what happened to old maid Zhao and the others?”

“Oh please, who in this residence doesn’t know that Eldest Miss is Old Madam’s darling? Yet Old maid Zhao dared to spread rumors about her. She and the others deserved to be beaten and sold. Young Master Zhou is merely a disabled guest. How can he compare to Eldest Miss?”

“...”

Yu Youyao rushed toward the two women and glared at them. She questioned angrily, “What did you say?”

The two old women were so frightened that their faces turned white. They knelt on the ground with a thud and started slapping their own faces, all the while crying out for mercy.

In An Shou Hall, Old Madam Yu was flipping through the portraits sent by Nanny Liu. She pointed at one of the portraits of a long-faced woman—

“This Aunt Xu looks suitable. She used to work at the Empress Dowager’s palace and is well-versed in pharmacology. She’s good at cooking, incense fragrances, and character training. She’s just turned forty this year; just the right age. Yao Yao needs someone who can take care of her well.”

Just as she thought, Nanny Liu smiled and agreed. “Old Madam has good taste. Those you like always prove to be great choices. I also think this one’s good.”

Old Madam Yu looked at the portrait carefully again. The more she looked at it, the more satisfied she was. “This Aunt Xu is so qualified. Why haven’t other families in the capital grabbed her up first?”

The palace servants released had always been very popular. Many of them would be booked in advance before they even left the palace. Aunt Xu was the most popular one in this batch.

“There’s something you might not have heard. Aunt Xu’s family had suffered a disaster when she was young. Everyone else had perished, so that’s when she had entered the palace. Eventually, after she received permission to leave the palace, she wanted to find a good family to spend her later years peacefully. Many households in the capital took a fancy to her, but she didn’t choose any of them.” Nanny Liu had always handled everything thoroughly and knew everything clearly.

Women in the Great Zhou Dynasty could not establish a household on their own. Hence, other than marrying again, someone like Aunt Xu, who did not have any other family, could only hope to find a kind family to work for.

A respectable nanny from a big family, such as Nanny Liu, was considered half a mistress of the household. In the future, she could also spend her elderly years in the same residence. It was not a bad way to live.

Aunt Xu was a respectable person in the Empress Dowager’s palace, and was even more qualified than Nanny Liu. She did not have to sell herself short.

When Old Madam Yu heard this, she clapped her hands together and smiled happily. "That's good. Our family doesn't have many people, and our back house is a clean and quiet place. Aunt Xu deserves to belong in our family. Go and ask her what she thinks. Tell her that if she joins us, she'll only need to take care of Yao Yao, who'll just need to be taught and reminded of some rules. Our family will definitely treat her well."

Nanny Liu smiled and agreed.

At this moment, Dong Mei, an old personal maidservant of Old Madam Yu's, lifted the curtain and entered. "Old Madam, bad news. Eldest Miss has ordered her servants to tie up two old maids. She even said that she wanted to give them 30 strokes of the paddle and sell them off..."

When Old Madam Yu heard this, she understood immediately. The beating in the residence a few days ago must not have been a thorough warning to the servants. It had only been half a month since then, but some of them had already reverted to their old ways of spouting nonsense. Old Madam Yu got very upset. She quickly asked Nanny Liu to help her over there to take a look.

When she reached the place, she could hear Yu Youyao's angry voice. "You old maids. You don't do your jobs well, only knowing how to avoid work and gather to gossip. Cousin is your Young Master. How dare you gossip about him? Grandmother is kind-hearted and has always been generous to you servants. But instead of doing your job properly, you're here sizing up your young master's character. Beat them, and hit them hard."

Chapter 15

Wanting to Treat Cousin Well

The two old women wailed desperately again.

At the side, there were two other old servants who were holding the paddles. They stood still and stole uncertain glances at the fuming Eldest Miss, unsure of whether to start hitting or not.

Yu Youyao's eyes widened incredulously and her face turned red with anger. "What? My words don't work anymore? You don't have to listen to me?"

"This..." The two old servants looked at each other and hesitated. "Miss, should we report this to Old Madam first?"

Yu Youyao stomped her feet in anger.

Outside, Old Madam Yu entered the courtyard with a dark expression. "Eldest Miss asked you to beat them. Why aren't you doing as told?"

The two old servants jumped, dropped to their knees, and greeted, "Old Madam."

Old Madam Yu glanced sharply at the two old maids who were sprawled on the ground and said sternly, "Listen up, from now on, anyone in the residence who doesn't do their job well and only gossips about their masters will be punished with 30 strokes of the paddle."

Upon hearing the Old Madam's words, the two old servants immediately raised their paddles to hit them hard. The two old maids on the ground knew that they were doomed and wailed loudly again.

Feeling offended and aggrieved, Yu Youyao rushed into her grandmother's arms. "Grandmother."

Old Madam Yu patted on her back and comforted her. “Just dealing with a few insensible servants has made you feel so hurt? Weren’t you quite fierce and impressive just a second ago?”

“They were too much. They actually said that Cousin, he, he... I was angry for a moment, so...” Yu Youyou stomped her feet. She hesitated and trailed off when she recalled how they had gossiped among themselves saying that Cousin was just a cripple who had come to visit, unable to finish her sentence as she felt uncomfortable and terrible about it.

Of course Old Madam Yu understood what she was trying to say. She said reassuringly, “Yao Yao, you did the right thing today. You should reward and punish clearly when dealing with the servants.”

Yu Youyao nodded and listened.

At this moment, Yang Shuwan had also received the news and immediately rushed over with Nanny Liu. She bowed to Old Madam Yu deferentially.

Old Madam Yu said coldly, “You’ve been the one in charge of this household, and Nanny Liu has never subverted your authority either. But look at all of them—how are they behaving? If you’re really incapable of managing everyone, you shall not be in charge anymore.”

With that, she ignored Yang Shuwan’s pale face and let Yu Youyao help her out of the side courtyard.

Yang Shuwan stood rooted to the ground as she pulled at her handkerchief furiously.

No matter what, she was the mistress of the household and Yu Youyao’s mother. The servants in her residence were tied up, beaten up, and instructed to be sold off without anyone even informing her. They really didn’t take her seriously.

If it were Old Madam who’d given the instructions, she could let it go. After all, there was still something called ‘filial piety.’ However, Yu Youyao was just a little girl who relied on the Old Madam’s authority to climb over her head and abuse her power.

What was this incident supposed to mean?

Could it be that she was already trying to interfere in the management of household matters?

That commotion in the courtyard had caused a huge scene. Yu Youyao supported her grandmother as they walked along the corridor towards An Shou Hall.

“I’m old and have limited energy. All I hope for is harmony at home, so I try to close one eye to everything and let things go. Your stepmother was raised by a concubine and wasn’t taught well. All day long, she’s either scheming to possess everything in the house or jockeying for power with the others. She doesn’t have the demeanor of a proper first wife at all. I really can’t stand to watch her behavior.”

In the past, her granddaughter still seemed too naive and innocent, so Old Madam Yu naturally wouldn’t have said such things to her.

But today, when she saw her granddaughter dealing with the servants, her words and actions seemed to have become more principled. Thinking about it carefully, she now felt an urge to teach more rules and principles to her granddaughter.

Yu Youyao's expression had become calmer. Upon seeing this, Old Madam Yu changed the topic. "Yao Yao, you are not young anymore. You should start learning the ropes to managing some household matters. Let Nanny Liu teach you more, she's very wise. No one in the residence is as capable as her. If you can pick up just 10-20% from her abilities, it will already be much more useful than you reading the 'Analects of Women' or the 'Female Virtue'. I guarantee that it will help you boundlessly."

It was fine if Yao Yao couldn't study well; after all, a woman who labored well wouldn't suffer. She already had plans for Yao Yao for when she'd grown just a little older, to let Nanny Liu teach her how to manage the household. That was the serious business for women.

Yu Youyao did not care much about managing the household, but since her grandmother wanted her to, she would try to learn a little to make her grandmother happy. However, there was something else that was making her much more concerned at the moment.

"Grandmother, Cousin uses a wheelchair to move and go around and doesn't have great mobility. Although The Green House is good, it's still a little inconvenient..." Yu Youyao hesitated to continue.

Old Madam Yu looked at her granddaughter for a long time before saying, "You're being very concerned about your cousin."

Yu Youyao stuck out her tongue sheepishly. "Cousin is handsome and his handwriting is beautiful. I just think that someone like him should live a good life, and shouldn't be underestimated by others. Plus, the moment I saw Cousin, I felt very close to him, as if I'd known him from before. I want to treat him well."

Old Madam Yu, who believed in Buddhism, smiled and said, "The relationships between people depend on fate. You probably have fate with him!"

Yao Yao was just like her mother—anyone whom she liked, she would try her best to treat well.

However, if she didn't like someone, she wouldn't pay much attention to them even if she had plenty of free time.

Zhou Linghuai had a physical disability, but he had an extraordinary temperament. He didn't seem to be an ordinary person, so it was also a good thing that Yao Yao was on good terms with him.

"Then, Grandmother, I..." Yu Youyao was very happy that her grandmother did not object to her getting close to her cousin.

Old Madam Yu dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "I won't interfere in the matters between you young people. Go and play to your heart's content."

After hearing her grandmother's words, Yu Youyao happily returned to the house and called all the servants over. She rummaged through the house and picked out many things.

Chun Xiao didn't know what her young mistress was doing. Even when she asked, Yu Youyao would look mysterious and behave secretively.

Soon, it was already noon. Chun Xiao came over and said, "Young Mistress, Old Madam has instructed us to have dinner at her house, to welcome Young Master Zhou. Everyone in the residence has to be present. For lunch, you can have it on your own here."

The maidservant began to set the dishes out on the table. Although it was a simple lunch of about four to five small dishes, they were delicious, and were all Yu Youyao's favorite food.

Yu Youyao opened the lid of one of the blue-and-white porcelain bowls. Inside was a glazed swallow that had been stewed for hours.

Recalling how she had almost caused her cousin to fall today, Yu Youyou felt guilty. She secretly condensed half a drop of spiritual dew and added it into the swallow. She then instructed Chun Xiao, "Send this to Cousin's room."

Chun Xiao agreed with a smile, but she wondered in her heart, 'Eldest Miss had just met the young master today. Why is she so concerned about him?'

In The Green House, Zhou Linghuai was also having his lunch.

The kitchen staff had asked Chang An about Young Master Zhou's food preferences and prepared a few light dishes of Huaiyang cuisine that would suit his palate. They were exquisite and delicious, but it was a pity that Zhou Linghuai did not have much of an appetite. After eating a few mouthfuls, he put down his chopsticks.

Chapter 16

Hemoptysis and Coma

Chang An advised, "Young Master, you should eat more. You've traveled a long way and must be tired. You have to eat and drink well to replenish your energy."

Zhou Linghuai glanced at him coldly. "You talk too much!"

Chang An shut his mouth and did not dare to say anything else. However, he felt that his young master's words were due to the incident from before. After holding back for a while, he still felt indignant and eventually said, "Young Master, I just heard from a few maidservants in the courtyard that when Eldest Miss Yu left The Green House in the morning, she had lost her temper and ordered someone to tie up two old maids. They received 30 strokes of the paddle and were dragged away immediately. Tsk, she's so arrogant at such a young age."

So, you should stay away from her in the future, to avoid being harmed by her.

Zhou Linghuai's throat was itchy. He held up his light blue handkerchief and coughed, then removed the handkerchief and glanced at it casually. The bright red color on it was shocking—he had coughed up blood. However, he put away the handkerchief without even informing Chang An, then asked hoarsely, "But did you find out why those two old maids were beaten?"

Chang An thought to himself, "Since when did you become so meticulous about someone else's matters?" However, out loud he only said, "I heard they had loose tongues."

She had them beaten so severely over just a few words. For someone her young age, she sure was vicious. From this incident, Young Master should realize her true colors.

However, Zhou Linghuai had a faint guess and understanding, as he thought back to how the old maids from the kitchen, who had come to ask about his food preferences not long ago, had been much too solicitous.

Looking at the few light dishes in front of him, Zhou Linghuai suddenly had an appetite. He lifted his chopsticks again and picked up a bowl of clear soup.

There were pieces of emerald cabbage in the white bone soup. It looked light and refreshing. The meatballs were also juicy and bouncy, with perfect seasoning. They were delicious.

Chang An's eyes widened with surprise as he watched his young master, who usually had a small appetite, eat the big meatball and finish the remaining dishes one by one. He even drank a whole bowl of soup.

At this moment, Old Maid Wang, who had just been assigned to The Green Room yesterday, led Chun Xiao in.

Holding a wooden tray, Chun Xiao bowed respectfully to Zhou Linghuai. "Young Mistress said that Young Master must be tired from having traveled all the way here. She has ordered me to send this box of premium birds nest here to nourish Young Master."

Zhou Linghuai's lips curled upwards. "Thank Cousin for her concern."

Chang An stepped forward unhappily and received the wooden tray. He lifted the blue-and-white porcelain cutlery off the tray and placed them on the table.

Chun Xiao lowered her head, saying, "I won't disturb Young Master's meal. I'll take my leave."

Old Maid Wang led Chun Xiao out. Chang An glanced at the scarce leftovers on the table, then looked down at the porcelain bowl in front of him. He wondered if Young Master could still eat?

As it turned out, he had really underestimated his young master.

Indeed, Zhou Linghuai could still eat.

The birds nest with rock sugar melted in his mouth. It was neither too sweet nor too heavy, and there was a faint lotus fragrance that refreshed his palate and soul.

After finishing a whole bowl of it, Zhou Linghuai suddenly felt as if there was a stone in his chest. It was heavy, suffocating, and uncomfortable. He couldn't help but cover his mouth with his handkerchief and coughed continuously.

"Young Master, what's wrong?" Chang An was shocked. He quickly poured a cup of hot tea.

"Cough, cough, cough... cough..." Zhou Linghuai coughed until his lungs hurt, until it almost seemed like he would even cough out his internal organs. He coughed without stopping, and couldn't even get a drink of water.

Chang An panicked. "Young Master, I-I'll get Uncle Sun immediately..."

Ever since the young master broke his leg, his body had completely collapsed. While he did manage to recover a little after recuperating for three years, this journey to the capital had been a long and

arduous one, taking a toll on his body. Naturally, he fell ill along the way. After entering the capital, he took a few days to heal. When he felt better, he sent someone to deliver a greeting card to the Yu Residence.

After all this, the young master's already poor health took another hit and weakened even further.

As soon as they entered the capital, Uncle Sun told them that Young Master had emptied his pockets along the way. If he fell sick again, it would be disastrous and potentially fatal.

Zhou Linghuai coughed a few more times. Suddenly, he felt a foul stench rush into his mouth from his chest. He couldn't help but choke and spit out a mouthful of black blood onto the handkerchief.

Seeing that the young master had coughed up blood, Chang An, who was about to call Uncle Sun, retreated a few steps and exclaimed, "Young Master!"

Zhou Linghuai fell limp against the back of his wheelchair. Chang An called out to him a few more times, but did not manage to wake him up. He ran out in panic, shouting as he ran, "Uncle Sun, Uncle Sun..."

Uncle Sun, who lived next door, heard the commotion and rushed over. He almost bumped right into Chang An at the door.

"Uncle Sun." When Chang An saw Uncle Sun, it was as if he had seen his savior. He was so agitated that he was about to cry. "Uncle Sun, Young Master coughed up blood. Hurry come take a look. Young Master, he, he..."

"What? He coughed up blood?" Uncle Sun's expression changed drastically when he heard that, as it meant that Young Master was on the brink of death. Stumbling over himself, he immediately rushed into the house without even waiting for Chang An to finish speaking.

Chang An followed close behind, looking completely panicked.

Uncle Sun first picked up the blue handkerchief that had fallen to the ground. He immediately saw the smear of bright blood. His heart sank, and he flipped the handkerchief over. When he saw the large ball of thick, black, and putrid blood on it, he frowned and began to check Zhou Linghuai's body before taking his pulse.

Chang An couldn't help but ask, "Uncle Sun, what happened to Young Master? He was fine before, so why did he suddenly cough up blood?"

Uncle Sun glanced at him. Chang An immediately quietened and did not dare to make another sound, out of fear of disturbing Uncle Sun.

After a long while, Uncle Sun asked, "Was there anything unusual about Young Master today?"

Chang An thought about it carefully and explained in detail about everything that had happened throughout the day. Then, he emphasized, "Other than Eldest Miss Yu almost causing Young Master to fall from his wheelchair earlier today, there was nothing unusual." At this point, he paused and suddenly said, "By the way, Young Master also ate the premium bird's nest that Eldest Miss Yu had sent over. He seemed to like it very much and finished it clean."

Uncle Sun immediately noticed the porcelain bowl on the table. He reached out for it and lowered his head to smell it. After pondering for a while, he took another few deep sniffs and did not speak for a long time.

Seeing Uncle Sun's serious expression, Chang An's face gradually turned even paler. He looked ashamed, anxious, and resentful. After holding it in for a while, he couldn't help but ask angrily, "Uncle Sun, how is Young Master? Is there a problem with the birds nest that Eldest Miss Yu gave to him?"

By now, his face had turned red with anger. "I knew that Yu Youyao had ill intentions. Previously, she almost caused Young Master to fall from his wheelchair. Now, she has harmed Young Master..."

Seeing that his young master had such a pale face and was leaning against the wheelchair weakly, Chang An felt dejected and ashamed. "It's all my fault. It's Young Master's first time in the Yu Residence. I should have been more cautious. I shouldn't have let him eat anything that was questionable or suspicious. I harmed the young master..."

Chapter 17

Terminal Lucidity?

Seeing how Chang An was mumbling to himself and sounding more ridiculous by the second, Uncle Sun glared at him. "I haven't even said anything. What are you muttering on about?"

Chang An was stunned. Just as he was about to open his mouth to ask...

Uncle Sun had already turned around and pinched Zhou Linghuai hard. The unconscious Zhou Linghuai slowly woke up. Chang An was so surprised and delighted that he immediately threw himself onto his young master. "Young Master, you're awake..."

Zhou Linghuai did not say anything, but merely glanced at Uncle Sun and then at the overjoyed Chang An. "What happened to me?"

Uncle Sun smiled at him and asked, "Young Master, how do you feel now? Do you feel uncomfortable anywhere?"

Zhou Linghuai shook his head and pondered for a moment. "This is the most comfortable and refreshed I've felt in the past three years."

Thinking back to the Young Master coughing his lungs out just a moment ago, and all the blood on his handkerchief, Chang An's heart skipped a beat. He was shocked. What did Young Master mean by that? Was he suffering from terminal lucidity?

Uncle Sun stroked his long beard and smiled. "That's good."

Before Zhou Linghuai could speak, Chang An could not help but say with agitation, "Uncle Sun, Young Master was clearly coughing badly just now and vomited blood. Why do you still say that this is a good thing? Take a closer look at Young Master, he..."

Before he could finish speaking, his leg was kicked by Uncle Sun, and he cried out in pain. Uncle Sun then glared at him and said angrily, "You rascal, what are rambling about now? Are you saying that I'm wrong? And stop it with all your gesticulating."

After being lectured by Uncle Sun, Chang An finally shut his mouth obediently, not daring to say anything more.

Uncle Sun took the blue handkerchief and pointed at the patch of bright red blood on it. “Young Master, you’d fallen ill from the long journey, and the ailment had spread through your body. Coughing up such a mouthful of blood is very serious and it meant you wouldn’t even live past tonight. Even if you survived, it had already shortened your lifespan, and you wouldn’t live for more than another three years.”

Zhou Linghuai nodded. After coughing out that mouthful of blood, he had indeed felt that his body had become weaker again, and had already expected this.

This blood was different from the one Young Master had vomited out earlier. When did Young Master cough up such scarlet blood? How could he not have known at all? Chang An widened his eyes in shock and opened his mouth to speak.

But Uncle Sun turned over the blue handkerchief and pointed at the lump of black and smelly blood on it. “Vile blood accumulates in all the internal organs. For some reason, Young Master has spat out this mouthful of it. It’s naturally a good thing for the vile blood to be expelled from the body.” After saying that, he turned to look at Chang An. “Do you understand now?”

Chang An lowered his head, not daring to say anything else, but feeling great relief in his heart.

Zhou Linghuai was also a little surprised. He glanced at the porcelain bowl on the table, his expression thoughtful.

Uncle Sun noticed his gaze and said, “Young Master, could it be that you coughed out the vile blood accumulated in your internal organs because you had eaten this bowl of bird’s nest?”

Zhou Linghuai said nothing.

Uncle Sun did not continue probing. “This bowl of bird’s nest is quite special indeed. It has to be brewed with an extremely good medicinal dew. It makes sense if Eldest Miss Yu was the one who sent it over. The Xie family in Quanzhou was known for their premium medicinal brew, and it was widely popular at one time as well. Although it failed to be passed down through generations properly, it’s not surprising that she still has some exceptional secret medicinal recipes on hand. This medicine heals the soul, nourishes the Qi, and strengthens the bones. It tackles Young Master’s illness. If you can eat it often, it will be extremely beneficial.”

Without an even expression, Zhou Linghuai nodded. “I understand.”

...

Yu Youyao had no idea about what had happened at The Green House. After dinner, she asked Chun Xiao to call the craftsmen and gardeners in charge of repairs and renovation in the residence. She also found a few capable old maids and servants, gathering a dozen people or so in total. Together, they headed to The Green House.

Meanwhile, in the house, Zhou Linghuai’s pulse was being taken by Uncle Sun. When he heard the commotion, he had Chang An to push him out to take a look.

Yu Youyao had already gotten her men to remove the threshold in front of the courtyard and changed it to a low, sloped one instead. She had even instructed a few old maids to shovel the flowers, wood, and pebbles that were in the way, and replaced them with green bricks that were smooth and wide.

Everyone in the courtyard was in full swing.

Seeing Zhou Linghuai come out, Yu Youyao led the maidservant over. "Cousin, Grandmother asked me to bring some people over to renovate The Green House, to make it more convenient to live in."

Zhou Linghuai looked at her with a deep gaze. "Thank you, Cousin."

The day before, the resident's servants had already seen him at the inn, so of course the old madam was already aware that his leg was broken and that he was in a wheelchair.

If they had wanted to renovate the courtyard, they would have done so yesterday when they were cleaning up the courtyard. Why would they wait until everyone had moved into the residence today to do so?

It was most likely because the young mistress had almost made him fall off the wheelchair in the morning. She probably felt guilty and went to look for Old Madam. And that was why all this was taking place.

Yu Youyao felt sheepish under his gaze. "There are more places in the courtyard that need to be redone. It might be a little noisy. Why don't you let Chun Xiao bring you around the residence so that you can familiarize yourself with the environment?"

"It's fine." Zhou Linghuai shook his head, his voice tinged with warmth. "I'll just watch from the side."

Hearing this, Yu didn't insist further. "Okay, then. If there's anything you're dissatisfied with later, remember to let me know."

Zhou Linghuai nodded.

The servants were quick and efficient in their work. The uneven areas in the courtyard were flattened one by one. Wooden ramps were placed beside the steps to make it easier for the wheelchair to go up and down. The thresholds in the house were also changed to low ones that were more accessible for a wheelchair.

The study, the bedroom, and the hall were all covered with jacquard-weave rugs. These rugs were thick and hairless, so it wouldn't be difficult to push the wheelchair across it. The table and chairs with sharp corners had also been replaced with round tables and round stools. Fragile items such as porcelain vases were also replaced with delicate wood carvings, elegant bamboo carvings, and so on.

After laboring for an entire afternoon, The Green House had changed drastically. It was very convenient for the wheelchair to move around inside and outside the house.

Yu Youyao also personally placed a very expensive 'Four Treasures of the Study' set on the table. Then, she said to Zhou Linghuai, "In a while, I'll pick a few vases of flowers and place them around the house. What flowers do you like?"

Zhou Linghuai looked around the study. "You decide."

Yu Youyao did not decline. "We could put a few vases of expensive orchids in the study. A few pots of bamboo on the windowsill. It will exude an academia ambiance. Next, we could also pick a few vases of hanging orchids and hang them along the veranda, which will look good and won't get in the way. We have to plant a grape vine in the courtyard and build a rack for it. We'll rest in its shade during summer and eat its fruits in autumn."

Zhou Linghuai pushed his own wheelchair and followed behind the little girl, listening to her chatter about what kinds of flowers to place here and what kinds of plants to grow there.

She even wanted the large vat in the courtyard to be planted with a lotus stalk, truly helping the place live up to its name—The Green House.

At the edge of the courtyard wall, vines were to grow all over the wall, and flowers would bloom all year round.

Finally, she pointed to the room at the side of the courtyard. "We'll need to build a small kitchen there."

Zhou Linghuai also had the same idea. He had to take his medicine very often and regularly, without fail, and he couldn't head to the main kitchen all the time, as it would be too inconvenient.

The young lady had already considered everything for him.

Chapter 18

Warm Hospitality

After reorganizing the entire courtyard, Yu Youyao turned to Zhou Linghuai. "Cousin, is there anything else you don't like?"

Zhou Linghuai smiled. She had picked out everything that could pose an inconvenience, even ones he had not thought of. "Everything's great!"

Yu Youyao was very delighted to be affirmed. "Well, as long as you like it."

"It's been a long afternoon. You should go home and get some rest." The sun had set, and the young woman must be tired after her busy afternoon.

Yu Youyao was indeed feeling quite exhausted, so she nodded. "See you at dinner."

Zhou Linghuai nodded.

When it was time for dinner, the families from the two houses of the Yu Residence gathered together, and separate tables were prepared for the men and women. There were dishes of every kind, as well as wine, snacks, desserts, and fruits. It was a sumptuous feast.

Zhou Linghuai wasn't in good health and couldn't drink, so in place of wine, he offered a toast with tea instead, one by one to each elder in the residence, to show his respect.

With the whole family gathered together, it was such a lively scene!

Yu Youyao secretly poured herself a glass of plum wine when her grandmother wasn't paying attention to her. After pouring the wine, she straightened her back self-consciously. Sitting upright, she looked obedient and polite, but her eyes were big and bright, sparkling as they darted around.

When she was sure that no one was looking at her, she broke into a wide grin—like a cat that had just stolen a fish.

She thought that she had done it without anyone noticing, but little did she know that her every move had been noticed by Zhou Linghuai, who was sitting opposite her.

He couldn't help but chuckle, so he raised his teacup to cover the faint smile on his lips.

He was actually starting to feel that this noisy dinner was becoming more interesting and less unbearable.

Yu Youyao was unaware that her little actions had already been spotted by someone. Holding the small cup with both hands, she drank from it secretly.

The plum wine tasted both sweet and sour, which Yu Youyao had always liked.

However, her grandmother was very strict with her. Other than allowing her to drink a small glass during the holidays for good luck, she was usually not allowed to drink at all. Her grandmother said that it was too improper for girls to drink.

Zhou Linghuai, who had just taken a bite of food and looked up, couldn't help but pause to stare for a moment.

The young lady's lips were stained with wine, and she looked lovely. Her face was a little flushed, and her black, bright eyes were dazzling. Probably because she had a low alcohol tolerance, she was a little tipsy after two small glasses of the plum wine. She sat obediently in her seat like a little doll, without moving or making a fuss, looking delicate and adorable.

Realizing her granddaughter hadn't spoken in a while, Old Madam Yu turned to check on her, and immediately found herself both angry and amused. She patted on her granddaughter's head. "You gluttonous girl!"

"Grandmother?" Yu Youyao called out softly. She blinked and looked up at Old Madam Yu. Her eyes were dewy, with pupils that were black and shiny like agate gemstones, looking completely dazed.

Old Madam Yu couldn't get angry at the sight of that. She turned around and asked Nanny Liu to pour a cup of sobering-up tea.

Since there was a banquet at home, such tea had already been prepared beforehand.

Nanny Liu smiled as she served Yu Youyao some of it.

But Yu Youyao wrinkled her nose as it tasted bitter and fishy. "This tastes bad. It stinks."

Old Madam Yu was amused. "Let's see if you still dare to drink secretly in the future."

The Plum Wine was a type of fruit wine, so it was very light. Normally, three to five cups wouldn't have much effect, and it usually wouldn't get Yu Youyao drunk. It was just that she was a little excited and got a little tipsy, but she would be fine after drinking the tea and resting for a while.

After the feast, the maidservants brought some mouthwash in. The old maids cleared the table, then refilled it with exquisite pastries, dried fruits, and snacks. Only then did everyone start chatting.

Yu Zongzheng asked Zhou Linghuai about his life in Youzhou.

Zhou Linghuai lowered his eyes and said in a hoarse voice, "After the incident at home, both my father and mother passed on. Grandmother's health declined, and she didn't have any relatives or friends. The clan found a reason to cut ties with us. Fortunately, I learned how to make ink and was able to make ends meet. But Grandmother really suffered..."

Yu Zongzheng was furious when he heard this. He couldn't help but exclaim, "The Zhou Clan is too much!"

The position of Commander was an official position that had a longstanding lineage. It was also considered a rather grand position, so the Zhou Clan must have benefited quite a bit from Zhou Linghuai in the past as well.

However, after the incident in Youzhou, officials of all positions were either killed, exiled, or imprisoned. The reason that the Yu Residence had the guts to mediate on behalf of the Zhou family was also because of the family's generations of kindness.

Even the emperor showed mercy and grace, yet the Zhou clan did not bother to help this orphan and widow at all.

But Yu Zongzheng was just an outsider after all, so he didn't continue to say anything further. He only patted Zhou Linghuai's shoulder and said, "You and Aunt have suffered for the past few years. From now on, you can live in peace at our residence."

And he added some more words of concern and encouragement.

Yu Zongshen asked Zhou Linghuai about his studies and came up with a few questions to test him on the spot.

Zhou Linghuai answered everything with ease.

Yu Zongshen asked a few more questions from this year's imperial examination. Zhou Linghuai was accurate and concise, and his answers were even more insightful than those of this year's top scholar.

Upon realizing Zhou Linghuai's standard, Yu Zongshen was secretly shocked. He turned to Yu Shanyan and Yu Shanxin and said, "Although Linghuai is only a few years older than the two of you, he is already incredibly knowledgeable. You can ask him for guidance in the future."

After saying that, he couldn't help but glance at Zhou Linghuai's legs.

If his legs were intact, he definitely would have been in the top three positions of the Imperial Rankings this year. He was an outstanding talent, in no way inferior to Song Mingzhao.

Furthermore, Zhou Linghuai was only a little over 14 years old, which was a year younger than Song Mingzhao.

Hearing their father's high praise for Cousin Zhou, Yu Shanyan and Yu Shanxin took the opportunity to talk to him. The three of them chatted, and the more they talked, the more they got along.

Yu Youyao listened with a tilted head, her eyes sparkling.

On the left, Yu Qingning stretched out her arm and passed a plate of sweet fruits to Yu Youyao. "Big Sister, have some fruits."

Yu Youyao thanked her and ate a piece.

Yu Qingning was also eight years old, two months younger than Yu Jianjia, and she had an extroverted personality. Yu Youyao's father cared more about this daughter of his concubine than about her. At the very least, she had never heard of Yu Qingning being scolded.

Yu Youyao did not interact with her often.

"Eldest Sis, you and Third Sis were both sick previously, but why did you lose so much weight? Third Sis doesn't seem to have changed much." Yu Qingning turned to look at Yu Jianjia several times.

In the past year, Yu Jianjia had been sick most of the time, but she didn't look much different each time she fell sick or recovered, and did not have much weight gain or weight loss. However, she still coughed and panted often.

When she was younger, Yu Youyao had once said that Yu Jianjia was deliberately pretending to be sick, but was berated when her aunt had heard about it.

Yu Jianjia bit her lip and looked aggrieved. "I've lost some weight too, but you probably couldn't tell because I was thin to begin with."

Chapter 19

Marquis Heir Song Mingzhao

Yu Qingning pursed her lips, not seeming to believe her.

Yu swallowed the fruit and pressed a handkerchief to her mouth. "I've shed a lot of baby fat this time, so that's why I've lost so much weight. When you're my age, you should also lose your baby weight to grow taller."

Ever since that dream she had, it seemed like everything became clear to her.

Yu Jianjia had a heart disease, but only her grandmother, father, and Yang Shuwan knew about it. Everyone else thought that her body was just a little weak as she was born prematurely and had some congenital defects.

In the nightmare, she had only found out about this after she was married into the Marquis Residence and was used as a medicine source.

Yu Jianjia would occasionally suffer from chest tightness and dizziness. In serious cases, she would suffer from chest pain and have difficulty breathing. She had been managing her health with the best medicines, so that she never appeared that sickly.

"I see!" Yu Qingning scratched the tip of her nose and rolled her eyes. "Eldest Sis, Cousin has just entered the residence today, yet you have already punished the old maids and created so much ruckus by bringing so many things from your room over to The Green House. You're showing too much concern for him. I've never seen you so attentive to Eldest Brother and Second Brother."

She had heard that the tables, chairs, and ornaments in The Green House, and even the antique calligraphy, paintings, and literary supplies, were all from Yu Youyao's own private collection.

Everything was magnificent and valuable.

Eldest Sis hadn't shared any of these precious items with her own sister, yet she had passed it all to this outsider—that was too much!

Hearing the jealousy in Yu Qingning's tone, Yu Youyao did not even bother to glance at her.

"Grandmother misses Grandaunt and feels sorry for Cousin who has suffered all these years. If you put in more effort, you can also try to compete with Grandaunt for Grandmother's affection."

Yu Youyao had thrown out such a beautiful retort that even Old Madam Yu couldn't help but look at her in a different light.

Yao Yao had really turned it around with just a line.

Although Old Madam Yu was happy to see Yao Yao getting close to her cousin, she had also been a little concerned.

But after hearing what Yao Yao said, even Old Madam Yu felt that it made sense. This was how it should be. Even if outsiders heard it, they would praise her for being so loyal and kind.

She would get the credit, though Yao Yao was the one who did everything.

Yu Qingning was stunned for a moment before she understood. Without her grandmother's permission, how would Yu Youyao have dared to create so much trouble for everyone?

She had embarrassed herself and was momentarily speechless. Quickly, she turned around and approached Yu Lianyu, the fifth daughter of the second house, to chat with her.

Yu Shuangbai puffed up her cheeks and glanced at Yu Qingning. She snorted and said to Yu Youyao, "What a troublemaker. She thinks everyone else is a fool. If she dares to use my big brother and second brother's names as cannon fodder again, I'll tear her mouth apart."

Yu Youyao agreed wholeheartedly.

However, in her heart, she felt that although she was close to her eldest brother and second brother and did like them, they were still from separate houses after all.

In her dream, she was locked up in the small courtyard by Song Mingzhao, being tortured and tormented while her father hadn't bothered about her at all. Her second uncle, eldest brother, and second brother hadn't seemed to care about her either.

But her cousin was different. There was no one in his family anymore. From now on, he would be a member of the main house, so of course they had to be closer. With a man in the main house who could take charge, the Marquis Residence would not dare to do as they pleased.

Yu Shuangbai took a bite out of a piece of sweet fruit before she changed the topic. "Ever since your recovery, you've stopped looking for me to play together. The last time I wanted to go feed the fish in the lotus pond together, you didn't agree."

There was a lotus pond which had all kinds of koi fish in it. By throwing some bait in, a large group of colorful koi would swim over to snatch the food. In the past, the both of them often climbed onto the rocks by the pond and counted the number of koi fish.

Yu Youyao was a little annoyed. "The lotus pond clashes with my Four Pillars of Destiny

. I won't play at the lotus pond anymore. Don't call me there in the future. I won't go even if you call me."

Yu Shuangbai rolled her eyes. "Fine, I guess it's once bitten, twice shy for you. Do you really have to avoid the pond like that?"

She had just compared Yang Shuwan and Yu Jianjia to sly, vicious snakes who had "bitten" Yu Youyao. Although the two of them had been whispering between themselves, it was still heard by the others nearby.

Yu Jianjia felt an itch in her throat. She covered her mouth with her handkerchief and coughed lightly.

Yang Shuwan held her breath and turned to look at Madam Yao. Seeing Madam Yao sitting calmly and sipping on her tea, as if not hearing Yu Shuangbai's insolent remark, she was furious.

This Madam Yao couldn't even raise her daughter to be well-mannered, yet she has the cheek to talk about being a noble daughter from a scholarly family. What a joke.

Yang Shuwan did not hide her glaring. Madam Yao saw it but didn't take it seriously.

It was not a big deal for the young ladies to chatter and gossip a little with each other. Madam Yang only felt offended because she had a guilty conscience.

If she were to stop the children from talking, that would only make things more awkward for Madam Yang.

Concubine He pushed a bowl of pear paste dessert to Yu Jianjia and was all smiles as she said, "Jianjia, you were fine just a while ago. Why are you suddenly coughing again? Are you feeling unwell again? Quick, have some pear paste dessert to smoothen your throat. I heard that Eldest Miss had specially instructed that this pear paste had to be prepared for tonight."

Her every line seemed to be showing concern, but upon deeper thought, every word hit a nerve. Yu Jianjia's face was pale. She lowered the handkerchief from her mouth and thanked Concubine He gently, but had no intention of actually eating the pear paste dessert.

At this moment, Madam Yao put down her teacup and she said with a smile, "The Spring Quarter Examinations are in a few days. There are many students in our clan who are participating in the entrance examination. I wonder how many of them will succeed."

The Yu Clan was a large family. In addition to their family living in the capital, there were also many others who were living with the Tongzhou clan.

As early as last month, some younger generations of the clan who were going to participate in the Spring Quarter Examinations had already been sent to the capital and placed in the Yu Clan's accommodations in the capital.

Old Madam took this very seriously. She had personally gone to take a look last month and had even sent a lot of literary supplies over. She had instructed the servants stationed there to take care of them meticulously.

At this moment, Old Madam Yu was twirling her prayer beads. She was indeed interested in this topic. "There seem to be a few who are not bad. I'm hopeful. However, they are all young, so it's not a big deal. They can take it as an experience. There is still much time for them ahead."

Madam Yao smiled and added, "Mother is right."

Yang Shuwan, who hadn't been able to join the conversation, finally found an opportunity. "Last year, in the township examination, the heir of the Marquis Residence, Song Mingzhao, took the first place and became a Top Scorer, really making many others envious. I wonder if he will take part in the Spring Quarter Examinations this year."

Meanwhile, Yu Youyao's heart jumped when she heard this name.

Her grandmother and the Marquis's wife had personal connections. Her aunt, Yu Mengxiang, had married the eldest son of the Marquis's third wife, Song Wenshu.

The Yu family had a close relationship with the Marquis Residence, but Yu Youyao and Song Mingzhao were five years apart. They weren't familiar with each other and could even be considered strangers.

However, in her dream, her grandmother had taken a fancy to Song Mingzhao, and that's when she had started to help arrange for her to settle into the Marquis Residence.

Chapter 20

Not Seeing Clearly

In her dream, Yu Youyao remembered having complex feelings towards her husband. She had also made up her mind that she would never want to have anything to do with Song Mingzhao in her lifetime.

At the mention of Song Mingzhao, Old Madam Yu couldn't hide her admiration. "Mingzhao is a good child. He was noticed by Mr. Xian Yun and taken in as a disciple two years ago. It hasn't been long since he's become a Top Scorer, so I heard from that old fellow from the Marquis' Residence that there are no plans to let Mingzhao take part this year. Since he's young and still doesn't have a strong foundation, it's better to wait another three years."

Mr. Xian Yun was a famous Confucian scholar of the Great Zhou Dynasty who had great talent and skills. That old fellow was clearly bragging.

Everyone present understood that the "old fellow" Old Madam Yu mentioned referred to the Marquis's wife.

Madam Yao looked envious. "I wonder how the Marquis's Residence has brought them up so well. The two older boys in my family are already 13 years old, but they only became elementary scholars last year, and there's still a long way to go before they can become high scholars. My

youngest is already 11 years old, but hasn't even passed the examination. All of them play all day long, never taking their studies seriously."

Concubine He glanced at Yang Shuwan, then smiled and said, "In three years, Shanyan will also be a high scholar, and maybe even earn the position as a Top Scorer."

It was rare for anyone to become a high scholar at the age of 16, so it would be rather impressive.

When Madam Yao heard this, she could not stop smiling. "Thank you, I hope you're right."

Even the Old Madam's expression softened. "Shanyan is just like his father. He's smart and has a bright future."

These words weren't empty praise. They clearly had high hopes for Yu Shanyan. Madam Yao smiled and squinted her eyes jokingly. "Mother, that's too high praise for him."

But since they were all daughters-in-law, how could there not be competition? Seeing that Madam Yao had gained praise in front of Old Madam, the smile on Yang Shuwan's face stiffened. She could not help but glare at Concubine He.

It was clear that this little wretch had deliberately praised the second house in order to put her down in comparison.

...

The next day, they worked all the way until the afternoon, and The Green House was finally completed. Yu Youyao was very satisfied. The servants who had participated were all rewarded with two taels of silver, which made the other servants very envious.

Zhou Linghuai headed to An Shou Hall and thanked Old Madam Yu. As she fiddled with her prayer beads, she said, "We're all family. I'm only doing what I should."

After that, she changed the topic and asked about Zhou Linghuai's studies.

He said respectfully, "In addition to the Four Books and Five Classics, I've also studied the Daoist Canon. In the past, because of my stubborn personality, my father had grounded me, forcing me to study Buddhist scriptures for a while to cultivate my temperament. I've also briefly read the Six Arts of a Gentleman. In addition, I've mastered the Four

Arts

, and other classics. In particular, Guiguzi was a masterpiece which used many literary techniques. It was intricate, ingenious, and unpredictable.

In recent times, many believed in Daoism but were obsessed with alchemy, ignoring important state affairs and disrespecting court officials. Almost everyone could recite one or two Daoist collections, but merely to please the sages.

Most people wouldn't be able to fully comprehend the Four Books and Five Classics even if they studied it for a lifetime, let alone the more obscure Daoist Scripture.

Zhou Linghuai was not just talented; he was exceptionally so.

The Zhou family had also had high hopes for Zhou Linghuai. Unfortunately, his legs...

Zhou Linghuai lowered his gaze and said nothing.

Old Madam Yu felt pity for him, but at the same time, she also felt rather gratified. “A man reads to learn to be wise, upstanding, and capable. Even though you aren’t pursuing the path to be a scholar, your studies should never be neglected. Our residence has hired a teacher for you. He is Mr. Hu Shan, who had participated in putting together The Book of Law during the previous emperor’s time. He is an upright and exemplary man. It’ll be good for you to learn from him.”

Even though his legs were disabled, no outsiders would belittle him once they found out that he was a disciple of Mr. Hu Shan.

Since he understood that this was arranged with his best interests at heart, Zhou Linghuai nodded gratefully.

When the former emperor was a young teen, Mr. Hu Shan had been his mentor but resigned after participating in the compilation of The Book of Law. His reputation was definitely a match for Mr. Xian Yun.

It was quite surprising that the Yu Residence managed to hire him. There was probably more than met the eye to this.

After returning to The Green House, Zhou Linghuai finished the painting he had been working on yesterday and asked Chang An to send it to Yu Youyao.

The way that Yu Youyao had been rash yesterday and almost caused Young Master to fall was still fresh in Chang An’s mind, so he was a little reluctant. Furthermore, although the nourishing cuisine she gave Young Master yesterday had healing properties, she hadn’t cautioned them on its extreme effects at all, almost causing a serious issue when Young Master had eaten it all without warning.

Chang An couldn’t help but feel a little upset. “Young Master spent a lot of effort on this painting yesterday. Why are you giving it to Eldest Miss Yu?”

Out of the many young mistresses in the Yu Residence, why did Young Master just happen to take notice of Eldest Miss Yu?

Zhou Linghuai didn’t say anything. He looked down at the canvas stand in front of him, which had been changed only yesterday. The sides were rounded and it had no sharp corners. There was an ivory-carved pen holder on top of it, and there were a dozen pencils of various sizes, each of them of premium quality. In addition, these pencils had been meticulously selected, along with the paperweight and inkstone set.

Noticing his gaze, Chang An pursed his lips. “Although she did help Young Master redecorate this place yesterday, it was ordered by Old Madam and has nothing to do with her. I asked around yesterday. Eldest Miss Yu is spoiled and willful. She’s not as well-mannered as Third Miss Yu Jianjia. Young Master should stay away from her in the future.”

At this point, Chang An glanced at the young master and saw that he had already started reading a book. Chang An wondered if he was even listening to him.

Zhou Linghuai furrowed his brows, seemingly displeased.

However, Chang An did not notice that. Worried that his young master would be harmed, he continued, “Why don’t you send this painting to the Third Miss of the main courtyard? Young Master, you will be staying in the Yu Residence in the future, so you will have to interact with the sisters in the residence. You should forge stronger ties, and you should choose someone who is easier to get along with, so that you will be more at ease in the residence in future.

Since entering the capital, he had specially looked into the details of the Yu Residence, and had heard that Yu Youyao had a spoiled and domineering personality, who often threw her weight around just because Old Madam Yu pampered her.

And seeing as how Yu Youyao had almost caused Young Master to fall, then subsequently beat and sold off a few servants, it seemed this information about her was accurate.

Today, he even happened to hear about Yu Jianjia having a fever for two consecutive days, almost losing her life, and it seemed to be related to Yu Youyao. So, he had become even more annoyed with her.

“You’re not seeing things clearly.” Zhou Linghuai gave him an indifferent glance.

Chang An felt a little aggrieved. Everyone in the residence had said that Third Miss was kind and polite, so why was Young Master saying that he wasn’t seeing clearly? “Young Master, you’ve only just met Eldest Miss Yu. Why are you defending her?”

Zhou Linghuai’s grip on the book tightened as he fell into deep thought.

The moment he saw Yu Youyao yesterday, he had felt that she was beautiful and pure. Hearing her gentle voice greet him, he had somehow felt an urge to get to know her better.

- Four Arts of the Chinese Scholar refers to the four main areas of artistic and academic talents expected of Chinese scholars in the past.”

Old Madam’s hand couldn’t help but pause in twirling her prayer beads. After a while, she said, “It’s rare for Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist books to be studied together.”

There were a total of nine books in the Four Books and Five Classics. They were classics which detailed how the past distinguished sages conducted themselves and succeeded in the world. It was a must to study these classics.

On the other hand, the Daoist Canon consisted of nine books, including the Book of Morality, Guiguzi[2]. Guiguzi refers to a compilation of ancient Chinese texts