Farmhouse 521

Chapter 521: He’s Going to Do It

"When do we have to wait until, we already occupy thirty percent of the military forces and aren’t afraid of the Empress’s party. You should acknowledge kinship with the Emperor earlier and gain his support. You are the legitimate eldest son, inheriting the throne is your heaven-ordained duty, and once the Emperor recognizes you, we win."

"You think too simplistically," Jin Zijin said with a wry smile, "look at the current Emperor, has he won?"

"What do you mean?" Yue Rujing expressed his confusion, "Is the Emperor still threatened by others?"

"I don’t want to become someone like him," Jin Zijin merely said faintly.

Not wanting to become like him thus made it even more difficult.

He had schemed his whole life, maintaining a superficial peace through mutual checks and balances and connections through married women.

To stir one part is to affect the whole, and isn’t it also precarious?

What he wanted to do was to take back imperial power, in the imperial court, in the Dao Sect. Just like his master said, to really bring peace to the world and stability to the Dao Sect.

Everyone thought he could easily ascend the throne because of his years of patience and accumulation, unaware that a firm net had already been spread in the court. Little did they know, without Xuanzong Yu Jizi’s involvement, the third prince’s rebellion would have succeeded.

The third prince lost not because of a lack of respect for seniority, but because he had a Four Pillars Pure Yin son, a rarity for thousands of years.

Pulling a failed Princely Heir as a human medicine is easier than dealing with the Crown Prince.

Yue Rujing thought for a long while but couldn’t figure out what kind of person the Emperor was. Besides wronging Xiao Qinqin and Jin Zijin, it seemed like he hadn’t done anything outrageously wrong.

"Alright, I don’t understand," Yue Rujing said with a feeling of powerlessness, "Just tell me when you need me. We can’t do without Silver to feed our troops and warriors, I’m going back to Jisheng Hall now. We’re opening tomorrow."

The tall red lacquered wooden door closed, and in the spacious hall, only Jin Zijin was left alone.

A moment later, another person emerged from behind the screen.

Looking at the closed door, he said with a light smile, "Yue Rujing is from a military family; he doesn’t understand the deceitful strategies of the royal court. I heard from my father that the Yue Family does not like to bother with court matters, so they prefer to guard the Southern Barbarian Lands for generations."

Jin Zijin sighed, "That’s wise, far from the Emperor and free to live a carefree life."

"Ha..." Xiao Jinyan chuckled disdainfully, "But the recent generations of the Yue Family are not so clever, they’re trying to stretch their hands into it. Cousin, trust no one but the Xiao Family."

Jin Zijin only gave Xiao Jinyan a meaningful look and did not respond.

Xiao Jinyan just grinned and didn’t take it to heart, then said, "The struggle for the throne often doesn’t hinge on brute force; sometimes the glib tongues of those old men in the court are more effective than thousands upon thousands of troops. Cousin, Zuo Zongzheng is biased towards his second son, who looks very much like him. However, I’ve heard that the child’s mother’s household is not very stable..." He implied with a knowing look.

Jin Zijin looked at him in surprise, then nodded slightly.

He stood up, took out a set of white clothes, and threw them to Xiao Jinyan, "Change into this and get out before it gets dark."

"Come on, it’s not easy for me to get out, let’s discuss important matters some more."

Jin Zijin sneered, "If you had joined the Dao Sect, you could come here every day to discuss important matters with me."

Xiao Jinyan: "...I’m not becoming a Taoist."

"Then go climb the walls of the high officials’ back courtyards," Jin Zijin retorted.

Hearing the undertone, Xiao Jinyan flattered, "Cousin, are you looking down on me for climbing over the walls of Officer Xie’s backyard? Let me talk to you about this; never underestimate the affairs of the back courtyard, those are definitely linked to the front hall. If you don’t believe me, find out about the affairs of Officer Xie’s back courtyard and see..."

Chapter 522: Opening

"Ouch..."

Jin Zijin punched him, "What does it have to do with me if you’re climbing the courtyard walls of Official Xie or Official Niu? Why the heck you climbed my wall...?"

"I... I didn’t! I climbed the wall of the Lin Family’s home," Xiao Jinyan touched his nose, which was bleeding.

So ruthless.

Looking at Jin Zijin’s face, black as the bottom of a pot, he hurriedly explained: "It was not intentional, you know I just have this little hobby of climbing walls at midnight. I was actually heading to Official Liu’s place, and it just so happened that I ran into you climbing the wall of the Lin Family’s home. Hey... I mean, cousin, is it only allowed for officials to light fires and not for the common folk to light lamps? Didn’t you also climb the wall of the Lin Family’s home?"

...Jin Zijin really wanted to punch him again.

"Anybody’s house is fine to climb, just don’t climb the Lin Family’s."

...

Jisheng Hall opened, and thanks to Yue Rujing’s management, it was bustling with activity.

Out of consideration for Yue Rujing and the Lin Family, acquaintances and strangers alike sent over congratulatory gifts, filling up an entire backyard.

Lin Qianqing received approval to help out and couldn’t stop smiling, quickly mingling with the guests who came to bring gifts.

"Cousin, your name as the Divine Doctor is already spreading far and wide on the opening day. With the signboard given by the Emperor himself, this is truly a blinding advertisement."

Gu Youyou looked up at the Divine Doctor’s signboard above Jisheng Hall, practically envisioning gouging out a bloody hole in Yue Rujing.

He had actually gotten this signboard behind her back but failed to bring Abao to her.

"With it, we don’t need to worry about promoting ourselves," Yue Rujing said.

Gu Youyou replied irritably, "Just make sure to start seeing patients early."

"Absolutely!"

The opening was very successful and lively; all the guests that day came to present congratulatory gifts, and there was no time to start seeing patients.

Gu Youyou started to see patients the day after.

Her older cousin became her assistant; as soon as Gu Youyou stepped out the door, she would follow right behind. This led to an argument with their aunt.

She was a conservative lady from a respected family, unable to endure her only daughter not behaving properly and making public appearances, which she found utterly disgraceful.

Once the Empress's birthday had passed, she and the other noble ladies were about to enter the Imperial Palace for the selection. How would they cope if their reputations were tarnished?

Torn between his lawful wife and his own mother, Lin Xingyi felt his head spinning.

Lin Qianqing had the backing of the old lady, who supported her going out with Gu Youyou to broaden her horizons, saying, "Keeping them at home all day, how many flowers can they embroider? What good is it to be skilled at embroidery and literate? They say that travelling thousands of miles is better than reading thousands of books. If they don't go out, how will they learn to interact with all kinds of people? And how will they survive in a place like the Imperial Palace where it's survival of the fittest?"

Lin Xingyi quickly agreed, "Mother makes sense."

However, Madam Jin of the Lin Family retorted, "A woman's ignorance is a virtue, and the Imperial Family places even more importance on a woman's virtue. My lord, have you seen any princesses or empresses making public appearances? Daya is our legitimate eldest daughter – by helping out in a medicine hall, what will the Madams of Beijing think of me? My lord, please ask Daya to come back home."

Lin Xingyi touched his nose and said, "Madam also makes a good point."

Seeing the situation turning unfavorable for her, the old lady suddenly clutched her head, crying out in pain.

"Old Madam, what's wrong?"

Her exclamation immediately drew the attention of everyone else in the room.

Lin Xingyi had only three children, two daughters, and a son, but there were plenty of concubines, filling up the room with their presence.

Chapter 523: Affairs in the Lin Family’s Backyard

Seeing that the old lady was not doing well, they were still not in a hurry to show their concern.

A favored concubine muttered, "The old lady is upset again, and is having a headache, isn’t she?"

"Mother, you are suffering from a headache again?" Lin Xingyi asked anxiously.

Madam Lin stomped her feet in frustration, twisting her handkerchief, but she had no choice but to support the old lady.

"Mother, if you are not feeling well, don’t come out, please go back to your room."

"Chunsheng, go quickly and summon a doctor," Madam Lin ordered.

"Ah! There’s no need to call for a doctor," the old lady said weakly, "My ailment isn’t something a doctor can cure, I need to do good deeds and accumulate virtue."

Do good deeds and accumulate virtue?

The crowd looked around, puzzled as to what the old lady was getting at this time.

"Having Daya go to the clinic to help out not only broadens her horizons but also counts as performing good deeds on my behalf, ah. If you don’t let her go, then my fortune will be insufficient, and I won’t live long..."

Everyone was dumbstruck, fully aware that the old lady was being stubborn, yet no one dared to contradict her.

Whoever didn’t allow Lin Qianqing to go to the clinic to do good deeds, didn’t want her to live.

Madam Lin ground her silver teeth in anger, cursing the old woman all day long; finally, she called the women from the backyard and scolded each one to vent her anger.

...

Gu Youyou was feeding rats in the backyard of the clinic, having asked the Lin Residence’s house servant to catch them for her.

Lin Qianqing said she couldn’t understand her cousin’s hobby of feeding rats, muttering, "I’ve seen people feed cats and dogs, but Cousin, this is the first time I’ve ever seen someone play with rats. You are truly unlike ordinary people."

Gu Youyou did not explain why she raised rats, only laughing, "These few aren’t enough. See who you can get to bring me more, just the half-grown ones, not the big ones."

Lin Qianqing: "..."

"I hear Auntie has been in a bad mood these past few days?"

Lin Qianqing’s eyes flashed as she said, "Oh, you noticed too?" She loved gossip about other families, just as much as her own.

"It’s because of my issue, upsetting grandmother," she said, moving a stool to sit beside Gu Youyou to watch her feed the rats.

"I haven’t told you about our family’s affairs yet, but now that you are in grandmother’s favor, I should tell you, so you don’t suffer any losses or get deceived."

"Mm, go ahead," Gu Youyou said, poking the little rats with a small stick.

"Well, my father, along with my mother, has married fifteen wives and concubines in total, three have passed away, and now there are twelve left. But only three can bear children. Guess what's going on?"

Gu Youyou was startled. She had not expected Lin Qianqing to discuss such matters with her.

Lin Qianqing lowered her voice, "Actually, my father is not a lascivious man. These wives and concubines were either bestowed by the Emperor or sent by court officials. He could not refuse them, nor could he afford to, so he accepted them all. Hehe, I know a secret. Despite having a bunch of wives and concubines, he spends most of his time living alone in his study, and in recent years, he only occasionally spends a night in Autumn Concubine's quarters."

Gu Youyou: "... Your uncle is really... a man of few desires."

An niece discussing such matters about her uncle was indeed amusing.

Lin Qianqing chuckled, "Our family doesn't have any particularly favored mistresses. Thus their status is naturally related to their own family background.

Alas! Who made my mother the daughter of the Ducal Residence, and she also has a cousin who is the Empress? Even if she had only borne me, a daughter, no one could threaten her status unless the Ducal Residence falls."

"That's true," Gu Youyou said with a dry laugh.

Having gloated enough, Lin Qianqing then spoke in a serious tone to Gu Youyou, "Because of my matter, my mother has some opinions about you, Cousin. You need to think of a way to get on good terms with my mother, otherwise, she will make things difficult for you, both openly and secretly."

Chapter 524: The Habit of Keeping Pets

"Hmm?" Gu Youyou looked up at her.

She felt a bit embarrassed and said, "I've implicated you, I'm so sorry. But I'm not just saying this for fun, at home my father and grandmother are the authorities, but the one who really calls the shots in the inner court is my mother. Having her bear a grudge against you would make for difficult days; just the reduced personal spending allowance alone would show that. If you're concerned, just ask any of those concubines trying to curry favor and they'll tell you.

"The clever concubines would rather offend my grandmother than dare to cross my mother."

"Really?" Gu Youyou was somewhat surprised and said, "I'm not competing with your mother for favor."

Lin Qianqing lowered her voice and said, "I felt a rapport with you, which is why I'm reminding you. What joys do women in the depths of a mansion have? Isn't it all about battling for themselves and their children? Once they have outmaneuvered all the women of a household, they start battling those from other families..."

"Stop right there, don't tell me your mother wants to seek amusement by picking a fight with me too?"

"Alas, of course not, what I mean is, whoever makes them unhappy, they'll scheme in every possible way to make that person miserable for a lifetime. Isn't that why you're now remembered with resentment by my mother?"

Gu Youyou looked at Lin Qianqing speechlessly. Had she known it would be such a hassle, she would have kept a lower profile! She should have stayed away from Lin Qianqing earlier.

Well, what's done is done. Considering this girl was going out of her way to badmouth her mother to warn her, she decided not to dwell on it.

"If you understand all this in your heart, why did you offend your mother?"

"It's different for me; she has only me as a daughter."

"So, when you upset your mother, others suffer along with you, right?" Gu Youyou said with annoyance.

"That’s why I just apologized to you!" Lin Qianqing said laughingly.

Really, Gu Youyou shook her head helplessly.

"I’ll take things as they come, as long as you don’t betray me, she can do as she likes."

Lin Qianqing hastily raised her hands in a gesture of oath: "I won’t, I won’t. As long as you, my cousin, allow me to stay by your side, I’ll never betray you."

"Hmm? She’s your own mother!"

Lin Qianqing chuckled and said, "My mother has been fighting with my grandmother for years, and I’ve always been on my grandmother’s side."

"Ah?" Truly her own daughter? Gu Youyou looked at her in surprise.

"Why is it that she’s always controlling me, while my grandmother often helps me out."

"Hehe..." Gu Youyou laughed dryly, and said impatiently, "It’s your grandmother who is on your side, okay? Don’t get things backwards."

...

Gu Youyou didn’t just keep mice; she kept all sorts of vermin, a whole bunch of them, in a courtyard within a courtyard in the back of the mansion.

Seeing this courtyard, Yue Rujing regretted it so much that his guts turned green, as this courtyard was built under his instructions.

How come he hadn’t realized sooner that Gu Youyou had this peculiar inclination to keep these disgusting creatures?

Wrong, that half-wolf, half-dog creature Abao that Gu Youyou kept was also a freak.

Thinking of Abao... right, when the snow in the north melts, he should have Abao sent over.

As Yue Rujing turned to leave, he happened to come face to face with Gu Youyou returning.

In her hands, she carried a cage, and without guessing, one could tell that it contained yet more odd and unusual creatures.

"Ahem... this hobby of yours is really quite unique," he said.

Gu Youyou pursed her lips and smiled, saying, "Your timing is perfect, I need your help with something."

Yue Rujing instinctively glanced at the cage in her hands and said, "If it has anything to do with those creatures, I’m afraid I can’t be of help."

"It is about them." Before he could refuse, Gu Youyou quickly spoke up.

"Don’t be in such a hurry to decline. Although it’s related to them, it’s not a difficult task; I just need you to help me find some food for them."

Chapter 525: I’m Just a Little Short of Breath

All right, I was about to get cross, but since it’s just for some food, that’s indeed a trifle.

"You said it’s not some weird stuff they eat, that would be good."

"No, no," Gu Youyou coaxed with rare obsequiousness, chuckling ingratiatingly, "Just some grass, you’ve mentioned before. Although it’s rare, it’s not hard to find for someone of your status and position. This matter... only with your methods can it be obtained, so..."

"You’re looking for Youying Grass?" Yue Rujing interrupted before Gu Youyou could finish.

"Guess that quickly?" Gu Youyou was quite surprised.

Yue Rujing wasn’t the sharpest, and his serious demeanor was so unusual. Some people feigned ignorance well, but he was rarely smart.

"I heard you were researching a cure for cold and heat toxins, and now you’re keeping some strange creatures, so I just made a wild guess. Seeing your reaction, I must be right."

"Yeah, you’re right. Can you get it?"

Yue Rujing rubbed his beardless chin, his expression unusually serious, and after pondering for a moment, said, "How confident are you in this?"

Gu Youyou became earnest as well, adopting her usual attitude when delving into academic research, "There’s no talk of how much confidence to have."

"No confidence?" Yue Rujing said in surprise, "Going to such trouble without surety?"

Gu Youyou cast him a glance, "This is a serious issue. I truly can’t answer you before I’ve made it. It’s either success or failure; when I do things, I never consider how much confidence to have, but rather whether I do them or not."

Yue Rujing felt a bit muddled by her logic, clearly not understanding Gu Youyou’s way of thinking, and said, "Youying Grass is cultivated by Xuanzong, and we Tianzong don’t dabble with such pickled trifles, so..."

"Don’t tell me you can’t get it?" Gu Youyou huffed, "You didn’t say that before. Don’t tell me you were just bragging to deceive me?"

"Why would I brag?" Yue Rujing straightened up, saying, "I only said Youying Grass isn't easy to get. But if the Princely Heir makes a move, not just Youying Grass, even the Flame Pond Fire Lotus from the palace, I could somehow manage to get for you."

"Really?" Gu Youyou said triumphantly.

"Of course it's true," Yue Rujing said, arms crossed and visibly smug.

"Good, then get some Fire Lotus as well."

Yue Rujing stumbled, nearly taking a tumble.

"You... you..." his face turning shades of red and white, was quite a sight. He wanted to accuse her of greediness and such, but recalling the grand promise he'd just made, he couldn't bring himself to speak a word.

"You said you could do it?" Gu Youyou continued to tease him knowingly as he suffered in silence.

"Any problem with that? If you really can't handle it, don't put on a brave face. I can ask someone else. After all, Princely Heir Yue, you're not omnipotent, right? This is Beijing, not Lingnan."

"No, there's no need." Yue Rujing felt like vomiting blood, "How much do you need?"

"About ten or eight stalks each, the more the better," Gu Youyou said cheerfully, "If it's not enough, we'll gather more later. Just do your best."

Ten or eight stalks?

What a colossal request!

Yue Rujing felt as if he were stricken with some bone-softening disease, unable to stand straight and leaning against the wall.

"What’s wrong? If it’s too much trouble, I’ll ask Zijin."

"Don’t, don’t, don’t call my senior brother." If he called his senior brother, in the end, he’d still have to do it himself. Yue Rujing clenched his teeth, "I’m just out of breath, I’ll be fine after a rest."

"Oh, I’ll prescribe you something, it’ll help whether you’re out of breath or out of energy."

...

Chapter 526: Not Going Smoothly

At night, a candle flickered, and Gu Youyou was writing something under the light.

Xiang Chun was grinding ink for her and had just brightened the wick.

She turned her head to look and thought that the characters Miss Gu was writing were very strange, not like the ones other misses wrote, but rather like some peculiar symbols.

Curiously, she leaned in and asked, "Miss Gu, are you writing? These characters are so strange."

Gu Youyou spoke softly, "These are a different kind of characters, hmm, consider them symbols for now."

"Miss Gu can write so many kinds of characters, that’s really impressive," Xiang Chun genuinely praised.

After Xiang Chun had brightened the wick, she covered her mouth and yawned.

Gu Youyou lifted her head to look at her, then glanced at the night outside.

It was getting late, Jin Zijin should be arriving soon.

She said, "It’s getting late, you should go rest."

"Ah? But..." Xiang Chun saw that Gu Youyou still had a while to write, and it did not seem like she would finish anytime soon, she said, "How can that be? Miss Gu hasn’t slept, how can I, as a maid, sleep first?"

"I might go to sleep later tonight," Gu Youyou said. "Your standing here will distract me, if you sleep, I can actually finish earlier."

"This..." As a maid, especially the head maid from grandma’s side, she knew the rules well.

How could she sleep before the miss?

"Go ahead, remember to drink the soup," Gu Youyou said as she stood up straight, placing the soup in front of her.

Her face bore a gentle smile, and Xiang Chun looked at the soup with an indescribable feeling.

Gu Youyou never mentioned what soup it was, but it tasted very good, sweet and fragrant, incomparable to ordinary sugar water. However, every time she drank it, she would become so sleepy and then sleep until dawn.

In the beginning, she didn’t notice anything odd, but as time passed and she drank more, she grew increasingly suspicious of Miss Gu.

Grandma had asked her to take care of Miss Gu, not to watch her, so she never knew whether or not to tell grandma about this.

"Hmm, Xiang Chun, didn’t you say you really love the soup I prepare?"

Gu Youyou’s bell-like voice rang out in the quiet night, and Xiang Chun couldn’t help but shiver.

"What is it?" Gu Youyou asked.

"Nothing, just... a little cold," Xiang Chun said.

She took the soup Gu Youyou handed to her and drank it down.

It was truly sweet and delicious, if it were poison, it would be too good to be true.

Xiang Chun put down the bowl, feeling increasingly sleepy. She yawned again, and under Gu Youyou’s watchful eye, went to sleep in the outer room.

Gu Youyou looked at the bowl, pensive. After a moment, she murmured to herself, "This can’t go on, giving someone soup every night, even the slowest person would find it odd, let alone Xiang Chun who’s not stupid at all, otherwise she wouldn’t have remained as head maid by my grandmother’s side."

There was a rustling from the back courtyard wall, and a moment later, she heard Jin Zijin’s voice, "Youyou!"

As Gu Youyou turned around, he was lowering his hood.

"Why haven’t you rested yet?" Jin Zijin saw the lamp on Gu Youyou’s desk and the fresh ink.

"I still have to wait a while, you go to sleep first," Gu Youyou returned to her desk.

"Was there any progress today?" Although men here didn’t much like woman meddling in outside affairs, Gu Youyou couldn’t help but ask him about the outside situation.

Jin Zijin sat opposite Gu Youyou, holding a somewhat cold teacup, his expression blank for a moment, then he gave a bitter smile.

"Not going well?" Gu Youyou asked.

"Hmm, not well," Jin Zijin honestly told her, "Youyou, do you ever think that I'm actually quite useless? I've been in Beijing for so long, and haven't really accomplished anything."

Chapter 527: Two Sages

"Plan thoroughly before acting, what is there to fear? Just take it slow." Gu Youyou said.

Although she wasn't quite clear about the promotion system of their State Preceptor and the underlying unspoken rules, she was, after all, someone who had fought in the business world.

In her past life, she battled with her second uncle's family for power and profit. Hadn't she experienced enough of those domestic schemes? Back then she was young, and her grandfather taught her to be patient and to hide her capabilities. She had played the role of the shrinking turtle for many years, but she wasn't simply hiding and doing nothing. Behind the scenes, she had been making a lot of moves, enough to strike them a deadly blow in the end.

Therefore, in Gu Youyou's eyes, she was not afraid to endure; she was the best at it.

So when Lin Qianqing mentioned that her aunt might try to trip her up, she was even a bit excited.

Gu Youyou's indifferent attitude actually helped Jin Zijin relax a bit. Reaching across the table, he lightly tapped her forehead and said, "You, I really don't know what's going on in your head, how are you different from ordinary women?"

Since he put it that way, Gu Youyou spoke frankly, lowering her voice, "You can completely treat me like a man." After saying this, she felt that it was somewhat inappropriate and added, "Or as an ally, at any rate, I am not the kind of woman in the inner quarters who needs your protection."

Having said this, she felt maybe she had spoken too boldly because people in this feudal society had no bottom line; killing someone was just a matter of doing it. The methods of the modern world could not be used in a place where identity and fists mattered more than reason, otherwise, the saying 'the scholar meets the soldier, and all reason is lost' wouldn't have been passed down through the ages.

With a troubled frown and acting coy for a while, her expression changed, and a large blob of ink fell from the tip of her pen without her noticing.

Jin Zijin smiled, took the pen from her hand, and hung it on the penholder.

"Ah...? Oh no..." Gu Youyou, seeing the large blot of black ink staining the paper, cried out in dismay, "I've written for so long, what a pity. But it's alright, I remember everything; I'll just write another one."

She took out a fresh sheet of unused paper, but Jin Zijin pressed down on her hand.

"Stop writing, let's talk," he said.

Youyou blinked her eyes. It was the first time they sat across the table to talk; they usually discussed matters while tucked in bed.

A single man and a single woman lying in bed, purely chatting—it was astonishing they had maintained this for so long.

Both had the potential to become saints.

"Hmm, are you going to tell me about what you're working on?" Gu Youyou said, "Don't speak yet, let me talk first. After I'm done, then you can decide how much to tell me and how much to keep to yourself."

Jin Zijin was just that kind of person—with a guarded mind, he would only reveal a bit if you pried a bit. Overly cautious and somewhat chauvinistic. Ah well, nobody is perfect. If he didn't even have these little faults, then he would really be a saint.

"Go ahead!" Jin Zijin gestured for her to proceed.

"Well, hey, first I want to ask you, how much do you believe in what I said about my past and present lives?" Gu Youyou leaned over the table, stretching her neck to look at him.

"You want to talk about the past?" Jin Zijin frowned.

He had told her not to bring it up again; that secret would be best kept inside, not to be spoken of or mentioned.

"It’s just the two of us, no need to be afraid!" Gu Youyou knew what he was worried about.

Jin Zijin swept his sleeves, extinguishing the light, and scooped Gu Youyou into the inner room, tossing her onto the bed.

Chapter 528: I was Involved in the Battle for Succession

Uh... Are we going to chat under the covers again?

"Wait for me!" After tucking Gu Youyou into bed, he went out again.

He came back after a while, only then did he take off his clothes and get into bed.

Gu Youyou knew he had gone to apply acupressure to Xiang Chun to put him to sleep, and she said, "You still don’t trust my medicine, do you?"

"Better safe than sorry," he replied.

As soon as the big stove warmed up the room, Gu Youyou couldn’t help but squeeze closer to him, her cold hands enveloped by his large ones, she couldn’t help but sigh at how warm they felt...

"Actually, I don’t have much to say, just want to tell you that I’m not as weak as you think. Yeah, I admit that I was like a delicate flower, nearly destroyed, when you first met me..."

"Get to the point, and stop moving your legs," Jin Zijin pressed down on her restless legs.

Being with her, he had to talk about serious matters to distract himself, but her fidgety actions and words like ’delicate flower destroyed,’ made it hard for him to not have thoughts derail.

"I just want to say, I’ve been through a struggle for inheritance too."

"What? You..." Jin Zijin was so startled that he gripped her hand tightly, causing Gu Youyou to cry out in pain.

"What are you doing, getting so agitated. Well, my... it’s sort of like a fight for inheritance, and your situation is pretty similar, isn’t it? Being a State Preceptor is just like being a Monarch, right? Those unspoken rules and such, I understand them."

Understand?

She didn’t understand.

Jin Zijin almost hoarsely asked her, "Tell me about your experiences."

"Ah! My family situation is quite complicated. How should I put this, we had some money, some power, and I was my parents’ only daughter, supposedly entitled to inherit what they left behind. But they died early, and at that time... coincidentally, just like the Gu Youyou from Lotus Village, I was only six or seven. My father had brothers and sisters who couldn’t bear the thought of such a large family falling to a little girl like me. Before I came of age, they did everything they could to get rid of me, and while my grandparents grieved over my parents’ death and were in poor health, they divided the family’s power, putting our family business in jeopardy.

I grew up in that kind of environment, stabilizing the family business while recovering bit by bit what they had taken. You see, having gone through that, I might be able to help with the big things you guys need to do, right?"

Jin Zijin’s gaze was complicated as he looked at her for a long, long time.

So long that Gu Youyou became impatient.

"Hey!" She sighed, "You always have this old problem, forget it if you're not going to talk, I'm happy to be left alone."

"No, Youyou..." He caressed her face, gently rubbing with his somewhat rough fingertips, and said softly, "So this is how you grew up." There was no disdain in his voice, only a feeling of heartache for her.

If it was said that another Gu Youyou growing up confined in a dark room was a pitiful sight, then what about her? As a little girl, in what kind of blade-filled shadows and battles of wits, must she have grown up with constant trepidation.

Her seemingly easy-going few words, he almost saw the countless hidden dangers that had once threatened her life; without the protection of her parents, she had to fend for herself.

So that's why she knew so much, why she could do many things ordinary people couldn't?

What kind of fear must a girl have felt when wielding a knife to hurt another person? She was stronger than he had imagined, which is why she managed to remain composed.

"You are more formidable than me," he said.

Chapter 529: We're Grasshoppers on the Same Rope

"I feel deeply ashamed!" he said again, "A man of such stature, yet unable to fully protect the woman he loves, always having you follow me and live in constant fear."

"It's the pressure of the situation, and I don't blame you. My only fear is that instead of being able to help you, I might hold you back."

This was the difference in their philosophies. Gu Youyou had always faced difficulties alone. When had she ever needed someone to protect her?

Even if she was scheming to have someone protect her, it was always within her control, merely a tactic for her.

"Good!" Jin Zijin chuckled, whispering softly, "You really do scare me."

He recalled what Xiao Jinyan had said about the affairs of the Jie Family's young master's inner house. Naturally, the matters of the inner house were best handled by the women within. He said, "When you have time, try to find out more about Zuo Zongzheng's second son's inner house."

"The inner house of Zuo Zongzheng's second son?" Gu Youyou was startled.

"Yes," Jin Zijin said, "Zuo Zongzheng, Mr. Jie, holds a significant position in the Imperial Court. There might be times when we need him."

Gu Youyou was clever and understood Jin Zijin's implication without further explanation.

Yet she couldn't comprehend. Wasn't Jin Zijin aiming to fight for the position of the State Preceptor? Shouldn't he be scheming against those old men of the Sanqing Temple instead?

"So the State Preceptor... has already extended his reach into the Imperial Court?"

"Not exactly," Jin Zijin smiled faintly, gently stroking her soft hair, and said, "I'm afraid you'll grow impatient..." As he spoke, he quickly corrected himself, "It's I who am impatient and not planning to take that path." Although that way was safer, it would mean waiting, and she was right, they could not wait that long.

The Dao Family's cultivation method emphasized calmness and composure; the master always mentioned the virtue of patience. This had been the unspoken rule between Xuanzong and Tianzong for years: if one faction became the State Preceptor, gaining the initiative, they must not rashly attack the other, and the other faction must not revolt or usurp the throne during the State Preceptor's tenure, and were obliged to wait until the State Preceptor was on his deathbed, to compete for the role in a just and honorable manner.

But waiting for years would age them. He was better off; with years of cultivating himself, he was more likely to live for a century, and he aged slower. But her, a woman, could not wait that long, for beauty fades quickly.

Gu Youyou listened but did not quite understand his intention.

Not planning to take which path?

"Then what other path do you have?" Or to put it another way, what exactly does he want to do?

In the past, she had assumed that with the struggle between Tianzong and Xuanzong, Jin Zijin, as Tianzong's senior disciple, would strive to win a way out for his sect and junior disciples, and a chance for survival for her by competing for the coveted role of State Preceptor.

But now, she realized that it wasn't the case. That was not his goal.

"I...?" Jin Zijin's eyes, deep as ink, glinted in the darkness, while moonlight streamed through the window, casting the last unmelted snow of early spring into a cold and dazzling brilliance.

The best thing about this world was its clean air, the stars that shone brightly, and the moon that was big, round, and brilliant.

Gu Youyou stretched out her hand and smoothed the furrowed brows on his forehead.

He wasn't very good at comforting others, and neither was she. If it were fitting for the occasion, one would say something about how spouses should share weal and woe.

But in her mouth, those words took on a different flavor, yet they seemed all the more sincere.

She smiled faintly and said, "We're both grasshoppers on the same string; you can't escape me, and I can't escape you. Whether you jump first or I jump first, or we jump together, the way we jump has to be discussed, right? If one of us doesn't jump well, wouldn't that be the end of everything?"

Chapter 530: My Origin

She was right; the metaphor successfully lightened the heavy atmosphere.

He pushed down her lifted head and her restless legs, pressing down firmly, restraining her until she was adjusted to his satisfaction and stopped troubling him.

"What are you doing?" It was too tight, she protested.

"A strong wind will blow tonight," he explained.

Nonsense, the moon was clearly beautiful tonight.

But she didn't call him out on it.

"You've told me your past; let me tell you about mine," he said.

Jin Zijin's past? Gu Youyou's eyes slightly lifted, and she grew a bit nervous.

She hadn't refrained from guessing his identity, but those were just guesses, not to be taken as truth.

"Go on, I'm listening. Even if it's a trivial matter, I won't look down on you," she said.

He smiled, "I like your mindset, you really know how to relieve your own stress."

How could she have survived in that environment without learning to relieve stress?

"Alright, enough talk, hurry up and spill it."

"Alright! Let's start with a story. You might..."

Gu Youyou yawned, truly feeling tired. She said, "Don’t bother with stories now, tell yours later. Just get to the point. Who are you? What’s your relation with Jin Ziyuan and the Imperial Family, and what do you intend to do? Tell me clearly, so I know what to do."

Jin Zijin: "..." She was indeed direct.

Seeing that it was getting late, he nodded slightly.

"You’ve known Jin Ziyuan’s identity for a while now, haven’t you? He’s the only son of the former Prince, and we are... cousins. I should call the man who leapt from the cliff ’Third Uncle.’"

"Oh...?" So, he died because of you?

"That day was an accident; I never intended to take his life," Jin Zijin said with a bitter smile: "My relation with the Imperial Family..." He paused, then continued, "Have you heard of the Princess?

Princess?

Gu Youyou nodded and said, "I heard from my older cousin that she married into the Xiao Family."

"Exactly." Jin Zijin’s voice was low, almost as if speaking to himself, "She used my identity, the former Crown Princess Consort, gave birth to a son..."

...

Lin Qianqing hadn’t been raising mice and snakes with Gu Youyou for just a day, but every encounter with these creatures still made her feel queasy.

There was no helping it, who made her cousin have such peculiar habits? They were indeed problematic preferences.

"Eh, what kind of grass is this?"

Lin Qianqing saw some strange grass in Gu Youyou's basket; she thought her knowledge was not bad, yet she had never seen such grass.

The grass was ice-blue, cool to the touch.

"Be careful," Gu Youyou saw Lin Qianqing pick up a plant and quickly snatched the basket containing Youying Grass, saying, "This stuff is poisonous, you can't just touch it."

Yue Rujing did have some skills; within merely ten days, she managed to procure these items for her—though they were few, just three plants.

Of course, Gu Youyou didn't say this in front of Yue Rujing for fear of vexing him to the point of kidney weakness.

"Cousin, what do you want with poisonous herbs?" Lin Qianqing withdrew her hand but couldn't take her eyes off the beautiful plants.

Gu Youyou said indifferently, "All medicines are poisonous in a way; medicinal herbs are also poisonous herbs, it's just that this particular medicine is a bit special. You, focus on your own life, and remember not to mess with them, that's all."

"Oh!" Lin Qianqing watched as Gu Youyou crushed the herbs and put them into a medicine jar, soon squeezing out some blue juice.

After that, she started putting various other herbs into the jar to mix and mash them into medicine.

"Cousin, what kind of medicine are you making?"

She felt it was a pity to chop up such beautiful grass.