

All Hail 31

Chapter 31

Cousin, Save Me

After being reprimanded by her stepmother on the spot, Yu Qingning felt so aggrieved and resentful that her eyes had turned red.

Yu Jianjia persuaded gently, "Mother, don't be angry in the temple. It won't be good if Bodhisattva sees this. Fourth Sis is still young and was feeling agitated earlier. I think she didn't mean to be rude. As her mother, you can just guide her more in the future."

Her gentle words sounded reasonable and kind, attracting a few other visitors who were about to offer incense to take a few more glances at Yu Jianjia when they overheard this. They then softly asked the people beside them which family that girl was from.

However, Yang Shuwan thought back to how Yu Qingning had mocked Jia Jia for picking a bad lot. When she had heard that earlier, she was undoubtedly incensed. Still feeling enraged, she said coldly, "You'll be grounded for a month when we return home, and you'll need to copy 'Female Ring' twenty times. Your pocket money will also be halved for a month."

After being scolded and punished, Yu Qingning felt so indignant that she was about to cry. When she thought of Yu Youyao, who had drawn a wonderful lot, she felt even more resentful and couldn't help but glare at Yu Youyao.

This made Yu Youyao, who had merely been standing at the side, feel a little puzzled. However, she couldn't be bothered about it.

Old Madam Yu took a look at the situation but also did not care to get involved. Madam Yang was really more and more incredible. She was even lecturing her stepdaughter in public now, without any consideration for how it would look to others.

A moment later, Madam Yao brought Yu Shuangbai and the others out.

The concubines' daughters had all managed to draw good lots. Yu Shuangbai also drew an especially good lot—hers signified great fortune, and was even better than Yu Youyao's "A Blessing in Disguise" lot.

After leaving the palace, Old Madam Yu saw that the few of them who had not drawn a good fortune lot were looking downcast. "Drawing lots is just for peace of mind. There's no need to take it to heart."

"Old Madam is right." Madam Yao also smiled and agreed. She changed the topic and said, "A few days ago, my niece was being playful and also picked a lot, and it actually turned out to be 'Li Dan's Dragon Phoenix Pair'."

Yu Youyao and the others were curious about what the lot meant. They all looked at Madam Yao eagerly, waiting for her to continue. However, Madam Yao had finished speaking, and she covered her mouth, laughing continuously.

Yu Shuangbai was extremely curious. She tugged at Madam Yao's sleeve. "Mom, don't keep us in suspense. Hurry up and tell us what the lot means."

Madam Yao finally managed to stop laughing. She held the handkerchief to the corner of her eye and dabbed. "This lot is for those who are wishing for a child. It means to be pregnant with a son."

Yu Youyao was confused. "But that's not very funny!"

Yu Shuangbai had a strange expression. "Isn't that cousin of mine only four or five years old this year?"

This time, everyone held their handkerchiefs and laughed. The matter of drawing lots was finally over.

Then, Old Madam Yu wanted to visit the meditation room, so she headed there on her own.

The Precious Peace Temple had grown some plum blossoms. At this time of the year, the plum blossoms looked the best, so Yang Shuwan wanted to bring Yu Jianjia and the others to admire it.

On the other hand, Madam Yao had run into her close friend and they were having a chat.

So the two houses of the Yu Residence parted as well.

Yu Youyao did not want to join the people of the main house. "Mother, I'm a little tired. I want to go back to my room to rest. I won't go with you to admire the plum blossoms."

Actually, Yang Shuwan wasn't really keen on bringing her along either, but she still had to pretend a little. Hence, she hesitated a little. "It's not often that we come out..."

Yu Qingning didn't really want to be with Yu Youyao too. She smiled and said, "Big Sister has to get up at dawn every day to learn and study. She's probably sleepy. Earlier, in the car, she had slept all the way too."

Yang Shuwan relaxed and nodded. "Alright, I'll get Nanny Li to send you back."

Yu Youyao quickly said that there was no need, and Yang Shuwan did not insist, as the courtyards were where the women of various residences rested and it was very safe.

Yu Jianjia coughed lightly. "Precious Peace Temple has many twists and turns. Big Sis, if you don't know the way, you can find a monk in the temple to lead you back."

After Yang Shuwan and the others left, Yu Youyao walked slowly along the limestone path. The Precious Peace Temple was huge. There were lakes, stone bridges, and flowers in the temple. It looked quiet and peaceful.

After walking for a while, Yu Youyao saw an apricot tree planted on the side of a lake. It was planted alone by the side of the water. The branches were blooming with flowers and it was beautiful, like a myriad of rouge spots that colored the spring sky.

Yu Youyao liked it when the apricot flowers were in full bloom. They were bright red. When the petals bloomed, the thick red color gradually turned pink. When the flowers fell, they became snow-white. She turned to Dong Mei and Chun Xiao and said, "Wait for me here. I'll get a stalk of apricot flowers and bring it back to make a sachet for Cousin."

It was rare for her to leave the Residence. She had to bring something back for her cousin.

Chun Xiao nodded while Dong Mei hesitated. "We'll accompany you, Young Mistress!"

"There's no need for that. It's quiet here, and there isn't anyone else around. Stay here and keep an eye on things. Call out to me if you see anyone," Yu Youyao instructed carefully.

It was better to be cautious when they were outside.

Dong Mei and Chun Xiao turned around and saw two trails, one on the left and one on the right. They looked deep and still, as if someone would approach from these trails when they weren't paying attention. It was indeed better not to follow her.

Yu Youyao lifted her skirt a little and walked to the tree. She saw apricot branches above her head—a spread of red, pink, and white. She stood on her tiptoes and reached out, but she couldn't reach it. She took a few more steps forward and suddenly heard a voice from behind.

"Young Lord, you've been in the capital for some time. Are you living well in the Yu Residence?"

Yu Youyao was shocked when she heard the man's voice. She abandoned the flowers and tried to avoid him, so she didn't manage to hear exactly what he had replied.

"Yes, it's alright." The voice was thin and sounded like the chill of spring, piercing straight to the heart and bone.

'Why does he sound so much like my cousin?'

Yu Youyao paused for a moment, but she couldn't help moving a little closer and peeked through—

Her cousin was sitting in a wheelchair, dressed in dark clothes with black stripes. There seemed to be a dark cloud hanging thickly around his entire body, looking dangerous and ominous. There was a book on his knee, and it was that book—Guiguzi. His face was very pale, and there was a sense of ruthlessness mixed with callousness in his eyes. He seemed like a completely different person from when he was at the residence.

Across from his cousin was another man dressed in black and kneeling on one knee. He kept his head down, so his face couldn't be seen, but she could vaguely tell from his voice that he was in his forties.

She had really seen her cousin. Yu Youyao was shocked.

"Young Master, the people in the Yu Residence are simple and aren't likely to scrutinize you, but your identity is special. You have to be careful," the man in black reminded worriedly.

Zhou Linghuai did not comment. Instead, he changed the topic. "The Spring Festival is coming. Marquis Weining's Residence..."

The words "Marquis Weining's Residence" made Yu Youyao's heart jump, and her subconscious was instinctively alarmed. At that moment, she heard a vigilant voice filled with a murderous tone call out, "Who's there?"

Oh no! Yu Youyao panicked. She turned around and tried to escape, but there was a sharp sword glow and a deadly aura that made Yu Youyao's mind go blank. In that split second, she closed her eyes and shouted, "Cousin, save me!"

Chapter 32

Cousin, You're So Kind

A strand of black hair that hung by her cheek was sliced off by the sword. Yu Youyao thought that she was dead meat for sure. But to her surprise, she was still standing fine after waiting a few moments. The pain and death she had expected did not happen.

Yu Youyao was petrified. She carefully opened her eyes a crack, but saw that there was no one in front of her, as if everything that had happened was just her imagination.

She felt unsure, but slowly opened her eyes more. Still, she did not see anyone.

'Did the man in black leave?'

Earlier, she had clearly sensed that the man had wanted to silence her.

'Why did he end up not killing her?'

Or was it because she had shouted too loudly earlier, and he was worried that it would alarm the others in the temple, so he chose not to kill her and to flee instead?

She heard the rattle of wheels. It was her cousin approaching.

Yu Youyao panicked and her half-opened eyes quickly closed shut again. "C-cousin, I just got here..."

In other words, she had seen and heard nothing.

Zhou Linghuai's eyes looked menacing as he looked at her. Her small body was trembling like a flower, and her eyes were tightly shut, with her thick and long eyelashes fluttering lightly.

She felt fear and anxiety coursing through her entire body, but she tried her best to look innocent and clueless, as if she really didn't know anything.

Survival instincts were really amazing.

When she did not hear a reply from her cousin, Yu Youyao felt so flustered that she was about to cry. "C-cousin..."

Her voice was sweet and pitiful, like a small animal that was weak, helpless, and posed no threat. Zhou Linghuai suddenly thought of the day that he entered the Yu Residence. This little girl was just like a ball of pink fluffiness, calling him, "Cousin," with a smile. Her eyes were clear as crystal, but were filled with curiosity towards him. Her chubby little hand gently tugged on his sleeve, wanting to get close to him. Furthermore, she redid the entire courtyard because she had accidentally pushed him against the gate and made him fall from his wheelchair.

She even sent him a stack of supplements daily.

At first, he had thought that they were just some common supplements, not thinking too much of it. However, after a few tries, he vaguely noticed that every time he finished the supplement, his entire

body felt comfortable, while his numbed legs felt slightly hot. Although the effect was slight and would not be noticed easily, he was always sharp and cautious. Naturally, he noticed the difference.

Uncle Sun said that this was a medicinal cuisine that was extremely beneficial to him, but unfortunately, he couldn't manage to find out what the secret medicinal ingredient in it was.

Thinking of this, Zhou Linghuai chuckled without realizing. "Cousin, there's only you and me here. You can open your eyes now."

"C-cousin, you..." Yu Youyou stammered. She could not even speak properly. She carefully opened her eyes. "Y-you're not angry with me? I just..." She suddenly covered her mouth and looked at Zhou Linghuai anxiously. Her big eyes started welling up. They were black and bright, and looked pitiful.

Zhou Linghuai looked puzzled. "Didn't you say that you just reached a moment ago?"

Yu Youyao's eyes lit up and she nodded. "Yes, yes, yes. I was just passing by and saw that the apricot flowers here were blooming beautifully. I wanted to break off a branch and return to the residence to make a sachet for you to carry around." She did not know about anything else.

Her eyes were clean and bright. Even though she was afraid, she did not show it. When she said that she wanted to collect some apricot flowers to make a sachet for him, she was speaking the truth.

Seeing that she didn't forget about bringing him a gift even when she was out, the remaining coldness in Zhou Linghuai's eyes melted away.

Yu Youyao, who was carefully stealing glances at her cousin, saw that the coldness on her cousin's face was melting like snow, revealing a thin and sallow appearance, just like how he usually looked in the mansion previously.

Yu Youyao heaved a sigh of relief and ran over. She squatted beside her cousin and looked up at him. "Cousin, apricot flowers are my favorite. Do you like them too?!"

Zhou Linghuai's gaze landed on the crown of her head. He raised his hand and placed it on her hair.

Yu Youyao blinked at her cousin and tilted her head in confusion.

"There are petals in your hair." Zhou Linghuai took a faded, snow-white petal from the top of her head and kept it into his palm.

She had seen through her cousin's secret, yet he hadn't hurt her. Yu Youyao's eyes curved into crescents as she smiled widely. "Cousin, you're so kind."

Kind? She probably wasn't aware that she had just walked through the gates of hell a moment ago. Zhou Linghuai was stunned for a moment. "Why are you walking around the temple alone? Where are your maidservants?"

Yu Youyao pointed at the other side of the area. "I wanted to pick the flowers myself, so I asked Chun Xiao and Dong Mei to keep watch for me."

Zhou Linghuai said calmly, "There are many people entering the Precious Peace Temple to offer incense today. It's full of strangers, so don't wander about. Keep the servant girls by your side."

Yu Youyao's eyes sparkled as she nodded. "Got it, Cousin."

Zhou Linghuai raised his head. A spring apricot branch extended above him and has bloomed beautifully. He reached out and broke the branch, handing it to her. "Go back!"

"Thank you, Cousin." Yu Youyao held the flowers in her hand and turned to run. As if she had thought of something, she turned back and ran to Zhou Linghuai. She whispered, "Cousin, I won't tell anyone that I saw you at here at Precious Peace Temple."

With that, she turned and ran off once again.

There was a hint of a smile on Zhou Linghuai's lips as he watched her take the flowers and leave with her two maidservants until they were out of sight.

At this moment, the man in black who had been hiding himself reappeared and said disapprovingly, "Lord, are you letting her off just like that? There are many kinds of people coming and going in the Precious Peace Temple today, and this place is quiet and deserted. Even if we had pushed her into the lake..."

"Do my words need to be questioned?" Without looking up, Zhou Linghuai picked up Guiguzi, which had been resting on his lap, and flipped to the page he had been at earlier.

His clear, direct reply was intimidating. The man in black lowered his head and shut his mouth, not daring to say anything else.

After a while, as Zhou Linghuai turned another page of the book, he warned, "Don't touch her. I think you understand what I mean."

The man in black was shocked and looked at Zhou Linghuai hesitantly. After a while, he said reluctantly, "Understood!"

What Lord meant was that he was not allowed to attack Yu Youyao, nor was he allowed to let others attack her secretly. Master had only stayed in the Yu Residence for a few days. Why was he already so protective of Yu Youyao?

He simply could not understand.

"Young Lord, you rushed for a sudden visit into the capital, so should we..." The man in black grabbed the sword hilt at his waist, his tone revealing a strong surge of emotions.

"There's no hurry!" Zhou Linghuai stopped him before he could even finish his question.

The man in black looked disappointed and said anxiously, "Young Lord, we've been waiting for three years. You can finally be king." Perhaps realizing that he had misspoken, the man in black suddenly paused, before he continued speaking normally. "To avenge Old Master and Madam, now is the best time. Why are we still waiting?"

“I know best about what to do for revenge.” Zhou Linghuai stared at the man in black coldly.

Chapter 33

“Dragon Slaying”

The man in black was indignant and wanted to persuade him. “Young Lord...”

“Uncle Chen, if an evil dragon extended its claws and killed someone, do you think the claws are at fault, or is it the dragon itself who is guilty?”

Zhou Linghuai lowered his head and flipped through the book in his hand. The side of his face was pale and thin, but his sickly and pitiable appearance revealed an indescribably handsome and distinguished aura. His lowered eyelashes were very long, casting a shadow under his eyes, making him seem unfathomable.

Uncle Chen’s expression became extremely complex. He clutched the hilt of his sword tightly. The veins on the back of his hand throbbed, and his knuckles turned white.

“Just because the dragon used its claw to attack, does that mean one of its claws should be cut off as revenge? If it used its right hand to kill, then should its right hand be severed? Is that revenge?” Coldness and viciousness seeped through his lips, and his eyes were as dark as ink. “I don’t agree. Only a life for a life is justified.”

The five words, “A life for a life,” lingered on the tip of his tongue, and he savored it in his mouth slowly. It was bone-chilling.

A calm voice came from above his head. It was as calm as a deep pool, but seemed to be brewing a turbulent undercurrent. The man in black abruptly looked up, and the words “dragon slayer” suddenly appeared in his mind. His gaze looked full of shock, astonishment, dilemma, agitation, and all kinds of complex emotions.

Zhou Linghuai asked calmly, “What do you think?”

The man in black tried his best to calm down and quickly analyzed the situation in his mind. “Ever since the sudden change in Youzhou three years ago, the situation in the court has become increasingly tense. The emperor is obsessed with alchemy and doesn’t come to the court often. The court officials are under the control of the cabinet and the Marquis of Weining. The court officials form cliques for private interests, fill their own pockets, and corrupt the law. The nobles are domineering, arrogant, and do as they please. The vassals of various areas are also getting restless.”

At this point, he paused slightly and looked up at the young master. He saw that he was holding a scroll in his hand and did not seem to be paying attention to him.

However, he knew that the young master was listening.

“Also, things aren’t very stable in Cangzhou, Yunzhou, and Liangzhou. Dongyi, Xirong, and Nanman have invaded the Great Zhou’s borders and fought repeatedly with the vassal lords guarding the three states. Every time there was

damage, the vassal lords of the three lands complained bitterly and repeatedly reported to Emperor Ming to ask the emperor to send troops to help.”

“I heard that before the New Year, Prince Ping of Liangzhou entered the capital under an edict. In front of all the civil and military officials, he cried until his face was covered in snot and tears. He said that it was bitterly cold in Liangzhou, and he could not even collect taxes. Every year, there were countless wars, big and small. In war, he needed money, food, and soldiers. The soldiers in his army had not changed their armor for three years, and he asked the emperor for money and food.”

At the mention of this, the man in black’s tone seemed to be dripping with disdain for the way a vassal king like him—who had a strong army under his control—had allowed himself to appear so weak and pitiful in front of everyone.

“Do you think they’re crying about being poor?” Zhou Linghuai pursed his lips lightly and gently closed his book. “They’re crying about their lives. Whoever cries the most pitifully, shamelessly, and cowardly would be the least likely to follow in the footsteps of King You. They’re smart, though. They have battles to fight, with casualties and persistent poverty. Such vassal states are what some people want to see the most.” Zhou Linghuai’s tone was filled with sarcasm.

The man in black blanked for a moment before he suddenly understood what his young master meant.

The vassal lords are responsible for guarding the borders surrounding the Great Zhou Dynasty and protecting its territory. Only when there were wars would there be a need for them to exist, and when they remained poor and damaged, the court would not worry about the vassal lords planning their independence.

Meanwhile, the official troops of the You King guarded the northern border and fought the Northern Barbarians all year round. It was the coldest border of all.

The Northern Barbarians were a large tribe. They were tall and strong, and were even great horsemen, archers, and fighters. Every autumn, they would attack the borders of the city, burning, killing, and plundering. The You King, who was guarding Youzhou, had no choice but to station a large number of troops. Could it be...

Zhou Linghuai narrowed his eyes. “To be able to put down his dignity and even swallow his pride, it means that he has something up his sleeve, and it must be something so big that outweighs even his dignity. But whatever he’s planning is probably going to get him twice his dignity back.”

The man in black held his breath. “Young Master, you mean, King Ping...”

Zhou Linghuai interrupted him and said coldly, “Send someone to keep an eye on Liangzhou.”

“Yes!”

Yu Youyao had left quickly with Chun Xiao and Dong Mei. She couldn't help thinking about how the man in black had called her cousin "Young Lord." He was extremely respectful and was unlike ordinary servants.

‘Cousin seemed to be acting very secretly?’

Plus, her cousin had mentioned the Marquis of Weining.

In recent days, she had gained some understanding of the various Residences in the capital, and what the Marquis of Weining's Residence was most known for was the fact that someone in their family had become an imperial consort.

This Imperial Consort Lu had been conferred the title of secondary consort even when the emperor was still waiting to succeed the throne. From then on, she had been constantly favored and doted on all the way until now.

Because the Empress was unwell, Imperial Consort Lu was in charge of the Phoenix Seal in the harem, so all the matters in the Rear Palace were handed over to her, and she held the authority in the harem.

Being related to her, the Marquis of Weining's Resident also became the most prominent family in the capital. It was far from what the Yu Residence could compare to.

Yu Youyao had an inkling that she might have accidentally discovered a shocking secret about her cousin?!

The reason that her cousin had suddenly come into the capital and moved into the Yu Residence, was definitely not as simple as seeking refuge with his relatives.

When Chun Xiao saw that Miss had returned with the flower branch in her hand, she pursed her lips and did not say a word. On the way back, she kept her head lowered, but she was a little puzzled. "Young Mistress, why did you run into the back area earlier? I couldn't see you."

When they had lost sight of their young mistress, she and Dong Mei were almost scared out of their wits. Fortunately, she had returned quickly.

Thinking of the dangerous situation she had been in just now, Yu Youyao felt a lingering sense of trepidation. "The flowers at the back were more beautiful."

Chun Xiao hurriedly said, "The outside is different from when you're in the residence. Young Mistress, you can't do this in the future."

Yu Youyao nodded absentmindedly. Not daring to wander around anymore, she returned to the room. However, after sitting for a while, she felt that the room was a little stuffy and decided to head to the meditation room, bringing Chun Xiao and Dong Mei along.

Along the way, there were uniquely shaped stones, rock structures, and rivers, which all created a peaceful and serene atmosphere. The ground was filled with patterned limestone bricks, and there were evergreen Bodhi trees on both sides.

Soon, Yu Youyao heard chanting not far away. They had arrived at the meditation room. Qing Xiu, who was guarding outside, welcomed them and led Yu Youyao into one of the meditation rooms.

The room wasn't big. There were only tables and chairs inside, making it look very empty. The incense burner emitted the smell of sandalwood. The servant girls and old maids stood on both sides of the room with their hands by their sides. Old Madam Yu leaned against the round, purple longevity embroidered pillow.

On the other side sat a round-faced old woman in an ink-blue loose outer coat that had gold embroidery. She had an emerald gem on her forehead, and most of her hair had already grayed. She looked older than Yu Youyao's grandmother.

Yu Youyao realized that this old woman was the old madam of the Marquis Zhen's Residence, Old Madam Song. She and her grandmother had also been close friends since they were young, so Yu Youyao went up to her and respectfully greeted her.

Old Madam Song called Youyao over and held her hand. "Yao Yao, during the new year celebrations, I remember that you were wearing a red pomegranate dress, looking chubby and lovely." As she spoke, she couldn't help but laugh. "It's been less than a month since then, but you're already a big girl now. I also remember that you will be turning ten in two months."

Chapter 34

First Meeting with Song Mingzhao (1)

Old Madam Song was a little plump. When she smiled, her round face looked kind. She looked at Yu Youyao with clear fondness.

The nine-year-old girl had looked rounder and more adorable than other girls her age. Now, she seemed less like a little girl and more like a sweet, delicate young lady, bright-eyed and charming. In another two years, she would grow to become even more of a beautiful young lady.

Old Madam Yu also smiled. "She has lost quite some weight and looks quite different."

"I see," The more Old Madam Song looked at her, the more pleased she was. She took off the suet jade bracelet on her wrist and put it on Yu Youyao instead. "I heard from your grandmother that recently, you have been learning from a nanny who had just come out from the palace. What have you learned?"

"I have not only learned etiquette and the rules, but I've also learned a little needlework, cooking, and tea preparation." Yu Youyao did not mention pharmacology, perfume, or anything else. Nanny Xu had said that a proper young lady should never reveal too much about herself, but just the right amount.

These were all things that young ladies should learn and know. The delight in Old Madam Song's eyes deepened. She patted Yu Youyao's hand. "Hui'er often talks about you. In future, come to my house often to play."

A ten-year-old girl was already old enough to be allowed to visit and play at a close family friend's place.

Yu Youyao nodded and agreed obediently.

The Marquis Zhen's Residence was regal and stately. The family had not been divided into separate houses yet. The four families lived together, and the eldest son had already inherited the title of Lord.

The Young Mistress Hui that Old Madam Song was talking about was Song Wanhui, the seventh daughter of the first wife in the Marquis Zhen's Estate. She was Song Mingzhao's younger sister and was the same age as Yu Youyao. Whenever the two families interacted, she always got along well with Yu Youyao.

After saying so much, Old Madam Song felt her chest tighten and couldn't help coughing a little.

Standing right in front of her, Yu Youyao reacted quickly, passing the copper sputum box from the servant girl to Old Madam Song.

However, Old Madam Song refused to use it, only glancing at the maidservant in front of her.

The maidservant retrieved the box from Yu Youyao. Only then did Old Madam Song lower her head and spit. She then dabbed the corner of her mouth with her handkerchief, and a cup of warm tea was already prepared and brought to her.

When Old Madam Song saw that it was Yu Youyao who was serving her the tea, she reached out to take a sip, rinsing her mouth with it before spitting into the container.

Yu Youyao handed the teacup to the maidservant and helped Old Madam Song lean against the pillow.

Old Madam Yu looked at Old Madam Song worriedly. "This cough of yours always becomes worse when the seasons change. Why are you still out and about?" With that, she sighed. "You're getting old. You have to take care of your health."

Old Madam Song shook her head. "This happens with age, it can't be helped." As she spoke, she glanced at Yu Youyao, who had already sat down beside Old Madam Yu, looking obedient and cute. "On the other hand, you old thing, with such a bright and lovable girl like Yao Yao by your side, you look more energetic than before; like you're three years younger than me."

Old Madam Yu was actually two years older than her, but her face had fewer wrinkles, and she was also more robust. It was impossible not to be envious.

There were more than a dozen young mistresses in her residence, who often spent time with her too. In the past, she used to think that a few of them were pretty outstanding. But now that she compared them to Yu Youyao, she could not help but shake her head.

Old Madam Yu also glanced at Yu Youyao with a smile in her eyes, thinking, "I didn't raise her for nothing."

She was indeed so filial to her grandmother! At that moment, Yu Youyao was seated on the small stool. She puffed her cheeks, feeling a little bored, and couldn't help but glance into one of the cubicles.

There was a golden bodhisattva consecrated inside. Yu Youyao didn't recognize which bodhisattva it was. There was also an old monk and six young monks sitting on meditation cushions, chanting scriptures.

As if sensing her gaze, the old monk opened his drooping eyelids and glanced at her. His turbid gaze settled on her forehead for an instant before he closed his eyes again.

Yu Youyao's breathing stopped for a moment. His gaze made her forehead burn and her back perspire. She hurriedly looked away, not daring to look at him anymore.

She felt that this old monk seemed to be able to see the blood jade lotus that was on her forehead. It made her feel uneasy and nervous.

Old Madam Yu turned around. "Yao Yao, if you are feeling bored, get a maidservant to accompany you for a walk."

Yu Youyao did not want to stay inside either. Just as she was about to get up, footsteps came from outside. Old Madam Yu's personal maidservant, Bai Kui, entered the room. "First Madam and Second Madam have arrived with the young mistresses."

Qing Xiu led them into the meditation room. Yang Shuwan and Madam Yao led the few young mistresses to greet Old Madam Yu and Old Madam Song.

Old Madam Yu had a neutral expression, not revealing if she was happy or angry. On the other hand, Old Madam Song had a smile on her face as she complimented that all the young ladies looked lovely. Her gaze remained the same as she looked at each of them, one by one, but paused on Yu Jianjia for a moment before moving on to Yu Qingning. When she saw Yu Shuangbai in her pink outfit, her smile became warmer.

Yang Shuwan wanted to say something to please Old Madam Song, but the old madam was coughing continuously, so the maidservants had rushed forward to serve and soothe her. After a while, Old Madam Song's cough finally eased a little, but it was no longer the appropriate timing for Yang Shuwan to ingratiate herself with the old madam. For a moment, she looked disappointed.

Seeing this situation, Yu Jianjia moved from standing beside her mother to the small stool beside Yu Youyao. Her eyes flickered and she noticed the suet jade bracelet on Yu Youyao's wrist, as pearly white as suet and as smooth as jade, emitting a delicate glow.

She had not seen Yu Youyao wearing this bracelet in the morning.

Yu Jianjia received the tea from a servant girl and took a sip. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Old Madam Song's wrist was empty.

When a gathering was arranged, it was common practice to present gifts as long as both parties were on good terms. However, gifting something during a coincidental meeting showed a sincere fondness from the heart.

By giving something she kept close to herself, she showed her affection and highlighted their special affinity.

In that instant, Yu Jianjia felt suffocated. Her throat itched, as if it had been filled with a gust of cold wind. She could not help but cover her mouth with her handkerchief and cough heavily.

Old Madam Yu grew even more expressionless. She turned to Bai Kui and said, "Bring over the pink embroidered cloak that Yao Yao had brought along as a spare change of clothes. Put it on Jia Jia."

Bai Kui hurriedly left the meditation room. Not long after, she brought a cloak over for Yu Jianjia.

Yu Jianjia thanked Old Madam Yu and had Hui Xiang help her put it on. Upon putting on the cloak, her body was protected from the cold winds that were blowing in from the outside.

After a long while, the heir of the Marquis Zhen Residence, Song Mingzhao, had personally come to greet Old Madam Yu. The young mistresses in the room were still very young, so there was no need to avoid them.

Song Mingzhao was tall and lean, and he wore a long, sapphire-blue overcoat that was embroidered with bamboo. He came through the entrance, walking in against the light.

Although he was still young, his gentle face was already looking handsome and strong. The way he had looked calm and imposing as a fully-grown adult in her dream was already vaguely noticeable.

Yu Youyao's breathing stopped. She felt a knot of pain in her heart, as if a needle had pierced through it. Her pink face turned pale instantly.

The moment Song Mingzhao stepped into the room, everything became clear.

Chapter 35

First Meeting with Song Mingzhao (2)

Yang Shuwan sized up the heir of the Marquis Zhen's Residence carefully. He had an elegant face and was an extraordinarily handsome man. Every move he made was refined and charming. In addition, she remembered that he was Mr. Xian Yun's favorite disciple, and had even achieved the title of Top Scorer last year. No young master in the capital could compare to him.

Scholarly families were particular about marriages—the families of both parties had to be well-matched in terms of social status. The Marquis Zhen's Residence was a noble and respected family in the capital. Because of Old Madam Yu, the two families were very close and even related by marriage, so this connection had become even more unbreakable.

Many of the noble families were all related by marriage. The Marquis Zhen's Residence was not an ordinary family, and their heir was all the more impressive. Jia Jia would be nine years old soon, and it was common that before a young mistress of a prominent family was even old enough for marriage, her elders would already have secretly begun looking out for outstanding young masters in the capital for her...

As Yang Shuwan considered all this, her eyes naturally landed on Yu Jianjia.

Meanwhile, Yu Jianjia was in shock. Her gaze followed the figure who had just stepped into the room. Her heart immediately started beating like a drum, and her pale face turned a shade of sweet pink.

It wasn't that she'd never seen handsome boys before.

Her eldest brother, Yu Shanyan, and her cousin, Zhou Linghuai, were both exceptionally handsome men, especially Zhou Linghuai, who looked distinguished and charming. However, neither of them could compare to that one glance she had just taken...

Just then, the Song heir's gaze swept over to Yu Jianjia, catching her off guard. Upon seeing his aloof gaze, she realized that she had been staring rudely.

The Yu Residence and the Marquis Zhen Residence were in-laws, and because she was still young, there was no need to ensure that they avoided each other. However, Song Mingzhao was still a male who wasn't her family member. Even though the elders were present, she should not be looking at him directly like this.

Clutching the handkerchief in her hand tightly, Yu Jianjia lowered her eyes. When she looked at the pink embroidered cloak she was wearing, she felt a little vexed.

Yu Youyao was plump while she was slender. This cloak looked bulky on her, and the color did not match her own clothes at all. It really looked terrible. If she had known earlier, she would have rejected her grandmother's suggestion.

Song Mingzhao strode forward and greeted the two old madams respectfully.

Old Madam Yu beamed with joy and couldn't help praising, "It's been a long time since I've seen Mingzhao. He's looking more and more distinguished, just like the old Marquis of Zhen." As she spoke, she turned to look at Old Madam Song. "You're blessed."

She was talking about the late Marquis of Zhen. Old Madam Song was surprised for a moment, then she smiled without saying anything.

Meanwhile, Yang Shuwan was standing beside them and couldn't resist interjecting, "Mingzhao has become a Top Scorer at the age of 15. In my opinion, he's an outstanding talent who's bound to surpass his teacher."

As soon as she said that, Old Madam Song picked up her teacup and sipped on her tea.

Old Madam Yu's expression darkened.

Hearing such praise, Song Mingzhao remained indifferent. Without even glancing at Yang Shuwan, he said respectfully, "Grandmother Yu, you praise me too highly."

After saying that, he raised his eyes and inadvertently caught a glimpse of the lovely girl beside Old Madam Yu. He paused for a moment, his gaze meeting a pair of sparkling eyes that were as bright as the stars in the sky.

When their eyes met, Yu Youyao was startled and quickly looked down.

Seeing the husband from her dream with her own eyes, Yu Youyao felt overwhelmed with emotions.

However, remembering that the scene in the dream hadn't happened in reality, Yu Youyao gradually calmed down and nodded calmly at Song Mingzhao.

In that instant, she suddenly felt that the amazing Song Mingzhao was actually nothing much. Compared to her cousin, he lost by a stretch.

With her gem of a cousin in mind, no matter how outstanding Song Mingzhao was, in her eyes, he remained lackluster in comparison.

'Hm, my cousin is the most dashing after all!'

At this moment, Old Madam Yu got someone to bring over a jade writing brush and gave it to Song Mingzhao.

The white jade pen handle was carved with bamboo patterns, and it had such smooth and exquisite luster. It was obvious how precious this writing brush was. Song Mingzhao accepted it. "Thank you, Grandmother Yu."

At this moment, Yang Shuwan found an opportunity to speak, but Old Madam Song had already put down her teacup and asked, "Why are you here at Precious Peace Temple?"

Song Mingzhao replied politely, "A few fellow students wanted to come to the temple to unwind."

As the room was filled with women, it was best that Song Mingzhao didn't stay any longer. After saying that, he respectfully left the meditation room.

Yu Jianjia's heart was pounding. She kept trying to resist, but eventually couldn't help herself and secretly raised her eyes. She peeked at his straight and tall back, getting a bit distracted.

As soon as Song Mingzhao left, the warm atmosphere in the room faded a little. The few of them chatted casually, but it was mostly Old Madam Yu and Old Madam Song who were talking. Madam Yao was a witty speaker, so she occasionally added one or two lines and livened up the atmosphere. Yang Shuwan didn't want to lose out, so she kept trying to join in and converse with Old Madam Song. At first, Old Madam Song would reply with a sentence or two, but after a few times, she no longer responded much.

Old Madam Yu took one look at Yang Shuwan and ignored her as well.

When Madam Yao turned around and saw Yu Shuangbai fidgeting on the small stool, she tactfully excused herself in front of the two old madams and brought Yu Shuangbai out of the meditation room.

Once she left, it wasn't suitable for Yang Shuwan to stay any longer either. She glanced at Old Madam Song. Even though she wanted to stay, she had no choice but to leave. She called out to Yu Youyao, but Yu Youyao replied that she wanted to accompany her grandmother, so she did not leave with them.

The room quietened down again.

Old Madam Song leaned against the pillow tiredly and coughed for quite a while. Yu Youyao couldn't bear to see her like this. "Grandmother Song, your phlegm is turbid, and your qi is weak. This is affecting your lungs. I have a recipe for medicinal pear paste—it's a little different from ordinary pear paste. When you return home, you can get your family to prepare it for you. It might help a little."

The medicinal pear paste was a secret recipe in 'Finest Delicacies'—it was also rather rare.

Old Madam Song couldn't help but nod along as Yu Youyao explained articulately. Her doctor had said the same thing. It seemed that Yu Youyao had learned a lot from her nanny. "That's good."

Yu Youyao carefully explained the recipe to Old Madam Song's maidservant, until the maidservant nodded and confirmed that she had remembered it. She also gave some tips on what to take note of when brewing and consuming the pear paste.

Old Madam Song listened and felt that Yu Youyao spoke very well despite being young. She couldn't help but glance at Old Madam Yu, who was calmly sipping on her tea. She felt another surge of envy.

In the past, Yu Youyao was a little undisciplined, but after learning from her nanny for a few days, she seemed to have become a completely different person.

Worried that her granddaughter's good intentions would be wasted, Old Madam Yu added, "This medicinal pear paste is a superior recipe that was learned from the palace. Get your doctor's opinion too, to see if it's good for you."

Old Madam Song shot her a look. "You old thing, do I look like someone who doesn't know how to tell what's good or not? I'll definitely appreciate Yaoyao's kind intentions."

The two of them chatted for a while longer. Then, Old Madam Song was exhausted and asked the maidservant to help her out of the meditation room, so only Old Madam Yu and Yu Youyao were left in the room.

Old Madam Yu gave Yu Youyao a look. "Tell me, did you get into trouble again?"

Chapter 36

Prajna (Must Be Seen)

Yu Youyao pouted. "Grandmother, what are you saying? I've clearly been here accompanying you. I haven't caused any trouble!"

"If you hadn't caused any trouble, why are you being so mild, and not running about outside having fun? Why are you staying in the meditation room with an old woman like me?" Old Madam Yu looked at her with a look of doubt. Usually, anytime they left the residence, she was the best at causing trouble.

Yu Youyao felt a lump in her throat and stomped her feet guiltily. "I'm just being filial to my grandmother, but apparently that's wrong too."

The servant girls and old maids in the room lowered their heads and stifled their laughter.

Dong Mei said, "Madam, you've really misjudged Eldest Miss this time. She took us to walk around the temple for a while, then picked some apricot flowers before coming back."

However, she did not know what had happened when she was picking the apricot flowers.

Old Madam Yu was surprised. She hugged her granddaughter and apologized.

Yu Youyao's anger dissipated. "Grandmother, you can't accuse me again."

Old Madam Yu agreed repeatedly. Then, she brought Yu Youyao to the cubicle and informed the old monk that they were leaving.

The old monk opened his eyes and his turbid gaze landed on Yu Youyao, causing her heart to turn numb. Only then did she hear him say, "Amitabha. Little one is fated with Buddha."

Yu Youyao was a little stunned, but Old Madam Yu's heart skipped a beat. She tilted her head to look at her and asked, "Grandmaster Hui

Neng

, what do you mean?”

She had heard that Grandmaster Hui Neng was knowledgeable in Buddhism and some physiognomy. Could it be that he could tell that there was something unique about Yao Yao?

The old monk did not answer. He slowly closed his eyes and recited in a low voice, “May I attain enlightenment from the Buddha in my next life. May my own light be blazing, illuminating boundlessly and immeasurably. Since I am here, I am no different from all living beings.”

“May I receive Bodhi’s help in my next life. May my body be like glass, clean inside and out, without any impurities. May the light be vast, and the prestige be blazing. My body is good, and I live in peace. If there are sentient beings, they will be born between worlds. Or, if there is darkness and night among humans, by my light, anything desired can be done...”

Old Madam Yu was stunned.

This was the “Sutra of the Medicine Buddha”, also called “Universal Light Tathagata.” When practicing the Bodhisattva’s Dao, he gave medicine and made twelve great wishes. Every wish was for the sake of fulfilling the wishes of all living beings, to remove the suffering and cure the illnesses of all living beings, and to allow people to live in peace, to live healthily and happily.

The old monk had observed silence for many years, so why did he choose to recite the twelve wishes of the “Sutra of the Medicine Buddha” to Yao Yao?

What did this scripture have to do with her granddaughter?

Yu Youyao was a little confused and looked at Grandmaster Hui Neng curiously.

It was not until many years later, when Yu Youyao saw Grandmaster Hui Neng again after she had left the capital and then returned to Precious Peace Temple again, that she suddenly realized that all karma had its own Prajna.

And Grandmaster Hui Neng had already taken a glimpse.

The second day after returning from Precious Peace Temple was the eighth of February.

After Yu Youyao accompanied her grandmother for breakfast, she returned to the Jade Courtyard.

The withered apricot branch had been nourished with water that was mixed with spirit dew, and had become lively again overnight. The buds on the branches had also bloomed and there was a strong fragrance.

Yu Youyao was learning how to mix perfume, and one way was to use dried flowers.

She plucked the flowers from the branches and pressed them flat using a paperboard. Then, together with the cardboard, she put the whole thing over a fire. When the flowers were half-dried, she placed them in a jar filled with some powder and sealed them away.

When the water in the dried flowers was naturally dried by the powder, not only were the petals dry and soft, but the color also looked as new as if they had just been plucked from a tree, but with a lasting fragrance.

Nanny Xu watched from the side, not forgetting to guide her, “In the book ‘Sacred Benefits of Peace’, there’s a technique for using apricot flowers to wash the face and treat spots. It’s the season of apricot flowers now—you should try it.

Apricot trees weren’t very auspicious and the Yu Residence did not plant them, but Yu Youyao had a plantation under her name that was specially for planting flowers and trees, so she most probably had planted them.

“There’s a secret mixture called the ‘Yang Taizhen Anise Cream’ in the ‘Lu Residence Classified Formulas’. It’s said to be a secret beauty recipe specially used by a favored concubine in the palace. Remove the outer parts of the flower, grind them, steam them, add a little fennel, and mix them evenly with eggs. Apply this mixture on the face every morning and night. It’s said to have the effect of making the face rosy and beautiful. Eldest Miss, when you’re a little older, you can use it too.”

Yu Youyao took the book of ‘Heavenly Fragrance Records’ and flipped through it.

The ‘Heavenly Fragrance Records’ was a collection of recipes and formulas from various dynasties. In the chapter for ‘Apricot Flowers,’ there were more than ten recipes for using apricot flowers to create fragrances and nourish one’s appearance. Among them was the secret recipe for the “Yang Taizhen Anise Cream”.

In the An Shou Hall, Old Madam Yu leaned against the armrest of the chair and said to Nanny Liu, “Have we sent out the gifts to all of the clan’s disciples who are about to enter the exam? This exam is a big deal; we can’t be negligent.”

Nanny Liu bowed and said, “Old Madam, don’t worry. We might have missed out an item or two in the past, but this year, Eldest Miss has helped to keep an eye on it. Since our return from the Precious Peace Temple yesterday, she has already asked the maidservants to pack all the incense ashes we’d obtained from the temple into the good luck packages. She has also instructed someone to prepare ink, ink, paper, ink stone, and so on. And early this morning, she has already ordered them to be sent over. I’ve checked the list. Not only were all the direct descendants accounted for, but the distant branches were also included.”

Madam Yang was now in charge of the household, so Nanny Liu could not give the instructions. Instead, without letting Madam Yang know, she had reminded Yu Youyao to be involved in the big and small matters of the household.

And now, as she was explaining, she made it sound like it was all thanks to Yao Yao that the matter was settled.

Old Madam Yu glanced at Nanny Liu with a faint smile. This old nanny was wise and shrewd.

Nanny Liu stood at the side obediently, as if she hadn’t noticed Old Madam Yu’s gaze. “I’m old, and I’m not as good at managing many things in the residence as I used to be. Eldest Miss has been learning how to manage the house from me for a while, and she’s also quite good. Even the accounts in the residence don’t stump her. Her intelligence and sharpness are reminiscent of a younger you, Old Madam Yu.”

Although these were words of flattery, Nanny Liu was her close personal aide, and she knew that she wouldn't say something like that if she didn't mean it. In that case, it must mean that Yao Yao had indeed done a good job.

Old Madam Yu could not stop smiling. Seeing that there was no one else in the room, she did not hide it. "What do you think of the heir of the Marquis of Zhen Residence?"

Nanny Liu was stunned for a moment. After a while, she said, "I've been with you for most of my life and have seen many outstanding juniors. Be it in terms of family background, appearance, or talent, the heir of the Marquis Zhen Residence is top-notch. No one in the capital can compare to him."

At this point, she thought of Young Master Zhou, who was living in The Green Room. Compared to the Song Heir, they each had their own merits. Unfortunately...

Old Madam Yu did not say anything else after this one question.

The next day, the candidates participating in the Spring Quarter Examination entered the venue.

During the few days of the examination, the capital was put under martial law. Every household lived their lives behind closed doors. It was rare for the capital to be completely without activity for a few days.

And so, day by day went by!

Chapter 37

Mentor-Disciple Deal

After three exams in seven days, the tightly shut doors of the Official Academy finally opened.

The capital bustled with activity.

Yu Shanyan and the others who weren't able to enter the examination rushed to the entrance of the Official Academy to experience the atmosphere in advance. Yu Youyao wanted to go too, but her grandmother did not let her go out.

The students who had been inside the Academy for seven days came out one after another. Most of them were in a daze. It was obvious that they had suffered quite a bit.

The next day, the disciples of the Yu Clan who had participated in the examination gathered and greeted Old Madam Yu, then thanked her for her care and help.

Seeing that they were in good spirits, Old Madam Yu asked, "Were the questions this year difficult? Did you manage to finish all of them?" She didn't ask if they had done them well.

The dozen or so disciples in front of her went silent. A teenager of about seventeen or eighteen wanted to step forward and say something, but the person beside him pulled him back and shook his head.

Naturally, this scene did not escape Old Madam Yu's notice. Her hand that had been twisting her prayer beads also paused.

The young man who had held him back was the third young master of the eldest branch of the Yu Clan, Yu Shande. He was also the most promising one from the clan this time. The Yu Clan had

high hopes for him. If he could get on the rankings, there would definitely be one more capable minister from the Yu Clan in the future.

At this moment, Yu Shande stepped forward respectfully. “The questions weren’t especially difficult, but we weren’t talented, and only barely managed to finish it.”

These were humble words. Just managing to complete it was already very impressive. Old Madam Yu smiled and said, “That’s okay. For the next few days, just rest well and wait for the rankings to be released.” At this point, she paused and said, “You’re still young. Most of you are participating in the examination for the first time. Don’t worry too much.”

After hearing what she said, everyone looked much more relaxed.

Old Madam Yu asked them to stay for lunch. It was a rare occasion for there to be a banquet in the residence, so Nanny Liu asked Yu Youyao to check on the main kitchen. When she returned to the north courtyard and passed by the lotus pond, she heard someone talking by the rock garden.

It was Yu Shande and another youth, named Yu Shanren.

“Why did you stop me from talking earlier?”

“It was just something that we had happened to hear someone mention in the Golden Jade Pavilion. We don’t even know if it’s true or not, yet you dare to share it with others. Do you have a death wish?”

“But since others have talked about it, there must be some truth to it.”

“As long as there isn’t evidence, we shouldn’t talk about it.”

“But, befriending the main examiner in private and obtaining the leaked test questions that way, making a deal to become mentor and disciple so that the disciple will repay his mentor when he makes it onto the Golden Ranking List—that’s clearly cheating in the examination. It’s too unfair to us, who have been studying hard for years.”

“Shut your mouth up!”

“|—”

“Regarding the examiner accepting disciples, there has already been a precedent case in the previous dynasty. The previous dynasty’s sacred sage had become old and felt regretful that he couldn’t continue to serve the country, so he had taken in a few more disciples, hoping to nurture more talents for the country. It’s still unclear if there was really cheating in the imperial examination, yet you dare to spout nonsense.”

“But...”

“Everyone in the capital knows that the Golden Jade Pavilion is one of the businesses of the Marquis of Weining’s Residence. If this causes any trouble, the Yu Residence will be implicated.”

There was a long silence in the rock garden.

After a while, he said, “Don’t think too much about it. Perhaps it’s just an ordinary mentor-disciple relationship, and has nothing to do with cheating. Besides, we have the Yu Residence supporting us, so this doesn’t affect us much either way.”

“Got it, Third Bro.”

The two of them left the rock garden together. On the other side, Yu Youyao’s scalp had gone numb upon hearing all of this. Her right eyelid twitched non-stop as she paced around the rock garden. Fortunately, there were guests at the residence and everyone was busy. There was no one else on this side of the rock garden except her. She heaved a sigh of relief.

That student who’d befriended the examiner—regardless of whether he had cheated—had better not have anything to do with the Yu Residence.

Yu Youyao turned around and went to the north courtyard, then told Old Madam Yu everything she had heard.

Old Madam Yu’s expression was solemn. She repeatedly instructed Yu Youyao not to spread this matter outside. Then, she sent someone to the second house, asking Madam Yao to inform Yu Zongshen to head to the main house the moment he was back from work. Finally, she called Yu Shande and Yu Shanren into the main house, and dismissed everyone else.

She remembered how strange the two of them had behaved when they were in the hall earlier.

About ten minutes later, Yu Shande and Yu Shanren walked out of An Shou Hall with ashamed expressions. Clearly, they had been taught a lesson by Old Madam Yu.

All the descendants of the clan left after having their lunch.

In the afternoon, Yu Zongshen came to the main house. Old Madam Yu closed the door and said to him, “Shande is quite sharp, but he’s still inexperienced after all. He’s too cautious but not thorough enough. You should give him more guidance in the future. Shanren is honest and straightforward, but he’s a little quick-tempered. However, he still knows to consider the big picture, and is a boy who can be taught. After talking to them today, they understand what they should do. After a few days, you can go over and further explain the rationale and reasoning to them. The youths in the clan are all willing to listen to you.”

Yu Zongshen nodded. “Mother, since it’s you who has handled it, I’m not worried one bit.”

Old Madam Yu said, “There’s no need to tell your big brother about this. If he finds out, he’ll definitely run about getting involved again. When that happens, he might feel satisfied, but not only will he implicate you, the Yu family will also be in hot water.”

After two to three days, Yu Youyao still had not heard any rumors about cheating in the examination spreading outside. Instead, the students who’d participated in the examination were out and about in

the capital, hanging out with friends, having discussions, and networking with the aristocrats. Mostly, they were just waiting for the results of the ranking to be released.

Once the list was released, the students who made it onto the list would be official scholars and could participate in the palace examination in April.

Yu Youyao felt relieved. Suddenly, she remembered the sachet she had promised her cousin and quickly fetched the jar that contained the dried flowers.

The dried apricot flowers were bright and beautiful in pink and white. The fragrance of the flowers was slightly tart while also slightly sweet. It smelled fresh and layered, and was suitable for both men and women.

Yu Youyao called Chun Xiao over. "Go to my box of items and bring a sachet to me. It's for a gift to Cousin."

After a while, Chun Xiao brought two sachets over. One was green with lotus patterns, and the other was blue with orchids. The colors were alright, but Yu Youyao wasn't satisfied with them.

Nanny Xu smiled and said, "Didn't you learn needlework? Why don't you embroider a sachet yourself for Young Master?"

When Yu Youyao heard this, she quickly shook her head. "No! No, I've only learned needlework for a short time. I haven't even learned all the techniques and skills. If I embroider badly, I'll make a fool of myself."

She wasn't very interested in needlework, but Nanny Xu had insisted that she learn it for two hours a day. In the first few days, she often pricked her own fingers, causing her precious fingers to be covered in bloody holes.

Yu Youyao was delicate and afraid of pain. After realizing that resisting Nanny Xu's instructions was useless, she accepted the reality. In order not to let her fingers suffer, she could only learn needlework seriously.

Actually, the best age to learn needlework was generally five or six years old. At that age, the bones were tender and flexible.

Yu Youyao was a little older, but she was born with good coordination. After learning for a few days, she had managed to learn a lot of needlework techniques, but still, she had never embroidered anything seriously.

Chapter 38

He Wouldn't Live Past 20?

"Whether it's embroidered well or not is secondary. What's important is your sincerity." Nanny Xu glanced at the "Sutra of the Medicine Buddha" calligraphy hanging on the wall and said, "The gifts that Young Master has given you were all written and made by him. It's not good for you to give him such common, standard gifts in return every time. You should show more effort."

Yu Youyao indeed felt a little ashamed. After seeing the calligraphy and paintings on the wall, her heart wavered. "But if the embroidery isn't nice, Cousin wouldn't want to carry it around!"

Nanny Xu smiled and said, “Even if he doesn’t carry it around outside, he can have it with him in the residence.”

Thinking of the fact that she had never embroidered anything seriously before, Yu Youyao was still a little hesitant. “Forget it. Chun Xiao’s workmanship is quite good. I’ll get her to embroider the sachet with bamboo patterns.”

Nanny Xu sighed softly. The gift-giving wasn’t the point—she wanted Yu Youyao to do the embroidering mainly because she was too careless with her needlework.

At this moment, Dong Mei walked into the house with a scroll in her hand. “Young Mistress, Young Master has sent over a painting.”

“Quick, show it to me.” Yu Youyao smiled. She quickly took the scroll from Dong Mei and carefully opened it.

On the pure white paper, there was a picturesque painting of mountains and a lake. An apricot tree stood with its reflection in the clear water. Its flowers bloomed elegantly, and the scene was beyond beautiful.

There were only a few strokes, but each stroke was well-spaced and expertly executed.

Yu Youyao’s face was filled with amazement as she looked at the short poem on it. “The apricot flower is white, but not completely. It’s red, but not entirely. Please look beyond it being red or white, and see it in a different light. Cousin really painted this magnificently.”

Only, why was her cousin suddenly giving her a painting for no reason?

And it even had apricot flowers!

Was he reminding her that he hadn’t received the sachet she had promised him?

It took at most five to six days to make a sachet, but it had been more than ten days since they had returned from the Precious Peace Temple. Yu Youyao felt embarrassed as she handed the painting to Dong Mei, asking her to have someone frame it and hang it in the house.

“Nanny, let’s go to the Embroidery Room!” Nanny Xu was right. Her cousin had given her works that he had personally made; it wasn’t right for her to have someone else make her gift.

‘How difficult can making a sachet be?’

Bond-molding hurt so badly and learning etiquette was so difficult. She had endured all of them. How could a mere sachet be too difficult for her?

In The Green Room, Zhou Linghuai sat under the porch. Uncle Sun’s eyes were squinted so much that it looked as if he was asleep. He stroked his long beard and took Zhou Linghuai’s pulse.

There were small lilac flowers in the spider plant, and they looked like small strings of wisteria, emitting a faint fragrance.

After a long while, Uncle Sun opened his eyes. “Young Master, your injury is on your spinal cord, causing your Qi and blood to stagnate, so your legs cannot feel or move. Furthermore, you have

also hurt your vitality, causing your energy to be weak. Your core is too weak to receive nourishment, and if you lose any more vital energy, it will damage and shorten your lifespan. In the past three years, I've tried my best, but I can only help in managing your condition, so that you can live for a few more years."

Three years ago, Uncle Sun had said that Zhou Linghuai wouldn't live past 20. Zhou Linghuai had heard such words so many times that he was no longer affected by it.

Five years was indeed a short time, but it was enough for him to devise a careful plan and avenge his parents.

Zhou Linghuai lowered his eyes and looked at his book, but he couldn't read a single word. For some reason, Yu Youyao's bright smile appeared in his mind, and he couldn't help but feel breathless.

Uncle Sun hesitated for a moment before saying, "Actually, Young Master's legs aren't completely damaged."

As soon as he heard this, Zhou Linghuai, who had long accepted that his legs were completely paralyzed, couldn't help but feel waves in his heart that overwhelmed him. But soon, a trace of sadness flashed across his eyes and his heart fell back into a dead calm.

Even if there was a way, it would probably be a long shot.

Otherwise, Uncle Sun wouldn't have kept it from him until now.

Uncle Sun sighed softly. "The Sun family has been practicing medicine for generations. Among our ancestors, there was once a King of Medicine who'd created a set of acupuncture methods for the Inner Qi. The family's 'Records of Ten Thousand Diseases' recorded thousands of difficult illnesses. Among them, there are diseases similar to yours. By using the Inner Qi Acupuncture method, your internal passageways will be cleared and your legs will heal."

Zhou Linghuai's breathing tightened, and his hands on his knees suddenly tensed. "Do you need any other conditions to execute this acupuncture technique?"

Uncle Sun nodded. "The Inner Qi Acupuncture is used to mobilize the vital energy in the body and circulate the Qi within you. Since your core is damaged, you will lose vital energy easily, so this acupuncture treatment is too dangerous for you, and I'd never told you about it before. Instead, I've only prescribed nourishing medicine for you to consume every day, as it can help to strengthen your core."

Zhou Linghuai's lips twitched, but as his clenched fists gradually relaxed, he regained his composure.

"However," Uncle Sun changed his tone and said, "Recently, I discovered that Young Master's core is actually showing signs of becoming stronger. It must be because of the medicinal cuisine sent by Eldest Miss Yu every day. It's most likely the top-secret recipe of the Xie Residence in Quanzhou."

Their manual had a long history and included many unknown treatments.

According to what he knew, the Xie Residence in Quanzhou was famous for their longevity. Members of the Xie family were more robust than the average person, and even their lifespan was longer too. It was rare for anyone to hit 70 years, but those from the Xie family had lifespans of more than 70 years. The current head of the Xie family, Old Master Xie, was already 73 years old, but he was still energetic.

Zhou Linghuai pursed his lips slightly but he remained expressionless. Recently, Uncle Sun had already mentioned the secret formula of the Xie family more than once.

“Young Master.” Uncle Sun squinted his eyes and glanced at his young master. Seeing his indifferent expression, he continued helplessly, “If we can use their secret recipe to nourish your vitality and strengthen your core, perhaps in a few years, your body will be able to withstand the Inner Qi Acupuncture technique and you will be able to walk again. Even if it doesn’t successfully treat your legs, it will at least improve your core health, and you will be able to live for at least ten more years, or even longer.”

For the past month, he had privately been studying to find out the secret recipe, but unfortunately, he still hadn’t a single clue.

Zhou Linghuai said nothing.

Uncle Sun wanted to persuade him further, but at this moment, Chang An walked in.

Zhou Linghuai looked up at him. “Did Cousin say anything after accepting the painting?”

“Nanny Xu was teaching Miss Cousin needlework, so I couldn’t disturb her. I passed the painting to Dong Mei.” Chang An’s head hung low.

Zhou Linghuai looked up and saw an apricot tree in the courtyard, its branches full of reddish-white flowers. The tree had been transplanted here a few days ago.

Suddenly, he could hear Yu Youyao’s sweet voice in his ear. “... the apricot flowers here were blooming beautifully. I want to break off a branch and return to the residence to make a sachet for you to carry around.”

In the blink of an eye, more than ten days had passed!

Not noticing that Zhou Linghuai was behaving differently, Uncle Sun sighed again. “Young Master, there’s hope for your legs to recover, and you have to be more conscientious in the future. In a while, I’ll make some medicinal oil to circulate your flow. I’ll also teach Chang An a set of techniques to massage you thrice a day. Before you sleep, soak your leg with the medicinal water to prevent the muscles in your leg from shrinking.”

The Young Master was unwilling to use any ploys to obtain the secret recipe from Eldest Miss Yu, so Uncle Sun couldn’t do anything about it. Fortunately, Eldest Miss Yu treated Young Master well and made a pot of medicinal cuisine every day.

Chapter 39

Tears of Anger!

In the embroidery room, Yu Youyao pinched an embroidery needle and carefully threaded it through the embroidery cloth.

She'd originally thought that embroidering a bamboo-patterned sachet would be very easy, but once she really tried it, she realized how difficult it was.

She knew the double-sided embroidery technique like the back of her hand, but when it came to actually executing it, it was a completely different story.

One needle at a time, the green bamboo pattern that she had wanted to create became a "caterpillar." It looked like a mess, and it shattered her confidence.

Yu Youyao refused to continue. "At this rate, when will I manage to embroider a decent fragrance pouch for Cousin? I should just get Chun Xiao to make one for me, so that I won't make Cousin wait too long."

Out of ideas, Nanny Xu secretly went to the north courtyard.

After a while, Nanny Liu personally arrived at the Jade courtyard. "Old Madam knows that Eldest Miss is learning embroidery and is worried that you'll hurt your hands, so she has ordered me to deliver gloves to you."

What good were gloves? They could only help so much.

However, both her grandmother and Nanny Xu were working together to make her continue embroidering. What else could she do?

Yu Youyao pinched the embroidery needle bitterly and continued to practice. After a while, she couldn't sit still anymore. She angrily threw the tools into the embroidery basket. "Dong Mei and Chun Xiao are both great at needlework, and can help embroider things like fragrance pouches or handkerchiefs. There are also embroiderers in the mansion. Why should I have to suffer?"

Nanny Xu said, "This morning, Fourth Miss visited the An Shou Hall and greeted Old Madam. She gave Old Madam a head scarf that she had personally embroidered. Immediately, Old Madam asked Nanny Liu to help her put it on. I wonder when she'll be able to wear the handkerchief embroidered by you, Eldest Miss."

Yu Youyao broke down.

Usually, the older young mistresses from wealthy families would learn needlework in order to please their elders and gain a good reputation. However, her grandmother doted on her, so naturally, she had no need to go out of her way to please her grandmother. However, it was precisely because her grandmother doted on her that she wanted to be more filial to her too. She shouldn't be unable to do what her other grandchildren could do.

Yu Youyao took a deep breath and retrieved her embroidery tools from the basket.

About half an hour later, Yu Youyao accidentally pricked her finger with a needle. Bright red beads of blood appeared on her fingertip. It was so painful that her eyes welled up with tears and she cried in anger. "It hurts. I don't want to learn anymore. I really don't want to. Embroidery is about technique, and it's something that has to be learned from a young age. I'm already so old. No matter

how seriously I learn or how hard I work, I won't be as good as others. Nothing I embroider will be presentable enough and I'll only make a fool of myself..."

Nanny Xu was already prepared for this. She pressed on Yu Youyao's finger with a handkerchief. After a while, the wound stopped bleeding. Then, she carefully applied a layer of medicine and everything was fine.

"What I've taught you is the double-sided embroidery technique, which has already been a lost technique among most people. If you learn it, it will be a unique skill that you possess. It won't be inferior to those who've learned needlework since they were young, let alone allow others to look down on you."

After explaining and coaxing, she finally managed to appease Yu Youyao. Nanny Xu was exhausted.

The first step was always the hardest, but at least she'd finally survived the first day of it.

On the second day, Yu Youyao finally accepted her reality, not acting as she did on the first day. Nanny Xu finally heaved a sigh of relief.

Yu Youyao was just a little lazy, but she actually picked up everything quickly once she got serious.

...

In the afternoon, when Zongzheng returned home from work, he saw Concubine He's personal maidservant, Zhi Lan, waiting at the entrance of the backyard. Instantly, he stopped in his tracks.

Zhi Lan bowed. "Master, Concubine He has personally whipped up your favorite dishes today. She's waiting for you."

Yu Zongzheng suddenly pictured a dark and silent courtyard, where Concubine He carried a single illuminating lantern in hand, waiting for him, alone and eager, in the still of the night.

Under the dim yellow light of the lantern, Concubine He's thin dress accentuated her seductive figure. Seeing that there was no one else around, he hugged her in his arms and pressed her against the corner of the wall.

He thought to himself that since it was in the dead of night, there was not a soul in the courtyard, and Concubine He did not stop him...

With these images in mind, Yu Zongzheng couldn't help but gulp. His lower body tensed a little, and he was about to nod in agreement.

Just then, his servant boy, Zhao Da, reminded him, "Master, today is February 20th."

The first and fifteenth days of the month were special dates, so he stayed in the main courtyard on those days. Other than that, he also had to sleep in the main courtyard on all even dates. It was as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head, and the raging fire in Yu Zongzheng's body was completely extinguished. "Tell Concubine He that I'll go to the Clear Autumn Courtyard tomorrow."

When she saw Yu Zongzheng walk away, Zhi Lan stomped her feet.

As soon as Yu Zongzheng arrived at the main courtyard, Yang Shuwan's maidservant, Mu Jin, greeted him. "Master, you're back. Madam said that Master has been busy recently. Since it's the 20th today, the family will have a lively meal together."

Yu Zongzheng had felt rather glum that he couldn't go to the Clear Autumn Courtyard, but after hearing this, his somber expression softened.

He thought of his children with Yang Shuwan. Jia Jia was obedient and understanding, though she was physically weaker, which made him dote on her more.

Shansi was his only legitimate son, and was his treasure.

Yu Zongzheng drew the curtain and walked into the inner room.

Yang Shuwan was wearing a peony dress and gave off a different kind of charm. Yu Jianjia was dressed in an outfit embroidered with plum flowers, looking delicate and weak. The two of them seemed to be talking about something in private, and their expressions revealed that they were facing some sort of difficulty. When they saw Yu Zongzheng coming over, both of them looked surprised.

Yang Shuwan hurriedly stood up and greeted Yu Zongzheng. She smiled and said, "Master, you're back early today. It seems like everything went smoothly at work today."

"The rankings will be released these few days, so the government office isn't as busy as before." Yu Zongzheng sat on the seat where Yang Shuwan had been sitting, while she sat meekly beside him.

Yu Jianjia stood up and personally poured a cup of tea before serving it respectfully. "Father, you have worked hard in the government office for the entire day. Have a cup of tea to relieve your fatigue."

With his beloved wife and daughter by his side, Yu Zongzheng was in a good mood. He took a sip of tea and put down the teacup. He looked at his daughter and said, "A few days ago, you followed your grandmother to Precious Peace Temple to offer incense but caught a cold and fell a little sick when you returned. I was busy during that period so I didn't have the time to come and see you. Are you feeling better now?"

"I'm feeling much better." Yu Jianjia smiled. Her pale face was filled with admiration and affection. "Although you didn't come to visit me, you had Zhao Da send me some premium ginseng to nourish my body. I know very well that you dote on me. It's just that you're busy with work, yet you still have to worry about me. It's my fault for making you worry."

After saying that, she bit her lower lip lightly and looked guilty, making her look even gentler and more endearing.

Such an obedient and sensible daughter made Yu Zongzheng want to dote on her further. He softened his tone and said, "Don't think that way. You have to be more careful with your illness. I'll get Zhao Da to invite Imperial Physician Hu over one day, so that he can take a good look at your condition. He's an expert in nursing patients to health."

Shameless

Imperial Physician Hu was the Imperial Physician of the Imperial Hospital. His rank was fifth-grade and his medical skills were brilliant. Usually when he was in the palace, he only had to interact closely with the Empress Dowager and the Emperor.

Yu Zongzheng knew Imperial Physician Hu personally, so he would most likely be able to invite him to the residence.

Yu Jianjia's eyes lit up. "Thank you for worrying about me, Father. However, Grandmother is old, and Imperial Physician Hu's medical skills are brilliant. It's rare for him to visit us, so we should have him check on her first."

Her heart condition was known only to her grandmother, her mother, her father, and the physician who usually took her pulse. Others were only told that she was born prematurely and hence had a weaker constitution.

There was another condition that most good families had for marriage—to be without any terrible illnesses.

Since she had that incident with Yu Youyao and fell sick, she had been sick several times in a row. She had also caused quite a commotion and a lot of concern in the residence. If she created another commotion by inviting Imperial Physician Hu for a house call, it would only cause everyone to start thinking that she had some terrible illness. Who knew what they would say about her? It might cause great damage to her reputation.

On the other hand, it sounded reasonable if her father invited Imperial Physician Hu to give her grandmother a health check. Then, after which, he could conveniently take her pulse while he was at their residence. This way, she could even be praised for being filial and considerate by her father.

Of course, it was only right for the Imperial Physician to take a look at his elderly mother first. At this realization, Yu Zongzheng felt ashamed, and felt an even greater appreciation for his kind and filial daughter. The way he looked at Yu Jianjia also became gentler.

"You're still young, yet you're already so perceptive, well-behaved, and mature." He turned to look at Yang Shuwan with an appreciative gaze. "I'm usually busy with work, so these children rely on your upbringing. This is your credit."

After saying that, he thought of his eldest daughter, Yu Youyao. If that child were brought up by Madam Yang, she probably wouldn't have been so pampered by her grandmother, becoming spoiled and insensible.

After receiving her father's praise, Yu Jianjia looked bashful and lowered her head.

Yang Shuwan looked at Yu Zongzheng with love as tears fell from her eyes. She hurriedly turned her head and wiped them off with a handkerchief. "It's my duty to take good care of you and our children. Hearing what you just said, all the hard work is worth it."

Yu Zongzheng put his arm around Yang Shuwan's shoulders and pulled her into his arms. "Wan'er, I know you treat me well. Otherwise, you wouldn't have..." Seeing that his daughter was present, he swallowed the words that were about to come out of his mouth. "I won't let you suffer."

He had first met Yang Shuwan when he visited the Imperial Censor's Residence during the year that Madam Xie was pregnant.

It was summer, and Yang Shuwan was wearing a thin pink dress, having fun reciting poetry with her sisters.

She exuded the air of an intellect. When she recited poetry, her voice was soft and gentle, and her talent could not be hidden. He couldn't help taking a few more glances when he suddenly thought of his wife at home—Madam Xie.

Madam Xie was sociable and beautiful, and very few women in the capital could compare to her. All of his peers and colleagues said that he was a lucky man, but he did not like her interest in financial matters. She did not have the gentleness and tenderness that a woman should have, nor did she have the virtue and talent that came with the upbringing of a scholarly family. Hence, they had a bland marital relationship.

On the other hand, he felt that a gentle and cultured woman like Yang Shuwan would be the best choice as his wife.

With this notion in his subconscious, he somehow found himself getting to know her more closely.

The Xie family had not produced a single child in the past three years. The rules of scholarly families were strict. Since the children of the legitimate wife were not born yet, it wasn't proper for a concubine to give birth first. Therefore, he did not have any concubines. Although there were a few maidservants whom he could take as concubines, he wasn't particularly interested. However, during one night after he had done some drinking at the Yang Residence, he was a little tipsy when he dragged the maidservant who had come to serve him onto the bed and fooled around with her for the entire night.

He thought to himself that it was no big deal to sleep with a maidservant, and he would just make her his concubine the next day. This kind of practice was common in rich families.

However, when he woke up the next day, he realized that he had made a mistake.

Yang Shuwan cried her heart out. "It's all my fault. When I heard that you were drunk, I was worried that the maidservant wouldn't serve you well enough, so I wanted to come over personally to check on you. I didn't expect..."

Yu Zongzheng was filled with shame and fear.

He had come to the Yang Residence as a guest, but he had humiliated their daughter because he had been drunk. If news of this scandal were to spread, he, the Imperial Censor who was in charge of investigating hundreds of officials, would probably become a laughing stock. If that happens, he most likely wouldn't even be able to keep his position.

Yang Shuwan's face was covered in tears, and she looked miserable. "You were drunk and didn't know what was going on. It was I who admired your talent and shamelessly climbed into your bed, tarnishing your reputation. I'm just a lowly concubine's daughter, but I'm lucky to have been able to know you. I don't expect you to take pity on me, nor do I dare to implicate you. I only hope that you will remember me in the future."

She had placed all the blame on herself, and her every line was filled with deep emotion for him. While Yu Zongzheng felt ashamed, he could not help heaving a sigh of relief.

With Yang Shuwan's words, it meant that he wasn't the one at fault. Even if this matter was exposed, he still had room to maneuver the situation.

The next day, news came from the Yang Residence that Yang Shuwan had fallen into the water and almost drowned.

Only then did Yu Zongzheng realize that Yang Shuwan had said those words to him yesterday because she'd already had the intention to die.

In order not to put him in a difficult position, and to keep his reputation clear, she chose to take her own life instead.

Yu Zongzheng felt very moved. How could he just stand by and watch Yang Shuwan die? Hence, he immediately promised to take Yang Shuwan as his concubine, and the two of them started their affair.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at him. "Master, I didn't think that you still remembered what happened back then."

Back then, her first mother—the official wife of her father—had planned to marry her to a rich businessman in Suzhou. However, people often said that it was better to be a concubine of an official than the wife of a businessman. Naturally, she didn't want to marry the businessman, so she started thinking of a way out for herself.

She usually stayed in her room and did not get to interact much with other men, but among those she had interacted with, Yu Zongzheng was the best.

The Yu Residence had been a scholarly family for generations, and had much stricter rules than ordinary families. A man could only divorce his wife and marry someone else if he still had no children at 40 years old. If he had a child, he could have a maximum of two concubines.

Although Yu Zongzheng had maid servants whom he slept with in the backyard, because his first wife had yet to give birth, it wasn't good for him to have children with a concubine first. Hence, he had yet to take in a concubine.

From Yu Zongzheng's words and behavior, it had been obvious that he did not have a good relationship with his wife, Madam Xie.

This gave Yang Shuwan an idea.

She had thought that once she entered the Yu Residence in the future, she would be a noble concubine. No one in the backyard would compete with her for favor, and with Yu Zongzheng doting on her, Madam Xie would not dare to do anything to her.

Who would have thought that Madam Xie would pass so quickly, allowing her to marry into the family as an official wife.

In the present, the two of them quickly controlled themselves when they remembered that their daughter was in the room as well. Recalling Yang Shuwan and Yu Jianjia's troubled expressions just now, Yu Zongzheng couldn't help but ask, "What were you two talking about just now? Tell me." Yang Shuwan looked troubled and glanced at Yu Jianjia, who also looked hesitant. Her lips moved as if she didn't know if she should speak.

Yu Zongzheng frowned at the expressions of both mother and daughter. “Is there anything in the residence that I can’t know about? If you have anything to say, just say it.”

Yang Shuwan hurriedly explained, “It’s nothing much—just some trivial matters of the household. I don’t wish to trouble you over it.”

With that said, Yu Zongzheng guessed that it probably had something to do with his eldest daughter, Yu Youyao. He frowned and turned to look at Yu Jianjia. “Since your mother isn’t talking, you should tell me yourself.”