Farmhouse 621

Chapter 621: You Must Also Go to the Imperial Palace

She had grown so big that, apart from the annual Dragon Raising Head Day when she ventured beyond the city walls to offer sacrifices to the Dragon King and Dragon Mother, and the Plum Blossom Festival of the last two years, she had never left Beijing.

She hardly dared to think about going to the countryside.

Gu Youyou said, "Do you want to visit the place where your father spent his childhood?"

"Of course, I do," Lin Qianqing was so excited she could hardly speak, "Have you been there?" After saying this, she hurriedly added, "You lived there when you were a child; you must have been there."

Whether little Youyou had been there or not, Gu Youyou didn't know, but she hadn't, merely saying, "I lived in the neighboring village and haven't been there since I fell ill. I don't remember much about my childhood. Your uncle has been serving diligently before the Emperor all these years, only to achieve his current status. I heard that since he entered Beijing, he has never gone back. You... we could think of a way, like going home for an ancestral ritual, perhaps?"

With Gu Youyou's reminder, Lin Qianqing felt like she had an epiphany, saying, "Yes, an ancestral ritual. If my father can't leave, we can do it on his behalf, can't we?"

"Right, but we have to include Shenxing."

Lin Qianqing's face fell, and she said faintly, "Then... let's talk about it later."

Having been in the Lin Residence for so long, Gu Youyou naturally understood the intricacies involved.

This girl was nice, but she didn't care much for her half-siblings born from concubines.

This brother didn't have a concubine mother; he was raised by his aunt. By rights, having grown up together with him, she should have been quite fond of him, but she just wasn't.

It’s probably because her aunt would complain that Lin Qianqing wasn’t a son who could inherit the Lin Residence, blaming herself for not having a son, and resenting the fact that the grand Lin Family would end up in the hands of a bastard child.

On the surface, the aunt treated Lin Shenxing as if he were her own, but who knew what she really thought.

It was about time, and Lin Qianqing stood up, saying, "You go to the clinic. I need to attend to those two wet nurses. Oh, it’s killing me."

Gu Youyou also stood up, lightly dusting herself off, and they walked outside together.

"The wet nurses are teaching you, so why are you serving them?"

"Isn’t it essentially serving them? They pretend to be the Empress and the imperial concubines, and we, mere mortals, are to practice palace etiquette with them."

Hearing this, Gu Youyou laughed out loud, but upon seeing her stern eyes shooting over, she hastily swallowed the schadenfreude words that were about to escape her lips.

Gu Youyou sympathetically said, "The wet nurses are too unreasonable."

Only then did her facial expression improve a bit, saying, "Indeed, they come every year, every single year..."

"Every year?" I exclaim, "Does palace etiquette change every year?"

"Not that!" Lin Qianqing said somewhat embarrassedly, "It’s just me... I forgot what I learned last year, and I didn’t do well, so my mother fears I’d embarrass myself in the Imperial Palace, and that’s why the wet nurses come to tutor me every year."

Uh...

Well, I have nothing to say to that.

...

With two days remaining until the Empress's birthday, Gu Youyou was pulled into her aunt's courtyard, who said, "Don't go to the clinic these next two days, instead, follow your cousin and learn the palace etiquette."

"Me?" Gu Youyou pointed to the tip of her nose, wondering why I need to learn? Just looking at my cousin's woeful little eyes told me how troublesome it was to enter the Imperial Palace.

Her aunt looked at her earnestly, her words leaving no room for rebuttal, "Indeed, you must learn because you also have to go."

"... That doesn't seem too appropriate, does it?" The Imperial Palace was such a grand place where people had the least rights, and Gu Youyou wasn't ready, nor had she thought about going so soon.

"You must go. That is also what your uncle wishes," the aunt said, her words leaving no room for objection.

Chapter 622: No Comparison, No Hurt

She was the type who reigned supreme in this residence, least fond of being contradicted by anyone, even with Lin Qianqing, of course, except in front of the elderly grandma and Lin Xingyi.

Gu Youyou quietly stood to one side, watching as two sturdy maids 'invited' her to Lin Qianqing's courtyard.

Well, it was a gathering of comrades in similar misfortune.

Lin Qianqing's spirits were lifted completely by having someone to keep her company, an emotion Gu Youyou could understand.

The two were lectured for four hours before the various rules and regulations were finally explained to them.

How they should walk, how to greet imperial consorts of different ranks, and so on.

When speaking, they must not look straight ahead but should lower their gaze to their own toes, etc...

After demonstrating once, the maids had them both give it a try.

Lin Qianqing had been learning for several days. Although she wasn't very good, she wasn't far off either, just remembering to act accordingly and to speak and conduct herself with caution was enough.

Gu Youyou learned it after just one lesson, much to the delight of the two maids.

They had thought that this country girl would give them a headache, and feared they might have to teach by lamplight at night, but they had not expected such a strong capacity for understanding.

Without comparison, there would be no harm done, and Lin Qianqing felt for the first time she had seen those two stern maids smile, their praise was anything but stingy.

"Miss Gu has excellent potential. Having taught for so many years, it's the first time I've encountered such a student. Now we can rest easy, just worrying if there will be enough time for Miss Gu to learn well."

"Thank you for your praise," Gu Youyou responded respectfully, bowing to them.

"Hmm, not bad, not bad at all, the movements are standard, and the volume of your voice is appropriate," the maids nodded with satisfaction and said, "Shall we call it a day then? Misses, when you return, think it over carefully, and don't get complacent just because you've been praised."

The two were delighted, especially Lin Qianqing. Suppressing the joy in her heart, she hastily bowed to the two maids, "Thank you for your instruction, maids!"

Gu Youyou's courtyard was also followed to by Lin Qianqing.

With a face full of surprise, she said, "Cousin, how did you learn so quickly? You remembered all those things in one go. I tell you, I memorize scriptures better than I do any of these etiquette rules."

Gu Youyou, while turning the soil in several pots of medicinal herbs on the medicine shelf, simply said, "That's because you are resistant to entering the palace, your heart isn't in it, so naturally, you find it difficult to learn."

Lin Qianqing pouted, unconvinced.

She also took a small shovel to loosen the soil for a pot of herbs, then said, "I just feel... it's troublesome, not as free and easy as at home."

Gu Youyou nodded in agreement.

Turning around, she took out a watering can and began watering the plants, continuing, "Although your aunt is strict with you, it's for your own good. No matter how naughty you are or how angry you make her, at most she would scold you and punish you to stay put and copy scriptures. She won't really do anything to you.

But in that place... didn't your uncle tell you that the emperor would arrange your marriage? It's likely to be one of the princes, and if you truly marry into the Imperial Family, your days will no longer be dictated by you, and aunt and uncle won't be able to help you."

The mood dipped at Gu Youyou's words.

Lin Qianqing listlessly shoveled the soil, nearly digging out the medicinal herbs that Gu Youyou had cared for diligently.

Gu Youyou quickly snatched the shovel from her hand and thrust the watering can into her hands, saying, "You'd better help me water them, all of them need water."

"Oh!" She merely uttered and turned to water the plants.

Gu Youyou shook her head helplessly.

Chapter 623: The Empress Dowager is Not the Emperor's Biological Mother

She was rebellious, but she could not rebel against the era.

Marriages of sons and daughters were decided by parents' orders and matchmakers' words. Those who dared to defy these were few, and not one of them met a good end. With Lin Qianqing's status, she had the inclination but lacked the courage.

Therefore, she had no choice but to accept her fate.

"By the way, do you know why my aunt suddenly said she wanted to take me with her?"

This was something Gu Youyou was curious about.

Showing your face in the Imperial Palace was a great honor for women of the era, but Madam Lin knew that Gu Youyou didn't like it, and, not trusting her niece for fear the uneducated country girl might cause trouble and embarrass her, she wouldn't have normally taken her to be seen.

Lin Qianqing said, "Probably because the Empress wants to please the Empress Dowager." Because of what Gu Youyou had said earlier, she thought of a future without hope, and her mood was still somewhat depressed.

Gu Youyou patted her on the shoulder and said, "Don't think about it too much, there are still a few months left. At least for now, within the Lin Residence, you're still free."

Alas, she also didn't know whether the way her grandmother had spoiled her was a blessing or a curse.

It seemed that it was more of a curse at the moment.

No wonder her aunt, who knew how to survive in a large household, was so worried about her.

"Alright, I'll help you water the plants," Lin Qianqing said, managing a weak smile.

Gu Youyou breathed a sigh of relief and asked, "Then tell me, if the Empress wants to please the Empress Dowager, why does your mother want to drag me into the palace?"

"Because you are famous, you are the doctor from Lingnan who cured the typhus epidemic and now you've opened a medical practice in Beijing. You won't make house calls unless absolutely necessary, that's your rule. To consult you for a medical treatment, an appointment is needed in advance, right?"

Gu Youyou chuckled awkwardly.

"With your rules, the Empress Dowager is put in a bind. She can keep to them, but it would be demeaning for her to ask you to come to the palace for a consultation. Now, the Empress, understanding as she is, thought of taking advantage of this situation to have my mother bring you into the palace, casually to attend to the Empress Dowager's illness."

Gu Youyou was shocked, "What ailment does the Empress Dowager have?"

Lin Qianqing replied, "The Empress Dowager is generally in good health, but she has troubles with her legs. It's said that she's been unable to stand in recent years and suffers severe pain when it rains. The Imperial Physician is at a loss."

After hearing this, Gu Youyou nodded; it sounded like a rheumatic issue.

Modern medicine had yet to cure rheumatism, so naturally, she could not cure it either.

However, she could alleviate the condition.

"How could the Empress Dowager have contracted such a condition?" she murmured softly.

It seemed a long shot for such a pampered woman to develop this issue.

"Cousin, you don’t know," Lin Qianqing sighed, "The Empress Dowager in the harem is not the emperor’s biological mother but was a maid by his mother’s side. The previous emperor later favored her, granting her the title of ’Talented Lady.’ After the Emperor’s mother, Empress Ning, passed away, the Empress Dowager raised the emperor, and the previous emperor promoted her status from ’Talented Lady’ to ’Virtuous Consort.’

Those years, after the emperor lost his mother’s protection, he had a tough time, leaning on the Virtuous Consort for survival. She too was frequently harassed by the previous emperor’s favored consorts, and it was then that her legs became disabled."

She lowered her voice, "It’s said she was forced to kneel in the bitter cold all night long, and the next day she couldn’t stand up anymore. The emperor later called in many reputable doctors to treat her leg, but none succeeded. She had to rest after walking a bit, and over the past two years, she’s become completely unable to stand."

Gu Youyou spoke indifferently, "So it seems that the Empress Dowager gained her position due to protecting the young emperor back in the day, and when he ascended the throne, he established her as the Empress Dowager."

Chapter 624: Chatting on the Road

"Indeed, she has no children of her own, and regards His Majesty as if he were her own son, having suffered so much for him,"

True enough.

Gu Youyou nodded.

"Then what does my uncle mean by agreeing to let me go?"

Lin Qianqing giggled, "Your uncle, my father, means that you should go to the palace to see the world and let the ladies who will enter the palace tomorrow see you too. Who knows, they might find a good match for you."

Gu Youyou was taken aback, almost chopping to death the herbs she had planted, thinking to herself: Lin Qianqing is wrong. It's one thing for others, but my uncle knows about my situation with Jin Zijin. Why would he arrange for me to look for a suitable match?

These people... they love to do things halfway and tell things by halves.

She guessed that they probably wanted her to enter the palace to understand the current situation.

Gu Youyou was smart and naturally knew that the subtle relationships between the women of the inner courtyards best reflected the situation of the former court.

She understood their intentions.

...

Two days later, accompanying her aunt into the palace, Gu Youyou and her cousin Lin Qianqing sat in one carriage, while her aunt took another. Throughout the journey, Lin Qianqing kept pulling back a sliver of the carriage curtain, pointing and commenting on the other carriages on the road.

"Look, that is Madam Zhang's carriage. They have no legitimate daughters, and last year she brought a concubine-born daughter to the palace. That girl was so flustered during her first palace visit she caused accidents again and again, bringing shame to her. Who knows if she will bring her again this year."

As she saw another carriage curtain lift, revealing a stunning face, she exclaimed excitedly: "Oh, that's Madam Lu! A few years ago, she frightened a princess in the palace, and the Empress Dowager banned her from entering. Yet, she's come this year.

She would not dare to come without an invitation directly from the Empress herself. Ah, cousin, why do you think the Empress invited Madam Lu?"

There’s a multitude of ladies in Beijing, and Gu Youyou herself has more than enough affairs to attend to, let alone remember a Madam Lu among the many with the same surname?

She closed the Ancient Medical Manuscript she was holding and asked idly, "Which Madam Lu?"

"That one, the most famous one in Beijing, who you saw on the day the Dragon King and Dragon Mother were worshiped, the one you remarked had an astonishing physique and was blessed with unique features."

"Oh, her!" Gu Youyou perked up.

She was a head taller than the average man, at least six-foot-three, with a voice like a drake and a big frame, demoted to a concubine by her husband twice.

Gu Youyou squeezed her head to the edge of the window and caught only a glimpse before Madame Lu put down the curtain.

Her appearance could indeed frighten a child.

As for why the Empress would invite Madam Lu... Gu Youyou pondered for a moment and thought: Isn’t it obvious? With a person like Madam Lu, unless there were substantial benefits, which lady of the house would want to deal with her?

Frighteningly ugly and vulgar.

The Empress invited her because she has her sights on General Lu and his son.

But she couldn’t say this to Lin Qianqing.

Gu Youyou smiled and said, "After all, she is Madam Lu. If she invited all the ladies of lower rank than General Lu and left her out, it wouldn’t be appropriate. Maybe the Empress wants to be seen as a generous ruler."

Lin Qianqing smiled, "The Empress is truly wise and righteous and is extremely kind to us younger ones. It’s just that the rules in the Imperial Palace are so complicated, which is why I’ve never wanted to go."

The Empress was her aunt’s cousin, the legitimate eldest daughter of the Ducal Residence’s senior branch. Should Lin Qianqing refer to her as Aunt by marriage?

Chapter 625: Confrontation on the Road

According to what Gu Youyou knew, there was an ancient rule regarding marriage that forbade people with the same surname from marrying each other. However, this rule varied across different eras. In certain periods, it was permissible for members of the Imperial Family and nobility to intermarry despite having the same surname. As a result, the current Emperor and Empress were of the same surname.

It was said that the Emperor had to go through a great deal of trouble to ascend from the position of Crown Prince to the Dragon Throne. Zhuzhao Country has a distinctive feature: there are an unusually large number of people with the surname Jin in the north, once a great clan many years ago. But after years of changes, it was difficult to distinguish who belonged to which branch of the family.

The power of the Ducal Residence was another major branch of the Jin surname outside of the Imperial Family. The connections were complex and deep-rooted, not to be underestimated. In order for the Emperor to ascend to the throne smoothly, he naturally could not adhere to the rule against marrying someone with the same surname, so he married her to become the Empress.

The carriage ride only stopped upon reaching the Imperial City, where the Imperial Family had a separate area designated for the ladies and misses of each household to park their carriages. After alighting from the carriage, the maids and coachmen brought along were not permitted to enter the palace, and had to wait by the carriages.

And the ladies and misses were all required to enter the palace by foot.

For a moment, the sight of these graceful women walking in resembled a parade of orioles and swallows, truly a spectacular scene.

Gu Youyou marveled that being able to walk in such uniformity also reflected the ancient people’s regard for punctuality.

If not for agreeing to arrive at the same time, the procession would have been a disorganized mess.

The ladies and misses began to greet each other. Lin Qianqing and Gu Youyou followed behind Madam Lin, who introduced them to the other ladies and misses.

"Oh, so this is your eldest daughter, it’s been a long time since I last saw her, she’s grown even more beautiful. The Empress is sure to be pleased when she sees her."

"Madam Zhang, Miss Zhang is not bad either. It’s said that Miss Zhang’s talents are the best among the misses in Beijing. The Empress likes talented women, so I think your daughter will also win the Empress’s favor."

Madam Zhang’s heart swelled with joy, yet she lamented, "My daughter has some talent, but we cannot compare to you, Madam Lin... with the sisterly affection you and the Empress have shared since childhood, alas!"

Upon hearing this, Madam Lin’s face darkened instantly.

Seeing this, Madam Zhang darted away swiftly, immediately pulling her daughter to greet Madam Li who was passing by.

Madam Lin clenched her teeth in anger, snorting coldly, "The Zhang Family has always been adept in currying favor, Qianqing, you must be cautious. That Miss Zhang is personally schooled by Madam Zhang, likely to be no different from her. If you both end up in the Crown Prince Residence in the future, she’s the one you need to guard against the most."

Lin Qianqing’s expression turned grave as she acknowledged with a ’yes’.

Madam Lin paused, realizing it was inappropriate to discuss such matters on this public road in front of her daughter and niece. She then said, "Let’s go, we should first pay our respects to the Empress."

Gu Youyou followed behind Madam Lin, noting the incident in her mind.

It seemed that Miss Zhang and her cousin Lin Qianqing were both candidates to enter the Crown Prince Residence.

As her cousin Lin Qianqing was related to the Empress and Crown Prince, if there was a fight for the position of the principal wife, it seemed she would have a better chance of success.

"Doctor Gu, Qianqing..."

Soon, they heard someone calling them from behind.

When they stopped and looked back, they saw Xie Qinyun alone, catching up while holding up her skirt.

After running a few steps and realizing it was improper, she promptly let go of her skirt and approached with small, delicate steps.

Madam Lin also stopped and looked toward Miss Xie.

She had no mother, her older sister-in-law had passed away, and her second sister-in-law was divorced, so she had no elders to accompany her, leaving her to attend alone.

Madam Lin felt a surge of pity and said, "Miss Xie, come with me. You’re such a pitiable child."

Xie Qinyun obediently replied with a ’yes’.

Chapter 626: Highway Robbery

Madam Lin walked ahead while Xie Qinyun made faces at Gu Youyou and Lin Qianqing from behind.

Madam Lin occasionally turned her head to instruct them, teaching them about matters related to the palace. They nodded earnestly in agreement.

Whatever Madam Lin said was accepted as correct anyway.

"Youyou, after the banquet, the Empress will likely speak with you about visiting the Empress Dowager to treat her leg ailment. You're smarter than your cousin; you should know how to handle this, right?"

Gu Youyou was momentarily stunned, then nodded lightly.

Madam Lin hummed in satisfaction and said, "It might not only be after the banquet; you could be summoned to go before it starts. Just be adaptable to the situation."

No problem at all.

Gu Youyou continued to nod.

...

While the Empress was hosting the banquet, Jin Zijin was also busy with his own matters.

In the woods, two bored, masked men in black were casually conversing.

"I heard that Gu Youyou entered the palace today. Brother, you agreed to this?"

After pulling down the black cloth covering his face and putting a wild grass in his mouth, he said, "Taking this chance to have a look is good. If not today, someday we'll be summoned."

"Hmm?"

"The Empress Dowager has bad legs, and the more famous she gets, the less she can avoid treatment. Besides, there's no need to avoid it!"

Yue Rujing laughed and said, "That's true." Then he became slightly worried, "But healing the Empress Dowager is not like healing others. Gu Youyou's medical theories are really frightening. She wouldn't be foolish enough to use some shocking and unorthodox methods to heal, would she?"

"Don't worry, Youyou knows what she's doing," Jin Zijin replied, climbing out of a ditch and glancing toward the entrance of a nearby grove.

Yue Rujing said, "As long as she knows what she's doing, that's good. The Empress Dowager's leg problem is a chronic issue; I've even examined it myself." He sighed and shook his head, "It's hopeless. But at her age, the Empress Dowager has attendants, so whether she can walk or not doesn't really matter. She just needs pain relief. Why trouble ourselves over this? Right?"

Jin Zijin replied indifferently, "Before his ascension to the throne, he and the Empress Dowager relied on each other for many years; she is to him more than a birth mother. Moreover, this Empress Dowager is different from the previous ones. She has no natal family, no relatives involved in politics—her heart is only with the Emperor, so the Emperor also trusts her deeply." With a slight chuckle, as if recalling something, he added, "What a great accomplishment it would be to cure the Empress Dowager! Isn't it clear that some intend to use this opportunity to gain favor with the Emperor? But that ailment... isn't so easily cured."

Considering what his brother implied... Yue Rujing pondered, narrowing his eyes.

"Brother, you're not planning to use this opportunity to have Gu Youyou curry favor with the Empress Dowager, are you? If she cures the ailment, that's great, but if not... Anyway, it's already like that; if she doesn't succeed, it won't matter much. I'm just worried that in her eagerness to achieve quick results, she might resort to her shocking and unorthodox methods and end up making things worse!"

Jin Zijin looked pensively at Yue Rujing, sizing him up, and asked, "Do you still have doubts about Youyou? You trust her so little?"

Yue Rujing originally wanted to proudly claim it was because he cared about her, but when the words reached his mouth, they weren't so bold anymore, turning into another sentence.

"Is that woman trustworthy in her actions?"

Jin Zijin: "..."

"Short-sighted!"

Yue Rujing was stunned before he realized that his brother was scolding him.

"Brother, how can you talk about me like that? You've changed..."

Startled birds flew up unusually in the grove ahead. Jin Zijin immediately spat out the grass from his mouth and put on his hood.

"Enough, tell everyone to be ready. They're coming."

The approaching riders galloped into the grove, drawing nearer and nearer until a rope trap in the leaves sprang out, launching three feet off the ground, catching the lead rider unawares and sending both rider and horse tumbling over.

Chapter 627: Robbing Huo Li

The people behind him managed to rein in their horses in time, but the shock was still enough to make the horses neigh violently.

The one who fell from his horse wasn't so lucky and immediately plummeted into the trap they had set earlier, dying on the spot.

The forest was silent, with no birds in flight, and the leader's face turned ugly with rage as he shouted, "I am Huo Li, the chief disciple of Xuanzong, how dare you!"

Yue Rujing sneered, "This idiot, do I not know he is Huo Li? The very Huo Li I am robbing today. Last time, it was joyous robbing us; now it's his turn to see how craven he looks!"

Yue Rujing snorted dismissively and gestured to the people behind him before leaping forward with a broadsword that was five inches wide.

He shouted loudly to the leader, "This mountain is mine, these trees I planted, if you wish to pass, leave behind a toll!"

Surrounded by his men, Huo Li sized up the line of people who had suddenly appeared.

In the outskirts of Beijing, it was unexpected for a group of ten men dressed in black to emerge from the forest in broad daylight.

And they were certainly not some common highwaymen.

"What do you intend to do?"

However, after his mind raced, Huo Li realized who the attackers were.

Yue Rujing said with a cold laugh, "Unwilling to part with your wealth, then does that mean you wish to part with your life?"

Having said that, he let out a great shout and charged forward with his broadsword towards the lead man.

Such a large blade was most suited for cutting down horses, and within moments, three men had fallen from their steeds.

Each of the men behind him wielded similar broadswords, rushing forth like a band of bandits who cared for neither their lives nor their noise, fighting fiercely with Huo Li and his men.

The ten men in black led by Yue Rujing knocked Huo Li’s men off their horses, and the combatants on both sides were inextricably engaged in battle.

Yet, Huo Li, as the leader, remained on his horse, watching indifferently from behind the crowd.

"Kill all these money-grubbing fools!" yelled Yue Rujing, still in a frenzy.

Seeing his own men falling out of favor, suffering severe casualties, Huo Li finally showed some concern.

He drew the long sword from his back and roared, "Do not push people too far."

Yue Rujing responded with a thumbs-down gesture towards him and continued fighting fiercely with his sword.

Huo Li's face twitched with anger, frustration boiling up inside him.

He had urgent business leaving the city today, yet he hadn't expected to be intercepted by this rabble.

They had tripped each other up more than once, both openly and covertly, yet had always known to measure their actions, never daring to break the unspoken rules of their game.

But seeing Yue Rujing's demeanor now, was he really intending to have all the men Huo Li had brought with him perish here?

"Good, since you started this..." Huo Li's face was twisted with rage and murderous intent, and as he spoke forcefully, the Cold Light Sword in his hand stood upright in midair. Immediately following, a cold moonlight-colored Taiji Eight Trigram symbol burst forth from beneath the sword's hilt, expanding in size and stirring up the sand and stones as it slowly spread towards Yue Rujing and his men.

Yue Rujing's eyes widened in shock, and he quickly retreated several steps, slamming his sword into the ground to halt the spread of the Eight Trigrams.

Those too slow to retreat were touched by the Eight Trigrams, their bodies instantly alight with a cold flame; upon closer inspection, it looked like many strange insects crawling over them.

There’s something wrong with that sword?

Screams erupted everywhere, and Yue Rujing, greatly alarmed, urgently shouted, "Get rid of the burning clothes!"

Upon hearing this, everyone hastily used their swords to strip off their flaming garments, then rolled repeatedly on the grass to completely extinguish the fire on their bodies.

Upon closer inspection, it became clear that those things were not fire at all, but a type of bizarre insect, carrying on their bodies what appeared to be floating, soft, moon-white fur. With each movement, they resembled leaping flames.

Chapter 628: Mission Failure

Touching the skin, the pain was even more excruciating than actual flames burning.

The crowd, clutching their knives, trembled with fear, retreated several steps, and dared not move forward any longer.

Yue Rujing, supporting the Taiji Eight Trigrams, grew increasingly weary, veins popping on his forehead. The knife in his hand was gnawed at by those creatures, emitting a grating noise.

Huo Li sneered coldly and shouted loudly, "Let’s see how much longer you can hold out. The sensation of being wounded by the Cold Light is far from pleasant. You’d better think it through. If you run now, I’ll only take their lives!"

There must be a price to pay for annihilating my men.

Yue Rujing spat out in disdain, "What other tricks do you have? Do you think these pathetic things can scare me?"

Huo Li snorted coldly, "I’ll see how tough you can talk..."

Having said that, he grasped the hilt of the Cold Light Sword and gave it a light twist. A strange fragrance then wafted from the hilt. Moments later, the Taiji Eight Trigrams glowed brightly with cold light, and the broadsword in Yue Rujing's hand shook so violently that it went numb and almost slipped out of his grip,

"I can't hold on much longer..." Left with no choice, Yue Rujing shouted word by word towards the forest.

Before the echo of his voice faded, another masked person leapt out from behind the woods, and a bright red dagger flew out of the masked person's hand, streaking straight toward Huo Li...

Huo Li was caught by surprise and hastily summoned the Cold Light Sword to block, but this move also happened to disrupt his formation.

The Taiji Eight Trigrams on the ground quickly retreated like a tide, shrinking back into the hilt of the Cold Light Sword.

After blocking the attack, Huo Li hastily retreated, his hand holding the Cold Light Sword trembling uncontrollably, the sword nearly slipping from his grip.

"You... you've come too?" He faced the person in black, saying viciously.

Jin Zijin didn't say a word but calmly sheathed the dagger, his eyes emitting a fierce glare that could scorch others.

Huo Li, unwilling to give in, wiped away the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, held the Cold Light Sword with a bowed hand, and said, "If that's the case... I shall take my leave."

He actually turned back the way he came.

Yue Rujing, carrying his broadsword, wanted to chase after him, furious, "You're thinking of running just like that? Watch me break your leg."

"Hey, no need to chase," Jin Zijin reached out to stop him.

"Why? Last time he ambushed us, we both ended up injured."

Jin Zijin said indifferently, "If he has failed his mission, someone will not spare him. Today Youyou is entering the palace for the first time, and we fear any mishaps; let’s head back quickly."

Yue Rujing, although somewhat reluctant, ultimately nodded.

Suddenly, he remembered something and hurriedly said, "Right, elder brother, I have news about a puppet man."

Jin Zijin, walking ahead, suddenly stopped.

"Where?"

Yue Rujing replied, "The exact location isn’t clear yet, but it’s not far from Beijing, at... Jinxiu City."

...

The Empress hosted the ladies who came to the Jiaotai Hall to celebrate her birthday, and there were simply too many high-ranking women in the Imperial Palace. Today, on this occasion, seeing them required performing grand rituals. They waited for Madam Lin to lead them through all the necessary rituals until their legs were sore.

It was only at the appointed time that they were able to sit down cheerfully to feast.

The Empress, a woman in her forties, was well-maintained and looked quite young. Dressed in sumptuous and elegant clothes that complemented her slightly plump figure, she carried a dignified and impressive air.

Throughout, she wore a warm and gentle smile. No matter who came to greet her, she always had pleasant words to say, touching people's hearts with perfectly crafted phrases, making everyone feel she was a very approachable person.

Chapter 629: The Absent Person

A woman like her, if placed in modern times, would undoubtedly be a strong figure navigating various high-level social circles, living a very uninhibited life.

Pitifully, no matter how capable she is, she is merely another woman within these high walls and palace gates; to live well, she still has to depend on the whims of men.

As for her, she is already the Empress, having successfully walked half of life's path, so her next step should be to vie for the Emperor's position for her son and to seat herself as the Empress Dowager.

Such an enemy is truly fearsome; had it not been for some early words from Jin Zijin, Gu Youyou would have believed her.

The Empress took a sip of her drink, glanced around, and slightly furrowed her brows, asking, "Where is Madam Ru? Why haven't I seen her here?"

A Palace Attendant replied, "Madam Ru has had a recurrence of her old illness these past few days, suffering from severe headaches. She only had a gift sent as a birthday present but did not come herself."

"Madam Ru is ill?" the Empress mused, and then inquired, "Why wasn't I informed earlier?"

"It was Madam's own wish; she said she feared the Empress would worry, affecting the birthday celebration."

Another Madam said, "Madam Ru returns to Beijing every year to stay for a few months after her tenure at the Xining Border Defense, always going back to Xining after the Empress's birthday. Now that she can't come, I fear her illness is serious."

After hearing this, the Empress nodded and said, "Indeed, I shall have to visit her another day."

A consort seeking favor giggled, "Your Majesty, it’s not just Madam Ru who hasn’t come today; Noble Consort Sheng hasn’t come either."

The faces of the assembled attendees changed dramatically.

The Empress also rarely furrowed her brows.

She was well aware that Noble Consort Sheng hadn’t come; how many times had this contemptible woman flaunted the Emperor’s favor to slight her over the years?

But in front of all these people, the Empress still maintained her composed and noble demeanor, asking with a smile, "And why hasn’t Noble Consort Sheng come?"

"I heard that she is also ill, Your Majesty. How come she’s sick again?"

The Empress felt her teeth itch with annoyance but responded coolly, "Noble Consort Sheng has always been frail; I should also visit her one of these days."

With that, she cast a cold glance at the overly talkative consort, silencing her.

The topic of Madam Ru and Noble Consort Sheng was quickly dropped, as the Empress turned to the conspicuously ’special’ Madam Lu and asked with a smile, "Madam Lu, I’ve heard that your son intends to discuss marriage this year? I wonder if there is a Miss from a particular family that Madam Lu has taken a liking to?"

Madam Lu, upon being addressed by the Empress, was flattered and startled, hastily swallowing the meat in her mouth before replying, "Replying to Your Majesty, his father is looking on his behalf. It seems he hasn’t taken a fancy to anyone just yet."

Madam Lu, naturally comedic, triggered laughter from the court ladies with her manner of response, as they covered their mouths in snickers.

Knowing they were mocking her, yet daring not to act out in front of the Empress, she only looked sternly at those who laughed loudest, quietly taking note of them.

This put the Empress in an awkward position, so she coughed once and everyone immediately quieted down.

Only then the Empress continued to Madam Lu, "Madam Lu really is... straightforward. However, with only one son between you and General Lu, the matter of his marriage should be carefully considered by you as his mother. A warrior like General Lu might not be as meticulous as Madam Lu, a woman's heart being finer, isn't it?"

This made Madam Lu's heart blossom with pleasure.

People often judged her by her appearance, thinking of her as crude and mannish; no one had ever spoken to her this way, suggesting she had a delicate sensibility.

Madam Lu eagerly responded with a smile, "Yes, yes, what Your Majesty says is true."

The Empress, imperceptibly, took another sip of the soup brought by the Palace Maiden, and continued to ask, "So, Madam Lu... do you have any suitable candidates in mind?"

Chapter 630: How to Deal with Concubine Du?

Madam Lu honestly answered, "Previously, it was his father who was considering this matter; I have not yet taken a fancy to anyone."

She thought to herself, The Empress is too impatient, I just mentioned that I haven't been involved in this.

"Oh, what a coincidence!" The Empress casually lifted her eyes and glanced toward a lady seated on the right, softly saying, "The Ducal Residence has a daughter from the fourth lady's family who possesses virtue and talent, and she is close in age to your family's Tianning. Why not consider her!"

Upon her words, everyone followed the Empress's gaze toward Madam Jin, who sat amidst the crisis.

Madam Jin’s face showed a somewhat awkward expression, but with everyone looking at her, she could only nod and smile faintly to Madam Lu.

Madam Lu’s eyes sparkled with delight, clearly very satisfied with the Empress’s suggestion.

For a young lady from the Ducal Residence to marry into their family would be social climbing on their part; her son being able to marry the Ducal Residence’s young lady naturally made her happy.

Madam Lu said excitedly, "This... this is good indeed, but my husband’s temper... he definitely won’t allow me to make the decision. Empress, I must go back and discuss this thoroughly with my husband!"

"That’s good, Madam Lu is truly virtuous!" said the Empress with a light smile.

Next was some singing and dancing.

The atmosphere was the most relaxed and informal at this stage. Amidst the rhythms of the music, the ladies and the young misses started to whisper to their neighbors, chatting and laughing, and before long their voices grew louder, threatening to drown out the singing and dancing.

The Empress did not mind; instead, she called Madam Lin over to talk. They were cousins who grew up together in the same courtyard. The noise was too loud to completely make out what they were talking about, but both seemed to be enjoying the conversation immensely.

At her side, Lin Qianqing and Xie Qinyun also began to chat and laugh.

"Hey, Qinyun, after we returned from your place last time, we were confined and I have no idea about the situation at your home now. Has the matter with your second brother’s woman been resolved?"

Gu Youyou also pricked up her ears; although these matters were no longer of any concern to her, she still couldn’t help but want to know the outcome.

Xie Qinyun spoke with a face full of indignation, "Not yet, that wretched woman is being detained; my father and my second brother haven't decided how to deal with her."

Detained?

Gu Youyou was shocked, "So your second brother believes that it was her doing?"

Xie Qinyun looked puzzled and said, "It's strange to say, my second brother has always had absolute trust in that wretched woman, but this time he didn't speak up for her."

Lin Qianqing said, "Since your second brother hasn't spoken up for her, won't your father flay her alive? For committing such an atrocity, she should at least be sent to the Governor's Office, right? Why is she detained at home?"

"How could that be!" Xie Qinyun exclaimed, "My father says that, but after all, family scandals should not be publicized. How can we really send her to the Governor's Office? Besides, although she hasn't been involved with a man, she is after all the daughter of Duke Mu. When Duke Mu passed away, he entrusted Miss Du and that wretched woman to my father's care. Ending up like this, my father has always felt very guilty. He believes it's his fault for not raising them right, and it's because of my second brother that the sisters ended up in such a mess, alas!"

Gu Youyou and Lin Qianqing sighed with pity, commenting that Xie's second son was truly a disaster.

But it wasn't all Xie's second son's fault; Concubine Du was ill-intentioned, and even without Xie's second son, she was not an easy person to get along with. The fact that she could live in harmony with Miss Du was simply because there were no conflicts of interest between them at that time.