Farmhouse 661

Chapter 661: The Coachman Disappeared

Gu Youyou said, "Xiang Chun, if you're really scared, why don't you sit outside? I remember there's a seat behind the carriage driver."

Xiang Chun quickly shook her head, "No no, I'd better stay inside the carriage to serve the two young ladies."

As soon as her words fell, a violent jolt occurred. Whatever the wheel had run over nearly flipped the carriage.

Lin Qianqing, who had been in good spirits playing with the dog, was thrown into a mess by the jolt. She fell flat on her back.

Brushing herself off angrily, she yelled to the outside, "What kind of driving is this? Aren't you looking at the road?"

Although Gu Youyou hadn't fallen from her chair, it had been a close call.

The hair arrangement that Xiang Chun had worked so hard on that morning was now askew.

The person driving the carriage outside was silent for a moment, then a voice came through, "Please hold tight, young ladies, this stretch of road is quite rough."

After saying that, he sped up the horses instead.

Lin Qianqing cursed loudly, "If the road is rough, why are you driving so fast? Do you want to die?"

The coachman outside ignored her and drove the carriage even faster.

Gu Youyou furrowed her brow. She could tell that the voice of the person outside was different from the carriage driver they had before—it wasn't the same person.

Had the carriage driver been replaced just now?

Abao stood up from the ground, its large frame looking imposing inside the carriage, its ears pricked up alertly—it had sensed something too.

"What's wrong?" Seeing Gu Youyou's serious expression, Lin Qianqing realized something was off.

Xiang Chun also squeezed towards Gu Youyou in the corner, warily watching Abao.

Gu Youyou lowered her voice and said to them, "The carriage driver has been switched."

"What...?"

"Shh!" Gu Youyou quickly covered Lin Qianqing's mouth.

"Don't be afraid, let's first figure out what the person outside wants to do."

Just then, Gu Youyou heard a strange rustling above the carriage, followed by something landing on the roof, a very light sound, one that Lin Qianqing and Xiang Chun couldn't hear—only Gu Youyou did.

Gu Youyou looked even more somber, her brow furrowing deeply.

If she wasn't mistaken, there must be someone with superb Qinggong skills on their carriage roof.

This really was something—after being in Beijing for so long, was their first outing destined to encounter trouble?

She wondered if they could arrive at Jinxiu City safely and then make it back to the Lin Residence unscathed.

Knowing her aunt’s temperament, if she learned about this incident, future outings would be even harder to arrange. Yet, Gu Youyou still harbored plans to expand her business in Jinxiu City.

Gu Youyou concentrated on the situation outside the carriage, whereas inside, Abao gradually relaxed and laid back down.

Lin Qianqing looked on in surprise and said, "The dog has lain down, cousin sister, has the original coachman come back?"

Gu Youyou turned her head and indeed saw Abao lazily sleeping on the ground, taking a nap.

Aboa wasn’t any ordinary dog; it was trained rigorously by Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing in the Lingnan Barracks. If there was danger, it wouldn’t possibly be sleeping peacefully on the ground, unless the danger had passed.

But Gu Youyou hadn’t heard any more disturbances from outside, and the coachman had not been switched again.

She said, "No." but she relaxed slightly and settled back into her seat.

"Then what do we do?" Xiang Chun in the corner clutched Gu Youyou’s sleeve tightly, carefully voicing her complaint, "Cousin miss, the dog you’ve raised seems pretty useless. When we’re facing a serious crisis, it actually wants to sleep."

Gu Youyou tugged at the corner of her mouth and said, "It seems we’re not in for a peaceful ride today. Let’s all stop talking now and just sit tight." After finishing her words, she comforted Lin Qianqing again.

Chapter 662: Arrival at Jinxiu City

She had never ventured so far from home, and I feared that the experience might leave her with some psychological scars.

There were no further incidents along the way, and it seemed that we were approaching Jinxiu City when Gu Youyou heard the person atop the carriage alight, and shortly afterward, the coachman’s voice.

"Misses, we’ve arrived at Jinxiu City. Shall we go directly to Manxiu Building, or would you like to look around the city first?"

The three of them had been on edge for the entire journey, especially Xiang Chun. The sound of their safe arrival was like music from heaven.

Lin Qianqing let out a sigh of relief and whispered to Gu Youyou, "Is that our coachman?"

Gu Youyou shook her head with a serious expression and said, "No!"After that, she told the coachman, "Let’s go straight to Manxiu Building."Gu Youyou suspected that their carriage had run into trouble midway through the journey. However, whoever had been behind the incident had not succeeded because Jin Zijin must have arranged for strong protection.The coachman had changed, and there had been someone on the roof of the carriage, yet Abao did not react.This indicated that Abao recognized the scent of these two individuals and felt no danger, hence its calm.It was fortunate that they had Abao with them; without seeing its calm demeanor, Gu Youyou wouldn’t have allowed strangers to lead them on their journey—anything could have happened.Surrounding noises hinted at a lively market.Gu Youyou reached to open the carriage window, but Xiang Chun held her hand back.The girl was still in shock, her face deathly pale."Miss Gu, don’t open the door."Gu Youyou laughed, pushed her hand away, and said, "We’ve already arrived at Jinxiu City, listen, someone is selling candied haws. Don’t worry, we’re safe now."Lin Qianqing was also pale, and Gu Youyou tenderly ruffled her hair, whispering, "Look at you, do you dare to venture out again? With such faint-heartedness, you’d better stay in the safety of Beijing’s large mansions."If this could make her take notice and become a proper woman of the inner court, it would be a good thing for her."No!" Against all expectations, Lin Qianqing immediately objected after hearing Gu Youyou’s words."I don’t want to stay cooped up in a mansion. Life should be exactly like this, filled with unexpected surprises!"Gu Youyou: "Surprises?" But weren’t you afraid?Xiang Chun, her face pale: "Miss, that was... terror, right? My poor miss, you were so frightened that you can’t differentiate between surprise and fright."Gu Youyou: "..."Lin Qianqing: "..." She glared at Xiang Chun and flung the carriage window open.A different kind of air entered the carriage, sparking longing in the heart.Outside the window was a bustling street filled with an endless stream of hawkers and pedestrians, even livelier than Beijing, the capital of Zhuzhao Country.No wonder Jinxiu City was wealthier than Beijing.Lin Qianqing looked out onto the street and let out a clear, crisp laugh."I was frightened this time, but I won’t be the next. Cousin, do you often encounter such events? You seem so calm."Gu Youyou gave a wry smile and said, "Often? Not really, just a few times.""Then who were those people?"Gu Youyou glanced subconsciously in the direction of the driver’s seat and said, "Why don’t you ask the coachman later and find out?"Xiang Chun tugged at Lin Qianqing’s sleeve and said, "Maybe we shouldn’t. They’re probably not good people."Lin Qianqing, however, looked at Gu Youyou and saw her

smiling softly, as if deep in thought.The carriage came to a stop, and the coachman got down first, then invited Gu Youyou and the others to disembark."Misses, we've arrived at Manxiu Building. Please alight from the carriage."

Chapter 663: Miss Du Receives

Gu Youyou lifted the carriage door and descended first.

The man driving the carriage kept his head lowered. That demeanor was very familiar to Gu Youyou—it was like those retired soldiers she had hired from the army with a hefty payment in modern times.

Moreover, there was a sinister and oppressive aura, like the black-clad men in the dark of night.

"Thank you!" Gu Youyou said to him.

The man did not reply, simply waiting on the side with his head lowered.

Gu Youyou then looked towards the top of the carriage, where there was no one left. That person had left before they even entered the city.

Abao sprung out of the carriage and, seeing the unfamiliar carriage driver, did not exhibit its usual wariness towards strangers. It obediently stayed by Gu Youyou's side.

Fearing it would frighten people, Gu Youyou even put a chain around its neck.

Although the chain posed no threat to Abao, as long as others saw that the dog was leashed and seemed safe, it was sufficient.

Xiang Chun and Lin Qianqing emerged from the carriage.

Xiang Chun immediately noticed that the carriage driver was not from Lin Residence and seemed to want to say something, but dared not.

It was Lin Qianqing who asked without any hesitation.

"Driver, how did you come to drive our carriage? Where is our family’s driver?" she asked.

The man clasped hands and said, "Miss Lin, please be at ease, he is unharmed. He will come to meet you when you return."

Lin Qianqing, still curious, asked, "Then what exactly happened on the road?"

"I beg your pardon, but I cannot disclose that," he responded.

After speaking, the carriage driver moved to the other side of the carriage and took it to where the horses were to be fed.

In a low voice, Gu Youyou said to Lin Qianqing, "Let’s not worry about it for now. We can ask our own driver when we get back."

...

Manxiu Building was a beautifully renovated three-story pavilion with carved beams and painted columns, exuding an ancient charm.

In this era, unless intentionally constructed as a tall tower, three stories was the maximum height for an ordinary person’s dwelling.

Miss Du greeted them, exclaiming, "Miss Lin, Doctor Gu, you’ve arrived! Please, come in quickly."

Gu Youyou gestured for Xiang Chun to present the gifts they had prepared. Miss Du accepted them with thanks and handed them to Cuiya to record in the book.

Lin Qianqing glanced at the meticulously renovated Manxiu Building, squinting and smiling, "Miss Du, congratulations! It’s indeed rare to see you so happy with such a smile."

Miss Du said, "You flatter me, Miss Lin. And I must thank you. Without you, there would be no Xintong today. To say that Doctor Gu and Miss Lin have given Xintong a second chance at life would not be an exaggeration."

Gu Youyou clasped her hands and said, "You are too kind, Miss Du. Seeing you so well today truly gratifies me. Today is a joyous day for the opening of your Manxiu Building; let’s go inside quickly."

"Yes, yes, let’s enter the house," Miss Du affirmed and then looked at the large dog led by Gu Youyou, her brow slightly furrowing.

"Doctor Gu, the dog you’ve raised is indeed very large," she commented.

Gu Youyou smiled and said, "It’s just big in size, actually very mild-mannered. Miss Du, I hope you don’t mind me bringing the dog here."

Miss Du looked somewhat intimidated by the dog, but still said stiffly that she did not mind.

Bringing Abao to such an occasion was indeed problematic, but Gu Youyou felt extremely anxious inside, always feeling safer with Abao by her side.

If she were captured, Abao might be able to send a message to Jin Zijin or lead the way.

Miss Du led them first to a guest room on the second floor, offered tea, and said, "I thought you might arrive a bit later, but didn’t expect you so soon. You must have started your day early. This place is very quiet. After the fatigue of travel, would you like to rest a while?"

Chapter 664: The Scumbag Wants to Turn Back

"Alright, Miss Du, please go ahead with your busy schedule, no need to mind us."

Today, she had many guests because Mr. Du had passed away years ago, and although there were no guests from the officialdom, there were quite a few from the business dealings of the Yu Family in the past.

Since she was reopening the Manxiu Building in Jinxiu City, many prominent figures in the city should certainly pay their respects to them.

Lin Qianqing was cracking melon seeds while looking downstairs when she suddenly frowned.

"What's wrong?" Gu Youyou, who was drinking tea, paused and looked towards Lin Qianqing by the window.

"Why is he here?" Lin Qianqing muttered in a low voice.

"Who?" Gu Youyou put down her teacup.

Xiang Chun also went to join in the excitement.

"Who else? The... jerk you were talking about."

"Jerk?" Gu Youyou stood up and went to the window, only to see Young Master Xie getting down from the carriage.

Gu Youyou clapped her hands and chuckled.

"What's this? The jerk wants to come back?"

"Come back?" Lin Qianqing also laughed, "Does he finally realize he did something stupid, losing a pearl and instead picking up a fish-eye as a treasure?"

Gu Youyou said, "That's hard to say, just watch what he wants to do."

Xiang Chun, standing aside, was utterly confused, not understanding the back-and-forth between them.

"Miss, Younger Miss, what are you talking about? What jerk coming back, what about losing pearls for fish-eyes?"

Lin Qianqing turned around, smiled at her, and said, "It would take too long to explain to you, better not ask. Go and see if you can get something for Abao to eat. If it gets hungry, I'm afraid it might scare Miss Du's guests."

Remembering the commotion Abao caused at the Lin Residence the other day, Xiang Chun shuddered and hurried out to check the kitchen.

Gu Youyou hummed in agreement, "Abao doesn't have to eat live food; it eats both raw and cooked meat."

She was just afraid that if Xiang Chun brought a live chicken, and it splattered blood on the spot, it would be too frightening.

Xiang Chun agreed and went downstairs, while Abao continued to lie obediently on the ground.

Although it had grown big and resembled a wolf king, its eyes always appeared innocent and harmless to humans and animals alike.

Downstairs, Young Master Xie had entered the building, and someone informed Miss Du, who eventually came out.

When the two met again, Miss Du seemed very composed.

Young Master Xie felt a mixture of emotions, and his face was filled with a dejected look, the faint smile also very forced.

He instructed his servant to present a congratulatory gift, saying, "Xintong, this is the congratulatory gift my father asked me to bring. Congratulations on the opening success of the Manxiu Building."

Miss Du had someone receive it and said with a smile, "Thank you, Mr. Xie."

Seeing that it was awkward for Young Master Xie to just stand at the doorway, she then said, "Guests are to be welcomed. Since Young Master Xie has brought a gift, please come in for a drink, please!"

The young master seemed hesitant, but Miss Du didn’t want to say anything more.

Following shortly, another carriage stopped, and new guests arrived. Miss Du brushed past Young Master Xie without any pause.

Getting off the carriage was Xie Qinyun, who first greeted Miss Du happily, then glanced at her second brother, who was lingering at the door indecisively, and turned to take the congratulatory gift from the maid’s hands, saying to Miss Du, "This is the congratulatory gift my father asked me to bring. He couldn’t come, so he sent me instead. Just as well, I definitely wanted to come and congratulate you."

"A congratulatory gift from Mr. Xie?"

Holding onto another gift from Mr. Xie, Miss Du looked towards Young Master Xie standing at the doorway and watching her.

Chapter 665: This is Mother’s Friend

Young Master Xie let out a light sigh and whispered, "I was afraid you wouldn’t accept it, so..."

"So it was you who sent it," Miss Du said with a brief look of surprise before continuing indifferently, "Please come in first. Make yourselves at home. I still have guests, so I won’t be able to attend to you."

Xie Qinyun didn’t say much and smiled, "Then you go ahead, I’ll just let myself in."

"Mm," Miss Du hummed softly and then pulled Xie Qinyun aside to whisper, "Miss Lin and Doctor Gu are in the T-shaped room upstairs. If you're looking for them, you should be careful since Doctor Gu has brought her dog along."

"Alright, thank you."

Similarly, Xie Qinyun brushed past Young Master Xie without a word, as if he were a stranger to her.

Miss Du was busy back and forth, attending to the guests, while Young Master Xie never entered the house and stood by the door, watching her bustling figure.

Gu Youyou and Lin Qianqing, standing by the window, found the view uninteresting and turned back to their seats to drink tea.

"Cousin, do you think Miss Du has come to terms with it?"

Gu Youyou pecked at her light tea and said with a faint smile, "What's there to come to terms with? Three-legged toads are hard to find, but aren't there plenty of two-legged men? As long as one is outstanding enough, why fear the lack of men falling over themselves to court her?"

Lin Qianqing had grown accustomed to Gu Youyou's way of thinking, but hearing these progressive thoughts still shocked her somewhat.

Luckily, Xiang Chun, who was sent to get meat for Abao, had not returned, or she might have been scared silly by Gu Youyou's words.

Elsewhere, Xie Qinyun had gone upstairs and knocked on their door.

Lin Qianqing said excitedly, "It must be Qinyun. I'll go open the door."

As she got up to open the door, Gu Youyou said from behind in a faint voice, "How do you know it's not Xiang Chun returning?"

Lin Qianqing’s hand paused mid-air as she turned back to smile at Gu Youyou, "Xiang Chun is a meticulously trained maid. Her knocks should be careful and the volume just right. It wouldn’t sound like this, so urgent and forceful. Whoever it is seems... excited and eager. So I guess it must be Xie Qinyun, and she’s eager to share the gossip from her family with us."

Lin Qianqing’s analysis was on point, and Gu Youyou gave her a thumbs up, saying, "Cousin, you’ve really improved lately. Good analysis."

Living in a large household, a woman needed to be shrewd to survive; perhaps her aunt was right—only a person like her could emerge as a victor in the inner courtyards.

This had nothing to do with her mother’s family status; with her disposition and tactics, even if she were of the same status as the other women raised by her uncle, she would still stand out.

Upon opening the door, indeed, they saw Xie Qinyun and her maid enter happily.

"You all arrived so early! Oh, what a big dog!"

No sooner had she finished greeting Gu Youyou and Lin Qianqing than she saw Abao lying on the floor, looking up at her.

Gu Youyou gently patted Abao’s head and spoke to it softly.

"This Miss Xie here is a friend of mother’s, you can’t scare her."

"Mother?" Xie Qinyun was taken aback by the appellation and promptly sent her maid downstairs to fetch some food, then closed the door and sat as far from Abao as possible.

Lin Qianqing laughed, "Its mother is my cousin."

She herself had been startled when she first heard Gu Youyou introduce Abao that way; her cousin was truly unique in every sense.

Xie Qinyun chuckled awkwardly, "Doctor Gu is really... this is too... unique." She had meant to say that Gu Youyou's behavior with the dog was quite unreasonable.

Chapter 666: The Gossip Brought by Xie Qinyun

She had thought that she and Lin Qianqing were already unlike any of Beijing's young ladies, yet she didn't know that there was someone as peculiar as Gu Youyou in the world.

Gu Youyou said with a light smile, "Miss Xie, don't mind me, I just feel that since I saved its life and raised it, and it once saved my life, Abao is like family to me. This dog has one characteristic, that is its absolute loyalty to its owner, which is incomparable to humans."

Gu Youyou's words struck her, and Xie Qinyun murmured softly, "More loyal than humans, and less fickle. Yes, indeed, this dog is better than some people."

Thinking of her second brother standing at the door, she suddenly laughed. "Let me tell you about the Du Family's concubine, it will amuse everyone."

She knew she was going to talk about these things.

"Hmm, go on!"

Gu Youyou arranged the tea and fruit as the three women gathered around to discuss other people's gossip.

"After Miss Du left, there was no peace at home. The issue of the concubine pushing Miss Du into the lotus pond wasn't resolved yet, and shamelessly, she actually asked my second brother to make her the first wife. When my second brother ignored her and persisted in bringing up the incident with Miss Du, she got so angry that she took it out on the people around her.

Her maid Dongmei, who said something unpleasant while advising her, was beaten by her until she lost two front teeth and was left deaf in one ear.

This maid came with her from the Du Family and was wholeheartedly devoted to her. Such a beating was truly heartbreaking.

She even squawked about selling the maid, specifically sending her off to that despicable Flower Pavilion. Just look at what kind of person she is."

Dongmei was scared by her and ran to seek help from my second brother. She didn't find him but ran into me instead, and I was the one who took her to my courtyard and saved her life.

I intimidated and enticed her, guaranteeing her a place by my side, and only then did she spill all the disgusting things the concubine had done over the years. She even told me a secret."

Xie Qinyun looked secretive, which made Lin Qianqing's curiosity unbearable.

"What secret? Come on, tell us!"

Xie Qinyun lowered her voice and said, "That wretch has been recently taking medicine, so her temper isn't great. She hurt her body a few years back while scheming against Miss Du and fell into the water; it's likely she can't have children in this lifetime. Our family usually doesn't allow the practice of taking concubines; her becoming a concubine was an exception. We certainly can't honor her as the first wife, because then my second brother would have to take another concubine just because she can't have children, right? So I told my father about this."

They had known about the infertility for some time.

Lin Qianqing was stunned, "What did your father say? How could you not know about her not being able to have children? Plus, they've been married for five years now, and she's been monopolizing your second brother without having children. Isn't it because there's something wrong with her?"

Gu Youyou coughed twice and said, "Hey, you two youngsters, be mindful of how you speak; we're still young ladies from noble families."

"Come on, cousin, can’t you drop the act?" Lin Qianqing looked at Gu Youyou with disdain.

Gu Youyou: "..."

Then she turned her head to Xie Qinyun and asked, "Come on, tell us, what’s happening with her now?"

Xie Qinyun was beaming with joy, feeling great as she said, "What use is a woman who can’t have children? Besides, she brought this on herself. Naturally, my father had the clan allow my second brother to divorce her on grounds of the Seven Outs."

Gu Youyou sipped her tea leisurely and said, "Actually, her condition can be cured. With proper care, she could still bear children."

Xie Qinyun exclaimed, "How do you know that?"

Chapter 667: Listed Seven Reasons for Her

Upon realizing that Gu Youyou was a doctor, she added, "Doctor Gu, the illness you treated her for?"

Gu Youyou replied, "Yes, I prescribed the treatment, and I said it could be cured, so naturally it can be cured."

"Oh, how could you treat her illness? She deserves what she got, it’s her own doing."

Gu Youyou simply said, "She paid with silver, I cannot tarnish my own reputation."

Xie Qinyun said, "...but that’s useless, how can we keep such a woman in our family? She must be divorced."

Xie Qinyun smiled proudly as she spoke, "Out of the seven grounds for divorce, she fulfills more than half. First, she has been disobedient to parents. Ever since Auntie Du entered our household, she hasn’t given my father a single day of peace. Every time isn’t he infuriated by her? Second, she has not born children. It has been five years and not even a girl to show for. Even if she is healed, so what? Who can’t give birth? Third, because of jealousy, in the status of a concubine, she monopolized my second brother

and nearly killed his legitimate wife, her own sister, that venomous woman. Fourth, for her gossip, our house has been restless for years, she should have been divorced long ago. If my second brother doesn't divorce her, I will take these charges of divorce to the clan."

Gu Youyou and Lin Qianqing were left dumbstruck, staring at her. Listing the seven grounds for divorce as a younger sister-in-law...is that really okay?

"What does your second brother think? Doesn't he despise Miss Du the most? Why did he come here today?"

Xie Qinyun humphed, "Who knows what's gotten into him? Probably he found out about some past injustices towards Miss Du and now feels guilty."

Xie Qinyun seemed reluctant to discuss Jin Zijin further, and as she spoke, she picked up her teacup, stood up, and walked over to the window to look down below.

A gentle and respectful knocking sounded at the door, indicating that Xiang Chun had returned.

Lin Qianqing stood up to open the door, and Xiang Chun returned accompanied by Xie Qinyun's maid.

Xie Qinyun's maid, Cuizhu, was carrying a plate with some fruit pastries on it.

Whereas Xiang Chun was holding a basket containing the meat she had managed to find.

There was a steamed chicken and a pig's trotter in the basket. She looked at Gu Youyou with apprehension and asked, "Can he eat these?"

Gu Youyou replied, "Of course, hand them to me."

Attracted by the smell, Abao woke up. Gu Youyou took the basket and went with Abao behind a screen to the side, to spare the young ladies any fright.

"Eat well here and be good. The next meal won’t be until evening."

She placed the plate on the ground along with the basket, pacified Abao, and then rejoined the group of girls.

"The Princess has arrived..."

A shrill male voice from downstairs startled the chattering girls in the room.

"The Princess? How did Miss Du manage to invite her?" said Xie Qinyun.

Lin Qianqing added, "Miss Du doesn’t seem to have much of a relationship with the Princess, how could she invite her?"

Gu Youyou, however, stood up directly and went over to the window.

The Princess of Zhuzhao Country, wasn’t she the one who replaced Jin Zijin in being raised by the Emperor’s side?

Jin Zijin had always been investigating who had brought the child to him and convinced the Emperor that she was Xiao Qinqin’s offspring.

Below was a luxurious carriage, surrounded by over a dozen guards wielding swords, as well as serving palace maids.

A gorgeously dressed woman descended from the carriage, for whom a footstool had been promptly placed at the bottom.

The lady was about the same age as Jin Zijin, nearing thirty, but well maintained, appearing no older than in her twenties.

Chapter 668: Princess Places an Order

She wasn’t particularly beautiful, but she had a plump, full-moon face that bespoke wealth and nobility, enhanced by many years of luxurious living in the imperial family, which endowed her with a natural air of aristocracy.

Miss Du welcomed the guest with anxious reverence, having no idea why the Grand Princess would visit.

The Grand Princess looked over Manxiu Building approvingly and nodded, saying, "It just so happens that I am in Jinxiu City today and saw that Manxiu Building is reopening, so I thought I’d take a look."

"Having the Grand Princess visit is the greatest honor for me," Miss Du replied, gesturing an invitation. "Please, Grand Princess, this way."

The Grand Princess glanced indifferently and said, "No need, I am just here to have a look and order a particular embroidery pattern."

After finishing her sentence, the Grand Princess gestured to her maid behind her, who respectfully produced an exquisitely crafted sachet.

She handed it to Miss Du and said, "The Yu Family closed Manxiu Building, claiming the Yu Family was no more and Manxiu’s lineage had ended. I never thought I’d see Manxiu Building reopen today."

She paused, then sighed, "This sachet was an offering from the Yu Family to the palace many years ago, before they shut down. I fell in love with it at first sight, and my father, the Emperor, gifted it to me. It was originally a pair, but when I got married, one was lost by those maids who were packing my belongings, and now I only have one left... So, today I am here with the hope that you can make another one to complete the pair."

Miss Du respectfully took the sachet from the hands of the Grand Princess and said, "I will surely match the other one for the Princess."

"Mhm!" The Grand Princess nodded slightly, and her maid promptly produced a silver note, handing it to Miss Du.

The Grand Princess said, "I know the embroidery work of your Yu Family is precious, so this is the deposit."

Miss Du received the silver note again, her conduct remaining impeccably respectful throughout.

The Grand Princess, quite satisfied, gave her final instructions and then turned to leave.

Watching the retreating party, Miss Du wiped the sweat from her brow.

With the Grand Princess gone, the guests, too, breathed a sigh of relief.

There were whispers about how Miss Du had managed to form a connection with the Grand Princess—it turned out the Grand Princess cherished Manxiu embroidery and wanted to complete her set of sachets.

Regardless, it was a good sign for Miss Du’s Manxiu Building to land an order from the Grand Princess on its opening day.

A guest said, "Congratulations to Miss Du. Under your management, Manxiu Building is sure to regain its former glory."

Upstairs in the "Ding" character room, Lin Qianqing and Xie Qinyun were both quite excited.

"Qianqing, would you say Miss Du’s hardships have finally turned to sweetness?" inquired Xie Qinyun.

Lin Qianqing laughed and replied, "Indeed, they have. Whether the Grand Princess meant to or not, passing by Manxiu Building and personally placing an order on the day of its grand opening is a tremendous good fortune for Miss Du."

Seeing that the fruit on the table was gone, Xie Qinyun directed her maid, Cuizhu, to fetch some more from downstairs.

After Cuizhu left, Lin Qianqing also sent Xiang Chun away.

It wouldn’t do for young ladies like them to gossip about others, and maids like Xiang Chun and Cuizhu were not just any servants; Xiang Chun, in particular, was one entrusted by their grandmother to serve Gu Youyou—perhaps in order to make herself scarce whenever Gu Youyou was up to something secretive.

Xiang Chun replied with affirmation and stood up to exit the room.

With only a few young ladies in the adjacent rooms and a fierce dog watching over them, they wouldn’t come to any harm.

After all the maids had departed, Xie Qinyun spoke giddily, "I can almost see the future Miss Du, the great proprietress. She’ll live a life unlike any of us."

Chapter 669: Faint Future

Seeing Du Xintong yesterday and today, it seemed like both girls were contemplating their own futures. The thought of vying for one man’s affection amongst a group of women in the estate made their expressions turn gloomy.

Lin Qianqing sighed, resting her head on her arm, "Actually, I’m quite envious of her. If I could exchange five years of hardship for a lifetime of peace and freedom, I would be willing."

Xie Qinyun poked her and said, "Get real. Don’t we both know what our futures hold? Unless the imperial power falls or our families decline, even if we die in that estate, we’ll never taste freedom. I’ve come to terms with it, which is why I never fantasize about freedom after marriage. I’m just making the most of my time now, having fun to my heart’s content. Once my father and brother marry me off, I’ll stay put and aim to be the top among those women."

Lin Qianqing seemed to think of something and stared blankly at her. "Do you know who you are most likely to be betrothed to? The eldest Prince or the second Prince?"

"How would I know?" Xie Qinyun spread her hands.

Lin Qianqing swallowed, suddenly looking awkward, and whispered, "Then... perhaps... we might... end up in the same household. Qinyun, if you target the women of the residence, does that include me?"

Xie Qinyun was also taken aback, staring blankly at Lin Qianqing.

This indeed was a problem that she had never considered before.

Could she and Lin Qianqing become enemies competing for favor?

No, no, no...

Xie Qinyun shook her head and said, "Then let's try not to end up in the same cage. I can't promise not to compete with you."

"Then... how can we avoid ending up in the same cage?"

"You..." Xie Qinyun narrowed her eyes and said, "Considering your mother's relationship with the Empress, your marriage to your cousin, the eldest Prince, is likely. In that case, oh dear, I need to go back and talk to my father to see if he has any influence on the Emperor's decision, to get me betrothed to the second Prince."

"The second Prince!" Lin Qianqing gave a wry smile, "The second Prince and the eldest Prince are at odds, and the Emperor only has these two Princes. One of them will be the future Emperor. If we are each married into the residence of a different Prince, then we won't be able to be sisters but will have to become enemies."

These topics were too saddening, and after speaking, everyone in the room fell silent.

However, Gu Youyou's silence was not related to their conversation. She had been thinking about the affairs of the Princess and hadn't been paying attention to what they were discussing.

Lin Qianqing tugged at the corner of Gu Youyou’s clothes and said listlessly, "Cousin, why is my life so hard..."

Gu Youyou came back to her senses and asked softly, "What hardship?"

"About what we were just discussing!"

"What were you discussing?" Gu Youyou was somewhat confused.

Lin Qianqing and Xie Qinyun paused, then jointly complained.

"Were you daydreaming?"

"You’re still clueless after we talked so much about our troubles?"

Well, forgive her; she really was daydreaming.

"I... was just looking at the streets of Jinxiu City. They’re even busier than Beijing and Lingnan!" Gu Youyou laughed awkwardly.

They shot her pairs of resentful eyes. Was watching the bustling scene more interesting than listening to their troubles?

Gu Youyou stuck out her tongue and said, "Alright, alright, go on, what are the youthful troubles of the two misses?"

Lin Qianqing said, "We were discussing our bleak futures."

"Oh, you girls still have futures?" Gu Youyou teased with a chuckle.

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Having said that, two resentful little eyes shot over again, and Gu Youyou gave a few dry laughs before grabbing the few remaining seeds and cracking them open.

"Go on, you were saying, continue."

"If we were to marry into the same palace, how would we live our days in the future?"

"Oh, aren't there two Princes? Not enough to go around?" Gu Youyou teased, unconcerned.

Her demeanor was very calm, but her heart trembled.

Such blooming young ladies might... They might end up even worse off than Miss Du.

"Cousin!" Lin Qianqing bit her lip, looking at her with grievance.

"Can't you be serious for a moment?"

"I am serious, you tell me." Gu Youyou put down the seeds and sat up straight.

She was prepared to listen to just how troubling their worries were.

She was a forward-thinking time traveler, but what of it? In reality, her abilities were limited, and she might not even be able to save herself, let alone others.

With a single imperial edict from the Emperor, even the Jie Residence and Lin Residence could only submit.

Reality was this cruel.

Lin Qianqing said, "If we were to marry into the same Prince Residence, we might become the next Du Xintong and Du Wanqing. If not in the same residence, we would surely become enemies, each serving our own master.

Cousin, you pay no mind to court affairs, so you are unaware that the eldest Prince and the second Prince have long been at loggerheads. One of them must emerge as the victor of the imperial power struggle, the other as the loser. Think about the fate of the third Prince; as the loser, there's only one outcome. His entire family would be executed!"

Gu Youyou nodded in agreement.

"Why agonize so much? Even if you do, what can you do? Can you solve the current predicament? Or are you thinking, speculate on which Prince has better odds of winning, and then align yourself with that one?"

Gu Youyou's words were a wakeup call, causing both to fall into silence.

Indeed, why worry so much? The higher the birth of ladies like them, the less freedom they held.

Whom to marry was never their choice, even if the man was to meet the King of Hell the next day, one would be buried with him if needed, and the other would become a widow.

Gu Youyou, however, pondered even more. If Jin Zijin were to come forward and acknowledge the Emperor, that would mean a competition for the throne among three Princes—now that would be interesting.

If they failed, well, she would be in the same boat.

So she would strive for what she could, and not waste time on what was clearly impossible.

Gu Youyou sighed and said, "If any of you dares to flee from the marriage, giving up your status and escaping from Beijing, I'll be the first to approve and provide full support. But your families, your honors, have long been intertwined with your clans. I know neither of you will choose to flee."

The atmosphere in the room grew tense; Abao had already finished its lunch, grooming its paws neatly and elegantly walked out from behind the screen.

Gu Youyou patted its head, gently stroking it now and again.

Abao’s fur was really beautiful.

Having grown so big, she wondered if it still chased butterflies as it used to.

Lin Qianqing, with lips bitten, sat dejectedly on the stool and said in a low voice, "I really envy Miss Du. Although she suffered, she was able to leave it all behind completely."

Gu Youyou sighed and said, "You see, your grandmother raised you to be this way, hoping you’d be happier. Yet it turns out, a temperament like yours is suited for an unrestrained life in the fields, not for Beijing’s grand mansions. I’m not sure if this is truly good for you or actually a harm...