Farmhouse 411

Chapter 411: Youyou Captured

Elsewhere, Gu Youyou was taken to an unfamiliar room.

The room had an ancient elegance, and all the furnishings were of high quality. The only detractor was that it seemed too dark due to the doors and windows being closed.

Her hands were tied with ropes, and her mouth was stuffed with cloth, leaving her only the use of her eyes to glare at the two people who had carried her here.

Performing such a deed of snatching someone on the streets surely indicated guilt, and those two didn't dare to meet Gu Youyou's gaze, shifting their attention toward the door instead.

"The young lady should be arriving soon, right?"

The other one replied, "Should be soon."

As their gaze returned to Gu Youyou, one of them sighed and said, "Don't glare at us like that, we don't want to do such shameful things either. But if we don't, others will be sent to do it, and they'll beat us up afterward. We are forced into this. If the young lady does something to you and you end up as a wronged spirit, you have to recognize your real enemy and not seek revenge on the wrong person."

Wronged spirit my ass, Gu Youyou so wanted to curse, but her mouth was gagged.

After this remark from him, the other person was startled and said, "The young lady wouldn't really kill Doctor Gu, would she?"

The man realized this issue too and exclaimed in shock, "No way, right?"

"Why not? What if she does?"

"Oh no, that would be the end of us. The Marquess is upright and just, and the entire street has witnessed this. He will definitely have to kill us to answer for the life taken."

"Yeah, why is our fate so bitter..."

Gu Youyou remained still, watching these two unfortunate house servants.

"We have to..." Huddled in a corner, the two servants whispered their plot. Gu Youyou sighed with relief upon hearing this.

They loosened the ropes on Gu Youyou's hands, slipped a knot into her grasp, and whispered, "Doctor Gu, when the opportunity arises, give this a pull and the rope will come undone. You've got to be smart, and make sure never to let the young lady kill you. Try to stall for time. Once we leave, we'll go find help."

Gu Youyou's expression softened, and she nodded at the two men.

Soon after, the sound of creaking was heard as the door was pushed open from outside, and Yue Ruxue, holding a whip, walked in against the backlight from the door.

Seeing Gu Youyou in such a sorry state, she couldn't help but burst into loud laughter.

"Gu Youyou, you've finally fallen into my hands. You have your day too, hahaha..."

This little wretch, at the age of willful folly, Gu Youyou thought to herself: It was just bad luck.

"Pull that cloth out of her mouth. I want to hear her begging for mercy," Yue Ruxue commanded fiercely.

The house servants removed the cloth from Gu Youyou's mouth and stepped back.

The sight of Yue Ruxue’s crazed demeanor made them uneasy; if something significant were to happen, the young lady might at most get punished, but it would be a disaster for them both.

One of them, bolder than the other, said, "Young lady, Doctor Gu has no power to truss a chicken, she definitely can’t stand against you... Maybe we can go now?"

"Cowards!" Yue Ruxue scolded with disdain, "Useless, be gone!"

The two men, as if granted an amnesty, hurried out and closed the door behind them.

Only Gu Youyou and Yue Ruxue were left in the room, with Yue Ruxue moving closer while glaring at Gu Youyou with hatred.

Gu Youyou slightly curled her lips upward and whispered, "I wonder what I’ve done to offend the second young lady to deserve being bagged in broad daylight on the street?"

"Hmph, where have you offended me?" Yue Ruxue stared at Gu Youyou with a bloodthirsty look in her eyes, laughing hysterically, "Your very existence is an offense to me. You’re just a country girl; killing you is as simple as crushing an ant."

Chapter 412: Scratch Your Face

"Oh, then I have nothing to fear; go ahead!" Gu Youyou said indifferently.

"You are not afraid?" Yue Ruxue said in astonishment.

Why was she so calm, shouldn’t she be afraid?

"If I were afraid, would you let me go?" Gu Youyou asked with a smile.

Yue Ruxue’s pupils shrank, and she took a step back.

The calm smile on Gu Youyou’s face stung her eyes as if mocking her, ridiculing her as a loser.

If she had lost to princesses or commandery princesses who were better than her, she would have had nothing to say, but losing to a village girl like Gu Youyou, how could she accept that?

She bent down, staring condescendingly at Gu Youyou, and said, "What kind of seductive tricks did you use to deceive brother Zijin, was it this face of yours?"

Apart from her reasonably attractive face, she really couldn't see any other merits in her.

As for her father's words that they were both without parents, making it a suitable match, she never believed them.

"Oh..." Gu Youyou drew out her voice meaningfully and said, "So you have taken a fancy to my husband, ah... alas..." She sighed again, looking at Yue Ruxue with a pitying expression, "Miss Yue, it's a pity that I have no intention of taking a concubine for my husband. I think you should give up."

"Concubine?" Yue Ruxue felt deeply humiliated and shrieked, "I, the legitimate daughter of the Lingnan Marquis Residence, who would dare to compare with me other than a princess? You dare suggest that I become a concubine?"

Gu Youyou looked surprised and hastily said, "It's a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding! I didn't mean for Miss Yue to become a concubine..." Actually, Gu Youyou meant she wouldn't let her in the door at all, not even if she threw herself at them.

However, her words were not fully uttered before they were interrupted by the triumphant Miss Yue.

"At least you know what's good for you," Yue Ruxue said. "My father told me long ago that when brother Zijin visits our house again, we should propose my marriage to him. I just didn't expect that he would be gone for so many years, and upon his return, he would be married to someone else. A concubine would have been fine, but no, he recognized you as his official wife.

Oh well, forget it, which substantial family doesn't have several concubines? I am generous and will not quarrel with you. If you apologize to me here today and call me 'sister,' I will let you off. When I enter the door in the future, I won't mistreat you."

Yue Ruxue felt self-satisfied as she looked down condescendingly, reprimanding Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou simply smiled faintly, as if watching a comedy.

What surprised her was the relationship between Yue Ruxue and Jin Zijin; she had no idea about it at all.

She wondered if Jin Zijin knew about it.

"Does Zijin know about this?" Gu Youyou tilted her head and asked.

The smile on Yue Ruxue's face froze, and she clenched the whip in her hand tighter.

Seeing her reaction, Gu Youyou knew for sure Jin Zijin didn't know about this, and her smile grew even wider.

"It's all your fault that my father couldn't speak out," she yelled fiercely.

Haha, sure, blame me for this too!

Gu Youyou said, "Do you know how old Zijin is this year?"

"Of course, I do."

"At his age, if it weren't me, it would be someone else; you really can't blame me for this. Miss Yue, you shouldn't go too far. You're just fourteen or fifteen years old. We've been treating you as a child and been patient with you. Don't grind away what little patience we have left; you'll regret it when it's too late to cry."

"What did you say? Are you lecturing me?" Yue Ruxue roared furiously and reached out to grab Gu Youyou, "You wretch, it’s not your place to lecture me. I’ll see if I can ruin your face. Aren’t you a doctor? Let’s see if you can heal your own torn... face..."

Chapter 413: You’re Too Young

Yue Ruxue cursed as she tried to grab Gu Youyou and lift her to throw her into a corner, but before she could finish her sentence, she fainted, her consciousness blurring.

Gu Youyou pushed her away and tucked the silver needle back into her sleeve before dusting off her hands.

She sighed, "After all, you’re too young, with such little wit, you’re nothing without the Marquis Residence backing you..."

Urgent footsteps came from outside the door, Gu Youyou turned to look, and suddenly sunlight spilled in.

In the pitch-black room, the sunlight was blinding, causing her to instinctively raise her hand to shield her eyes.

She saw a tall figure striding towards her, sweeping her into an embrace.

"Youyou!" A familiar voice, his characteristic scent.

She had known he would come, but not this quickly. If she had known, she would’ve delayed instead of provoking Yue Ruxue to act against her so soon.

She should have left the heroic rescue to him.

"Are you okay?"

"I’m fine," Gu Youyou said.

"Axue!" On the other side, Yue Rujing had already helped Yue Ruxue up.

"Axue!" Yue Rujing looked at Gu Youyou and said, "What happened to her?"

Gu Youyou, with a cold face, snorted, "She won't die, it was just a little anesthetic."

"What is going on with you two? Why have you started fighting again?" Yue Rujing didn't like Gu Youyou's attitude.

"Didn't the person who reported to you explain clearly?" Gu Youyou said irritably. "Since it's not clear, why not wait for your dear sister to wake up and you can ask her yourself? Zijin, let's go."

Jin Zijin glanced at Yue Rujing and left with Gu Youyou.

On the road, Gu Youyou began to recount the day's events to Jin Zijin.

"Yue Ruxue brought me here to force me to agree to let you marry her and also to step aside for her; she wants to be the head," Gu Youyou said, looking at Jin Zijin, who frowned deeply in response.

She continued, "I heard that the Marquess planned for Yue Ruxue to marry you. It's just that he didn't expect you to return after so many years and already be married. You must have known about this, right?"

Jin Zijin, somewhat bewildered, honestly replied, "I really didn't know."

"Now that you know, what will you do?" Gu Youyou pressed on.

"That's their business, it has nothing to do with me," Jin Zijin stated bluntly.

"All right, don't worry about it. Don't talk about things that aren't certain yet. Even if there was such a matter, I will not marry again. I only want you and that's enough!"

His words left Gu Youyou with a fluttering, joyous heart.

"Yue Ruxue really did something so capricious. I believe the Marquess is an honorable man and will give us an explanation."

Fine, she was eager to see how the Marquis Residence would explain themselves after Yue Ruxue had dug herself into a hole.

...

Two days later, Yue Rujing came to Jisheng Hall as usual to find Jin Zijin to go to the military camp together, but today he looked somewhat tired.

Because of Yue Ruxue, Gu Youyou's disdain for him grew, and when she saw him, she turned to leave.

"Hey, wait!" Yue Rujing stopped Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou indifferently responded, "Your senior brother will be down soon, just wait here for him."

"I'm looking for you!" he said. "It's about Axue."

"Oh?" Gu Youyou raised an eyebrow. "You're planning to give us an explanation, then?"

"Why can't you be a little forgiving? Axue is still so young. It was wrong of her to treat you that way, but aren't you fine? Instead, she got caught in your trick," Yue Rujing said sharply.

Gu Youyou found issue with his logic and scoffed, "So being young means you can act recklessly without being responsible for your actions? If I forgive her this time, what about next time? The time after that? Do you really want a fatality to happen before you consider it a serious matter?"

"You’re being unreasonable!" Yue Rujing was so angry that she huffed and puffed.

"You’re making a scene for no reason!" Gu Youyou retorted, unwilling to show weakness.

"You’re petty and narrow-minded!" Yue Rujing shouted loudly.

"You’re beyond reason!" Gu Youyou turned and went outside, taking a cloth to wipe the vertical signboard.

"You... you..." Yue Rujing almost bit her tongue, running out of words.

He truly wasn’t cut out for arguing.

No, it was that he couldn’t argue with Gu Youyou; this woman was sharp-tongued and quick-witted.

"Ah, forget it. I didn’t come here to argue with you today; I came to ask for your help," Yue Rujing said, deflated like a punctured ball, and followed behind Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou paid him no attention and just kept doing her own thing.

Jin Zijin arrived and said in a deep voice, "Whatever you have to say, say it to me. If you’re here to plead for Yue Ruxue, I don’t think Youyou can do it, and I won’t let her go."

Gu Youyou paused for a moment, not saying a word.

She had known that Yue Rujing would come for this, but if Zijin said no, then it was no.

"Senior brother!" Yue Rujing had a dispirited look, "Axue is still young; you’ve watched her grow up."

Jin Zijin said, "It’s precisely because of that that I have this attitude."

"Senior brother, I..."

Jin Zijin raised his hand, interrupting him, "Indulging her blindly will only encourage her arrogant and disdainful nature. Ajing, I know you cherish your sister, but this overindulgence isn't helping her; it's harming her. Yi Can is a good man, and he is still young, with a bright future ahead of him.

This marriage arrangement, apart from being rushed, has no other issues. It's your father's decision; he has always been accurate in judging people and will not harm Yue Ruxue."

Only now did Gu Youyou know that the Yue Family had decided to marry off Yue Ruxue, and it was urgent—within this month.

The man was just a junior military officer; no matter what prospects he may have in the future, his current status was far from worthy of Yue Ruxue.

For her, it was a step-down marriage, and to marry in such haste was indeed a heavy punishment for someone with her proud temperament.

...

Jin Zijin's attitude towards Gu Youyou had changed greatly; he no longer hid many things from her, such as the conflict initiated by the soldiers stationed at the border of Nanzhao Country and Lingnan. He said it was not a coincidence, but manipulation by the State Preceptor.

Unversed in political affairs, yet capable of instigating trouble among soldiers of another country thousands of miles away, it showed that the State Preceptor was even more formidable than Gu Youyou had imagined.

Her decision not to go to the Lin Family in the capital was the right one.

Wherever she went, misfortune followed, which made her feel somewhat guilty. Jin Zijin, however, told her that this trouble was deliberately stirred up by him and Yue Rujing, but they did not know that his reach had extended to Nanzhao Country.

If so, it was just as well; he had finally exposed this part of his strength, and it was worth it.

Gu Youyou didn't understand the so-called political tactics, so she didn't say much.

She only knew that the power struggle between the two sides was truly affecting innocent people; that father and son were really hacked to death by Nanzhao soldiers in a brutal manner.

The town at the junction of the two countries was called Wangxian Town. The border wasn't as neatly drawn as the Chu River and Han border on a chessboard, so this town was a mixture of residents from both countries.

Their reasoning was that this father and son, registered residents of Zhuzhao Country, had insulted a young widow from Nanzhao Country. However, other residents from Nanzhao said the father and son had a good relationship with the widow's late husband, and on that day, they were just repairing the leaky roof. The men had only fixed half of it when Nanzhao soldiers burst in, caught them, and without a word, hacked them to death.

Chapter 415: Blood Stains Wangxian Town

Both sides held to their reason, but in reality, it was irrelevant because if they didn't kill them, other reasons would've been found.

What mattered was that Zhuzhao Country could not let its citizens die in vain. To appease public resentment, Marquess Yue sent a memorial to the Emperor in Beijing, and the Emperor's decree was that the matter be dealt with entirely at Marquess Yue's discretion.

This chess game, they initiated the first move, their opponents had already responded to the next, now they were waiting, waiting for them to make the third move.

"Will Marquess Yue send troops?"

Jin Zijin smiled faintly, "Of course, otherwise, it would be difficult to calm the public's anger."

Gu Youyou looked at his face and felt her heart palpitate inexplicably. People would die in a war, but how could he still manage to smile in the face of death?

He smiled, that confident smile, which, if it were on Yue Rujing's face, would definitely seem triumphant.

But was killing something to be proud of and boast about?

That smile was somehow familiar, and Gu Youyou suddenly felt a shock.

Wasn't this the same feeling she had when she was about to devour her competitors in the business world?

She looked at him, her gaze filled with surprise and a sense of unreality.

The battlefield was like the marketplace, one gambled with life, the other with wealth. If you lost the former, you'd have no life; lost the latter, and a fortune dissipated. What of the innocent people who lost their jobs as collateral damage? When had she ever pitied them?

In that sense, they were essentially the same kind of person.

"Have you already decided what to do?"

"Hmm." He hummed affirmatively, stroked her hair, and gently patted her shoulder.

It was the eighteenth year of Changqing's reign in Zhuzhao Country. That spring, the peach blossoms in Wangxian Town flourished brilliantly in March, blanketing the town with a fresh pink bloom overnight.

The two armies clashed, and the battlefield was set in the midst of Wangxian Town. The residents had long evacuated, and the blood spilled belonged to the soldiers from both sides.

The victory went to Lingnan, the opposing commander was captured alive. To retrieve their commander, Nanzhao Country agreed to evacuate the Nanzhao residents from Wangxian Town, forever barred from stepping half a foot into the town again, and they agreed to give a generous compensation to the family of the father and son, yet, they did not make the sword-bearing soldiers apologize.

The family, mere commoners, had other sons and grandsons besides the ones lost. So, after mourning briefly, they forgot the pain of their loss upon receiving enough Silver Taels to go from poverty to wealth and scarcely remembered that the murderers were not executed nor did they apologize.

Having lived with Jin Zijin for a while, Gu Youyou realized that a superficial victory was not a true victory.

That night, as she lay on the bed unable to sleep for a long time, she pulled on his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder, and asked softly, "Did we win?"

He hadn’t brought up this matter to Gu Youyou for a long time after the war, so she felt uneasy.

He only said two words, "Draw."

"Then..." She was about to ask why it was a draw, but then thought that if he didn’t mention it, it must touch on some secret he was unwilling to share. So just as she began to speak, she swallowed her words back down.

He turned to embrace her in his arms. This embrace had nothing to do with poison; he just wanted to hold her.

Resting his chin on top of her head, his gentle voice came through.

"Ask whatever you want without hesitation, no need to hold back."

Gu Youyou was startled, then chuckled and said, "I’m afraid to ask because you might not answer, and then where would that leave my pride?"

"Hmm!"

"The things you can say, you’ll naturally tell me, and the things you don’t, are those inconvenient for me to know, right?"

He laughed and patted her back, sighing, "Of course not. The reason I don’t say some things is that I don’t know how best to put them."

"For example?" His words were sometimes enigmatic, sometimes misleading, and more often than not, they were incomprehensible.

Chapter 416: There is Some Blood Relationship

It seems that the marketplace and the battlefield do have their differences. When Grandpa was telling her business stories, she at least never felt completely lost.

"For example, the matter you wanted to ask about!"

Gu Youyou’s face darkened. See, he’s circled back again.

This man is really annoying.

Fine, she asked.

"Why did our opponent retreat so neatly after only a minor defeat? If it were me, I wouldn’t stop until I achieved my goal, unless the stakes were so high that I had no other choice but to back off."

"Oh? Youyou understands tactics too?" Jin Zijin asked in surprise.

Gu Youyou said, "Not really, but I’m gifted in discussing things sensibly."

He pinched her cheek and smiled, "Because his purpose has been achieved. That person is no longer in Lingnan."

"That person?" Gu Youyou was slightly startled, then she immediately thought of who they were referring to.

It was said that he was a Sun-Moon Medic more valuable than herself, the only male of pure Yin among the seven medics.

Jin Ziyuan is really unlucky. Out of the countless people in the world, the one born of pure Yin had to be him, and he had to fall into the hands of the twisted State Preceptor.

"You're also looking for him, aren't you worried? It seems like you've lost a move."

But Jin Zijin laughed and said, "Why would I be? He's a tough nut to crack. I actually want to see how he knocks out the teeth of the tiger."

Gu Youyou: "..."

"So you want to sit back and watch the tigers fight?"

"Isn't that exactly what you hoped for?"

Gu Youyou felt a bit guilty; she didn't completely hope for that.

Alright, if he says so, then so be it.

As for Jin Ziyuan, she wasn't sure if she felt more pity for him or if she harbored more thoughts of using him.

In the end, she was a selfish person who valued her own interests more.

If the sky were to collapse there would be taller people to support it, and if the twisted State Preceptor were the sky about to fall, then Jin Ziyuan would be that tall person.

Who else but him, a pure Yin male once in a hundred years? If a pure Yin female were lost, at worst it would take more time and effort to find another, but without him, the State Preceptor might never see his dreams realized in his lifetime.

After a long time, Jin Zijin's voice rang out again in the silent night.

"Youyou, I might know who he is now."

"What?" Gu Youyou looked up and said, "You mean Jin Ziyuan?" She thought he knew.

After searching for so many years, he only now knows who the person is... that's really something...

"You know his name?" Jin Zijin's eyes grew darker as he propped up half his body.

The early spring was still cold, and Gu Youyou tugged at the blanket.

"I thought you knew? You've been searching for him for so many years not knowing who he is."

Jin Zijin said confidently, "What do I care who he is? All I know is that he's a medic secretly raised by Xuanzong in the deep mountains, and the Youying Pearl is on him."

Gu Youyou: "..."

Alright, she was at a loss for words.

"So you know who he is now? Were you acquaintances before he became a medic?"

Jin Zijin froze, then dejectedly slunk back under the covers.

"Yes, an acquaintance. Someone I’m very familiar with, although we only met once and never talked."

Gu Youyou: "..." How does that count as an acquaintance?

"What has he told you? Starting from the first day you saw him, I want to know everything."

Gu Youyou looked at him in surprise and asked, "You really want to know so much about him, could you actually be relatives?"

Jin Zijin fell silent again, his eyes deepening.

Gu Youyou said, "I just feel that your names are quite similar, and your eyes look alike."

"True, there is some blood relation." he said.

Blood relations, huh? Gu Youyou couldn’t help but recall the wild speculations she made while gathering herbs in the countryside, although not very reliable, it wasn’t entirely impossible.

Chapter 417: Come Clean

This might well be a bone-chilling conspiracy of fratricide.

The night breeze was refreshing, sneaking in through the cracks of the window that had not been closed tightly, blowing on the face, feeling doubly comfortable, and reviving the spirits a great deal.

He would occasionally caress her body, all the while restraining that raging desire.

Even when they were discussing serious matters, it was the same.

"When we were in the ancient tomb, he always slept in a coffin, took his medicine, and was very quiet. Probably to prevent me from escaping, that savage uncle often tossed me into the coffin and covered the lid," she said.

His hand caressing her back suddenly tightened, pinching her a bit painfully.

She straightened her back and her body shrank a bit.

Feeling her body retract immediately, he apologized in a low voice, "Oh, I pinched too hard, please continue."

Gu Youyou nodded and said, "You could pinch a bit harder on the shoulder, my shoulder is sore from working all day."

Jin Zijin: "..."

"The first time I moved to the town he came to see me, the same night Yue Rujing came, and while Yue Rujing was in the yard, he was on the beam of my room. Zijin, at that time I didn't trust you, and you didn't trust me either, and I didn't know where Yue Rujing sprang from. You won't blame me for saving him, will you?"

Jin Zijin laughed and said, "So...that was actually the second time you saved him?"

"That's not the point, ah, forget it, I'm trying to discuss something serious with you."

"When he came, I guess at first he just wanted to make sure I wasn't dead, and later he probably felt pity for me, so he let me go with him. If I had known he was a tough nut to crack that you guys couldn't chew, actually going with him to find the answer would have been nice. But I was afraid, scared that he wouldn't last long before you guys caught him, so I didn't dare. Ouch, be gentle."

Jin Zijin's face darkened, still regretting not leaving with another man? Punishment is due!

Jin Zijin pinched her shoulder hard, then justified himself boldly, "Didn’t you say your shoulder was sore? How could it get better if I don’t pinch harder?"

Gu Youyou: "..."

Ignoring him, Gu Youyou continued: "It was then that he told me his name, Jin Yi, styled Ziyuan. Because I gave him a prescription, the one I use myself, which can suppress cold poison. One reason was out of pity for him, and the other because I had my own selfish motives. I didn’t want him to kick the bucket too soon."

Jin Zijin gently massaged her shoulder, thinking to himself: That’s more like it.

Back then she knew nothing, aware only that her situation was very dangerous, and that there was no one she could really trust.

Even in such a situation, she was clever enough to keep a safeguard for herself without showing any sign.

"Jin Yi, styled Ziyuan. Jin Yan, styled Zijin, your eyes look so similar, I suspected your relationship at the time. But then, when Banxia and I went to the countryside to collect herbs, and met him again, he said he had nothing to do with you. Does that mean he actually doesn’t know who you are?"

"Yes!" Jin Zijin didn’t deny it, sighing, "But now he should have guessed... a bit."

Guessed one identity, the other he could not possibly know.

Gu Youyou asked, "It’s not a coincidence your names are so similar, is it?"

Jin Zijin immediately said, "No, it is just a coincidence."

Gu Youyou: "..." What a coincidence.

That night, she told Jin Zijin everything about Jin Ziyuan but kept one thing from him, the matter of the object Jin Ziyuan gave her.

People always keep some safeguards for themselves, even when facing those closest to them — this would be her safeguard for herself.

...

Chapter 418: Smuggling to Gather Herbs

The weather in March and April is a season rich in herbs, and Gu Youyou and Banxia would take turns to stroll up the mountains from time to time.

The suburbs of Lingnan City were abundant in medicinal materials, but Jin Zijin said there was an even richer place, although one had to disguise oneself to go there.

On this day, they not only brought their herbal baskets but also clothes for disguising themselves.

After arriving and changing clothes, Gu Youyou realized Jin Zijin had taken her smuggling.

Smuggling into Nanzhao Country to gather herbs?

This was really...

"Nanzhao Country worships Magic Poisonous Insect Techniques, and they often use witchcraft for treating diseases, so they don’t use many herbs," Jin Zijin explained.

"So most of the herbs on the mountain are untouched?" Gu Youyou asked with sparkling eyes.

Jin Zijin smiled and said, "Exactly, if we’re lucky, we might find precious herbs that have aged."

Hehe, that sounds great, let’s go ahead with the smuggling.

In the mountains, Jin Zijin did not deceive her; Gu Youyou was delighted. In her basket, she collected several herbs, all of which were valuable varieties of considerable age.

Loud and clear singing echoed through the valley. Curious, she parted the bushes and peered down to see brightly dressed men and women singing across the river in the romantically peach-blossom-filled valley.

’In March, I miss my sister as a hundred flowers bloom, I wander alone beneath the peach trees; without you, my heart cannot enjoy the blossoms, I only hope for my beloved sister to come.’

Gu Youyou turned to look at Jin Zijin in surprise. Weren’t ancient people constrained by etiquette and always reserved?

What was with that deeply affectionate Nanzhao Country man singing a love song down there?

Jin Zijin simply smiled faintly and said, "Nanzhao Country has liberal customs, its people have always been bold in matters of men and women. Influenced by them, the citizens of Lingnan City are also much bolder than those in the other cities of Zhuzhao Country."

So that was it.

Gu Youyou chuckled and said, "Matters of the heart should be open and upright; there is no need for secrecy. I find the people of Nanzhao Country quite sentimental."

Jin Zijin just smiled faintly and said, "You should only say that to me. After all, born and raised here, one should follow local customs. Too bad your citizenship is from Zhuzhao Country."

She stuck her tongue out at him and once again craned her neck to watch the spirited people below.

"Hey! She’s coming!" The girls on the other side of the river nudged a shy young lady forward, shouting to the people across the river.

The men on the opposite bank burst into laughter, pushing the man who had been singing the love song to the front, facing the woman across the river in a distant gaze.

That woman, looking at the opposite bank, sang out loudly, "In March, I miss my brother during Qingming, as everyone ascends the mountain for the spring outing. I see thousands upon thousands of passersby, yet my brother alone is nowhere to be seen."

Her tone carried a hint of complaint, yet her expression was shy and timid.

The man on the opposite side hurriedly rushed down to the riverbank, where a Boatman with a green headscarf, begged him, "Last time I didn’t go, and Qingzi must be mad at me. Uncle Jiang, please take me across."

Uncle Jiang, with a tobacco pipe clenched in his mouth, shouted across, "Can we go?"

The women on the other side laughed and pushed Qingzi forward, saying, "Your beloved man wants to come over, are you going?"

The girl looked at her anxious sweetheart on the opposite bank, wanting to give him a hard time, but eventually, she shyly nodded her head.

The group of women immediately shouted, "Go!"

Then, the Boatman put away his tobacco pipe and made way for the man to board the bamboo raft.

Chapter 419: What Songs Can You Sing?

And the woman across also boarded the bamboo raft; in the middle of the water, there was actually a small island more than three feet long. The bamboo rafts stopped on either side of the island, and that’s where they formed their unions.

Gu Youyou found it novel and amusing, and the mellow voice of Jin Zijin reached her from behind at that moment.

"This is the marriage ceremony of Nanzhao Country. As long as a man and a woman both ascend to the Song Stage of Fate in the middle of the water, they will become husband and wife. Look, that man is taking his wife home."

Could they really just take her home like that? And Jin Zijin referred to her as his wife?

After her initial shock, Gu Youyou commented, "Interesting, simple, low-cost, quick results."

This marriage ritual was indeed interesting: no need for matchmakers, hence simple; marrying only required paying the boatman's fee, which means low-cost; a man could take a bride home just by singing a folk song, thus the results were quick.

Successively, several couples were formed, yet the number of men and women on both banks did not decrease. As one pair left upon union, new men and women ascended the stage.

Gu Youyou suddenly felt an urge to give it a try.

After all, they were already married, so ascending the Mandarin Duck Song Stage one more time seemed harmless.

Mainly, she was curious if this awkward man would sing a love song, or rather, what kind of love song he would sing.

On the opposite bank, the man standing at the front, with his face flushed, didn't dare to sing, looking anxious and too embarrassed to start singing.

The woman on this side got impatient, stomping her foot in complaint and singing plaintively, "Brother, just speak your mind, sister is willing to ease your worries, If only you wish it, brother dear, I'll gladly follow you to the Song Stage."

She was indeed a bold and straightforward girl.

Finally, the man on the opposite bank, his face still red, sang in response, "True love can’t be bought for a thousand gold, the day you become my wife so dear, like mandarin ducks we’ll never part, through all life’s flavors, we’ll stick near."

The girl across was satisfied then, following him to the Song Stage of Fate in the water.

Gu Youyou suddenly announced, "I’ll go too!"

"Hey!"

Without waiting for Jin Zijin’s consent, Gu Youyou had already pushed through the bushes and ran towards the blush-colored valley.

"Come back, this isn’t just a game!"

Gu Youyou didn’t listen and ran even faster.

Jin Zijin immediately chased down the hill after her. Their silhouettes were noticed by the people on both sides of the valley. The boatman shouted loudly at Jin Zijin, "Young man across there, if you want to chase the girl, please go to the opposite bank, you cannot disrupt the rules."

Seeing Jin Zijin’s lagging silhouette behind her, Gu Youyou laughed heartily.

Upon reaching the other bank, a girl greeted her enthusiastically with a teasing smile, "Sister, your beloved is so eager, he even chased you to the opposite bank."

Remembering that Jin Zijin must be very angry, Gu Youyou couldn’t help but cover her mouth and laugh.

The other women took her shyness for bashfulness, teasing her and joking about her thin-skinned nature.

The folk songs in the front continued, and as soon as the woman on this side finished singing, the bold man across immediately took over, singing shyly.

"The sun comes out all bright and red, your father shall be your wedded head, play the tune and ascend the Song Stage, into the bridal chamber with love engaged."

Laughter erupted from both banks, and the girl in front of Gu Youyou, flustered and fuming, stomped her foot. Another girl teased her, "Sister, will you enter that bridal chamber or not?"

The girl, too embarrassed to speak, stomped her foot and said indignantly, "Nuisance, next row."

"Hey!" The man across, chuckling, pushed through the crowd towards the boatman poised to lower the next row.

The old boatman also couldn’t help but start laughing.

Suddenly, exclamations arose nearby, "The brother across looks so handsome; I wonder whose brother he is!"

Chapter 420: Just Playing Around

The "brother" they referred to was a beau, and after chatting idly with those women for a while, Gu Youyou learned that their encounters weren’t just ones where they met and followed someone after singing a few songs; it was mostly cases of mutual affection. But there were also some spur-of-the-moment matches.

Elbowing through the crowd for a better look, Gu Youyou indeed saw Jin Zijin standing tall and straight like a pine, right over there.

In his eyes was a dangerous anger.

Things have gone too far; he’s definitely going to ’punish’ me when we get home, Gu Youyou thought to herself.

"The brother across the way is so handsome, I don’t care who he belongs to, I want to sing and see how he’ll respond."

A bold girl had already stepped forward.

Gu Youyou panicked, hurriedly squeezing through the crowd to pull her back, shouting, "Mine, mine, that’s mine."

He was already angry, and if these overt love songs embarrassed him further, he would surely flay her alive.

Hearing her anxious voice, the face of the man opposite finally softened a bit.

"Oh, little sister, it’s you. No wonder you looked familiar."

They had seen the people chasing after her earlier.

Someone said sourly, "Young lady, it might not necessarily be yours, you have to sing the right tune to claim him."

Reminded by her, Gu Youyou belatedly realized that she needed to sing the proper tune to lead him away. She had only thought about how he would sing, without remembering she had to sing as well, how embarrassing!

Gu Youyou stood at the forefront, looking at the man across the river.

He was outstanding on his own, but among that bunch of misshapen fruits, he stood out like a crane among a flock of chickens.

No wonder the girls on this side were screaming their heads off.

Seeing the women on this side boldly sizing him up, she suddenly regretted it. Such a good man shouldn’t have been brought out for them to see.

In the midst of her contemplation, he started singing.

His voice was warm as the gentle sun, carrying a trace of silent reproach.

Alright, he was scolding her for being naughty again.

"Green hills face each other on both banks, mandarin ducks mirror each other, too. With a wave of a brush, love and hate hard to describe, how many silent grievances are entrusted to the drifting clouds."

Uh...

Gu Youyou was stunned; indeed, she couldn’t expect to hear such explicit lyrics from Jin Zijin’s mouth.

He likened them to mandarin ducks, the legendary birds that must fly wing to wing. But how could they fly wing to wing if they stood on opposite banks of green hills?

With a wave of a brush, love and hate hard to describe, how many silent grievances are entrusted to the drifting clouds.

These two lines were a bit odd—did they relate to them?

He really was a bit angry.

Her playful mood faded, she could only gaze at him earnestly and say, "The reeds are lush and the dew turns to frost. May I ask the brother, will you come to the center of the water?"

She couldn’t be bothered to contemplate lyrics, and simply asked him outright.

The crowds on both banks started egging them on, with the men behind him jostling him saying, "The lady is asking you if you’re going to the center of the water or not, go on!"

And the girls beside Gu Youyou whispered prayers, "Don’t go, don’t go!"

Gu Youyou watched him anxiously, seeing that he hadn’t moved for a long time, she couldn’t help but start getting angry.

Clenching her fists in preparation, she glared at him fiercely, thinking: Won’t you give it a try? I’ll kick you under the bed every night.

Seeing the kitten on the other side showing her sharp claws, Jin Zijin’s furrowed brow relaxed.

"Go? Of course I’ll go!" he laughed heartily.

The men around him breathed a sigh of relief, hastily shooing him off the stage.

If he kept standing there, they would end up chasing away their own wives’ affections.

The women stamped their feet, lamenting what a pity it was.

Gu Youyou’s smile blossomed, and she hurried to the river’s edge to find a boatwoman to pole the bamboo raft.

During the lush blooming of spring in March, the waves rippled layer upon layer, much like the waves in her heart.

"I thought you were angry and wouldn’t come, leaving me here looking ridiculous; I already said you were mine."

He said, "Of course I was angry."