**Farmhouse 731**

Chapter 731: Husband-subduing Destiny

The Hu Family had agreed, and they were so happy that they hardly knew how to contain their excitement. When the matchmaker came back singing their praises, the matter was almost settled.

Madam Lin was also very happy, just waiting for the Hu Family to come and make the formal proposal.

But she waited and waited to no avail; growing anxious, she sent someone to inquire and heard that Hu Yu Qing, while walking down the street, had been hit on the head by a falling flower pot from a balcony above. He had been in a coma for two or three days, and although he was now awake, due to the severity of his injury, he was confined to his bed, groaning all day long.

Madam Lin's heart sank, and in her own room, she cursed angrily, "Which damned fool didn't secure the flower pot properly? With so many people on the street, look who got hit?"

Her maid, Hen Xiang, busily said, "Isn't that the truth? Master Hu is really unlucky. Out of everyone on the street, why did the pot hit him? Madam, what should we do?"

After some thought, Madam Lin said, "Tomorrow, have someone ask when Master Hu will recover from his head injury."

"Yes, Madam," Hen Xiang responded.

The news Hen Xiang sought came back quickly, and with trepidation, she relayed to Madam Lin, "Madam, the Hu Family has changed their minds... they... they will not be coming to propose."

"What?" Madam Lin leaped up from her chair, agitated.

"Wasn't everything agreed upon? Why not consent?"

Hen Xiang reported the facts as she learned them.

"That's right, the servant heard that the misfortune of young master Yu Qing being struck by the flower pot was strange, and the superstitious old lady of the Hu Family went to Sanqing Temple to divine good and bad omens. But those at Sanqing Temple told the Hu Family's old lady it was a great misfortune, and that misfortune was our family's Miss Youyou.

They said our Miss Youyou is destined to bring bad luck to her husband. Fortunately, the two families were only discussing marriage and had not formally proposed. If they had, then the young master Hu who was hit by the flower pot would never have woken up.

They've already said that compared to life, all the wealth in the world isn't worth mentioning; they wouldn't dare gamble with Hu Yu Qing's life. Therefore, this match... I'm afraid it's fallen through!"

Hen Xiang finished speaking warily, hardly daring to look into Madam Lin's eyes.

Of course, Madam Lin was extremely angry. She preferred to believe that Hu Yu Qing just happened to be hit by the falling flower pot and didn't buy into the talk that Gu Youyou was cursed to bring misfortune to her husband.

She herself felt half-dead; she would believe if someone said she was short-lived, but hard-pressed to harm her husband—how could that be?

It must be that the Hu Family's old lady had consulted an inexperienced priest who made a mistake.

But mistake or not, the truth was that Hu Yu Qing was still bedridden due to the injury from the flower pot, and thus she had to look elsewhere for a suitable match.

Put the Hu Family aside for now.

Gu Youyou inadvertently escaped a disaster, completely oblivious to it all.

Madam Lin said coldly, "Go, send an invitation card to Madam Fan's residence for me."

She refused to believe that she couldn’t get Gu Youyou married off within the year.

...

In the blink of an eye, the day of the Imperial Selection arrived faster than they had imagined. For the better part of the month, apart from one visit to the palace, Gu Youyou hadn’t left the house at all.

Just as Gu Youyou had predicted, with the Imperial Selection imminent, their confinement was lifted early, and Madam Lin did not mention the matter of reading the Women’s Four Books a hundred times.

Lin Qianqing appeared a bit nervous, and Gu Youyou comforted her, "You’ve known this day would come. Whether you stretch your neck or shrink back, it’s the same slice of the blade, so why not boldly stick your neck out?"

Lin Qianqing’s large, clear black and white eyes brimmed with moisture as she looked at Gu Youyou resentfully and said, "Cousin, is that really your idea of comforting someone? I feel like it would have been better if you hadn’t said anything at all."

Chapter 732: Someone Can’t Hold Back Anymore

Gu Youyou said earnestly, "My words are sincere."

Lin Qianqing: "..." There was no way to have a pleasant time anymore.

Madam Lin had prepared the most beautiful clothes, the most exquisite jewelry, and some pieces of silver for Lin Qianqing to take along so that she could conveniently tip the servants.

She repeatedly instructed that after entering the palace, Lin Qianqing must keep her temper in check and seek the Empress if any issue arose. Before the selection, she should avoid conflicts with other families, and so on. After speaking for nearly half an hour, she finally let her get on the carriage and enter the palace with the wet nurses and eunuchs who had come from the palace.

Gu Youyou stood behind Madam Lin and saw her watching the carriage disappear from sight before she shed a face full of tears.

Lin Qianqing was her only daughter, and naturally, Madam Lin hoped that she could live happily according to her own wishes, but alas, many decisions were not hers to make.

Gu Youyou knew that her aunt truly loved Lin Qianqing, but her status and position prevented her from offering too much.

Gu Youyou whispered, "My cousin has always been intelligent. As long as she understands right from wrong, she won't cause any trouble. Aunt, do not worry."

Madam Lin, drying her tears, said, "They have ten days to learn etiquette in the palace. I am just afraid that during these ten days, she might fall into someone's trap. Daya is clever, but she doesn't always apply her cleverness in the right places. If something happens within these ten days, she won't even have a chance at being selected."

Gu Youyou, however, did not think so. As long as the Harem was under the control of the Empress, nothing could happen to Lin Qianqing.

It was purely her aunt's excessive worry from being overly anxious for her daughter.

If she was this distraught now, how much more would she suffer if her daughter entered the Prince's residence and lived poorly in the future.

"Aunt, for the next few days, I'll visit the palace more diligently, so don't worry."

"Ah, right, right!" Madam Lin suddenly realized and said, "You can enter the palace at any time; just visit the palace more often during these days. Daya always feels very uneasy each time she enters the palace. I was at ease when she was in the Empress's palace, but now in Chuxiu Palace, there is a bunch of girls with deep scheming eyes watching her, and I am really not at ease."

Gu Youyou rolled her eyes, feeling that her aunt was almost suffering from paranoia.

With so many girls entering the palace together, why would everyone target your daughter?

Besides, Lin Qianqing had the assertive Xie Qinyun by her side; even the thought made it hard to imagine them at a disadvantage.

Their combination was such that it would be a relief if they didn’t bully others.

...

Yue Rujing was said to have gone to Xining, and without her help, Jin Zijin had become increasingly busy of late.

He was busy enough himself, and now he had to attend to Tian Jizi, who was sometimes befuddled and sometimes lucid.

When Gu Youyou heard about his situation, she could only hug him with compassion, saying, "Why don’t you just leave the business in Jinxiu City alone, I can find an opportunity to go out myself."

But Jin Zijin said, "The imperial selection is about to begin; let’s not add complications. The business of your ready-made clothing store in Jinxiu City is not a big deal; the Store Manager takes care of it. If you wish to manage it personally, I’ll arrange for her to meet you another day, and you can contact her directly afterward."

"That would be best!"

Since Gu Youyou wanted to be a businesswoman making money, she could not be afraid of her aunt finding out.

Such things could not be hidden forever.

Jin Zijin looked at Gu Youyou with some worry and said, "Try to go out less recently and have someone accompany you when you go to the palace."

Seeing him so anxious was rare, and Gu Youyou, sensitive to the change, felt something was amiss and asked, "Did something happen?"

Jin Zijin replied, "My master has come to the capital, and the news of his muddled mind has leaked out. There are some people, I am afraid, who can no longer restrain themselves."

"How could he be so careless?"

Chapter 733: What Illness Will Madam Lu Have?

Jin Zijin bitterly smiled, "There's nothing much about it, it's a matter that can't be concealed forever. When he's confused, he listens to no one, and always sneaking into Beijing is not a solution. Therefore, this time he came, he did not have someone deliberately hide it."

Gu Youyou: "..." She didn't know what to say anymore.

"Alright, I will be careful."

...

On her way to Beijing, Gu Youyou was intercepted by a young woman dressed as a maid.

Recalling Jin Zijin's warning from the night before, she didn't get off the carriage but only opened the carriage window.

"Miss, what do you want?"

The girl was apparently tired from running, panting heavily. It took her a while to catch her breath.

"Doctor Gu, I knew you'd be on this road. The servant... has finally caught up with you."

Gu Youyou: "..."

"Whose maid are you?"

"Oh, Doctor Gu, I am a maid from the Lu Family. I had the audacity to stop your carriage today because there was no other choice." The little maid said in a rushed manner, seemingly remembering something sad, and began to choke up with tears.

Gu Youyou comforted her softly, "Are you talking about General Lu's family?"

"Yes!" The maid hurriedly nodded.

Is it that General Lu who married a tomboy? What was Madam Lu looking for her for? Medical consultation?

Gu Youyou said, "Don't rush, take your time to speak."

The maid slightly bowed, dried her tears and then slowly began to explain.

"My madam has been to Jisheng Hall many times looking for Doctor Gu, but she never found you. We tried to deliver messages to the Lin Family, but each time Madam Lin sent a servant to brush me off and never let me see Doctor Gu. I had no choice but to find out that Doctor Gu goes to the Imperial Palace every few days. So I came here to wait."

After speaking at length without getting to the point, Gu Youyou felt somewhat speechless.

"Then why are you waiting for me?"

The maid said, "Please, you must treat my madam. She's waiting for you in Jisheng Hall right now, Doctor Gu. I've heard that only you might be able to cure her illness... you must go, please..."

Gu Youyou, busy on her way to the Imperial Palace, could have ignored the maid or waited until she returned to treat Madam Lu at Jisheng Hall.

But driven by a curious gossiping heart, she couldn’t help but want to see for herself. What exactly was wrong with Madam Lu?

Whenever Madam Lu stepped out, her stunning presence naturally brought gossip along. It wasn’t until Gu Youyou arrived at Jisheng Hall that she learned Madam Lu had been blocking the entrance for several days, attracting many onlookers and bringing much business to the hall.

She was almost like a living billboard.

The crowd was buzzing with speculation. Madam Lu, with a physique stronger than most men’s, what illness could she possibly have that only Doctor Gu could treat?

Yet every time she came, her brisk and effortless demeanor didn’t seem to suggest she was ill at all.

As Gu Youyou descended from her carriage, everyone was exceedingly curious.

"Hey, hey, Doctor Gu is here."

"Oh my, Doctor Gu has finally arrived."

Gu Youyou: "..." She too wanted to be a responsible doctor, and despised her own actions, akin to only casting nets and not fishing.

"Doctor Gu, what exactly is wrong with Madam Lu?"

Gu Youyou gave the onlooker a cold glance and said, "I haven’t examined her yet, how would I know?"

Although Gu Youyou had come out of curiosity, she did not appreciate others joking about her patients.

Once inside Jisheng Hall, Gu Youyou said to Shopkeeper Hu, "Please disperse those who are not here for treatment, so as not to disturb the patients."

Shopkeeper Hu, having not seen Gu Youyou for many days, had tears streaming down his face once he saw her again.

Chapter 734: She Looks Like This Because Someone Harmed Her

"Ah, Madam Lu is waiting in consultation room three, Doctor Gu, please hurry."

Gu Youyou, leading Madam Lu's maid, pushed the door open and instantly saw the tall and burly Madam Lu. To her surprise, the consultation room was not solely occupied by Madam Lu, but also her son, Lu Tianning!

In her memory, this young master Lu didn't much care for his mother's manly presence, so why was he accompanying Madam Lu to see a doctor today?

"Doctor Gu!" Madam Lu rose to her feet with the aid of her son, offering a polite greeting.

Gu Youyou hurriedly returned the gesture.

They were officials, she was a commoner. Their greeting was a sign of respect.

Her reciprocation was both proper and respectful.

"Madam Lu, please take a seat," Gu Youyou invited her to sit opposite the consultation desk.

Looking at Madam Lu's appearance, she indeed seemed rather rough and robust for a woman. Yet today, Madam Lu appeared more forlorn, bearing the sorrows unique to womanhood, and less of her usual brash and abrasive energy.

It left her wondering what illness could make her look so gaunt.

"Madam Lu, where do you feel discomfort?"

Seeing her hesitant to speak, Gu Youyou had to ask.

Madam Lu dabbed at the corner of her eye with a handkerchief and sighed softly, "I know outsiders look down on me for my appearance, thinking I don’t resemble a woman, that I’m crude and ugly."

Gu Youyou said nothing, feeling awkward.

What was she to say? The truth would be hurtful, which wasn’t the conduct of a doctor. But to lie... facing Madam Lu in such a state, she truly felt that a falsehood would be more hurtful than the truth, too insincere.

After some thought, she offered some words of consolation, "Physical beauty is fleeting, but the beauty of the soul endures. Our appearance is determined by our parents, and we cannot change that, but the beauty of the heart is within our control. Madam Lu, you needn’t concern yourself with the opinions of others."

"No, that’s not it!" Madam Lu was immensely agitated, and had her son not restrained her, she might have stood up in her agitation.

Gu Youyou certainly hadn’t expected her words of comfort to have such an effect.

It was as if she had been injected with a stimulant.

"Mother, don’t get agitated, take your time," the young master Lu said soothingly.

Then he turned to Gu Youyou, "This matter has deeply hurt my mother, Doctor Gu, please don’t take it to heart."

Yes, yes, I won’t take it to heart.

"What exactly is the matter?"

That was the key question.

Madam Lu gradually calmed down and began to share her story.

"Doctor Gu, one’s appearance may be given by birth or marred by others... My current state is the result of someone’s doing..."

As she spoke of her physical condition, Madam Lu was overwhelmed with endless bitter tears.

As a child, Madam Lu wasn’t as astonishingly tall and sturdy as she was now; she was a normal child, just growing slightly faster and taller than her peers.

Had she grown normally, she would have become a tall and slender girl, not like the mannish figure with broad shoulders and coarse features she presented now, even growing facial hair, chest hair, and leg hair that needed to be constantly scraped off.

The reason was that Madam Lu had been betrothed to General Lu since childhood. According to ancient customs of the wealthy, the bride was to bring along a dowry, which included several beautiful maids. These maids could potentially become the husband’s concubines later on.

This vexing tradition had doomed Madam Lu for life.

Those maids meant to accompany the young mistress in marriage were cultured from a young age, raised at her side to ensure they got along well in advance.



The parents at home would also secretly observe, only those who were absolutely obedient to the young lady would accompany her in marriage.

Among Madam Lu’s bridal maids, there was one who came from a fallen healer of the Dao Family.

This girl's family had been healers for generations, but they were not purely devoted to saving people; they also enjoyed researching some abnormal things. After harming someone, their home was raided by the Governor's Office, leading to the girl's displacement. Later, she was bought by Madam Lu's parents.

She knew some medical skills, was clever and adaptable, and quickly gained the trust of Madam Lu's parents. Thus, she became one of the reserve maids for the bridal entourage.

Facing Lu Family's future matriarch, the restless heart within her began to stir.

She started secretly poisoning Madam Lu according to a harmful family recipe. Madam Lu was in her adolescence when poisoned. Eating that girl's poison, she began to grow more and more unusual, increasingly resembling a tomboy, even developing a beard and chest hair, features a woman should not have.

Her stature, too, grew unusually tall, towering nearly above the heavens from an already slender frame.

By the day she married General Lu, she had already taken on the look of a tomboy.

And among those bridal maids, one was already one of General Lu's concubines.

Youyou listened intently, sighing deeply.

She was also quite curious about that concubine.

If her guess was correct, the medicine given to Madam Lu was likely rich in male hormones.

No wonder she seemed to have an excess of male hormones.

That Madam Lu could still give birth to a son under such circumstances was indeed a miracle.

Feeling intrigued, Youyou asked, "Do you have that medicine?"

She wanted to see just what kind of prescription could be so powerful.

"Yes, this one," Young Master Lu produced a packet of medicine, some pills.

Youyou: "..."

She did not believe she could guess all the ingredients of the pills just by looking at them.

"Is it possible to obtain the prescription?" Youyou inquired further.

Madam Lu said, "That woman is currently locked in the firewood room. If Doctor Gu wants the prescription, I will definitely obtain it for you. But she's quite stubborn; you'll have to wait a few more days!"

Youyou calmly replied, "There's no rush, let me first examine Madam Lu's condition."

"Of course, thank you, Doctor Gu!"

Youyou smiled faintly and said, "This is what I should do as a doctor, Madam Lu needn't be so formal. However, I'll need Young Master Lu to step outside and wait for a while first."

Lu Tianning nodded, reassured Madam Lu not to worry, then left the room and closed the door.

After examining her, Youyou mostly confirmed that Madam Lu's condition was indeed due to an excess of male hormones, exacerbated by taking medicine during her developmental years, which led to her current appearance.

Now in her forties, her body had fully developed, and her bones had set. Even if the hormones in her body returned to normal, it was impossible to revert to her previous form.

Youyou had to share this truth with her.

"I will prescribe some medicine to help regulate your body. This medicine may need to be taken for quite a long time, so you must be prepared."

Madam Lu, reminded of her plight, wept and said, "Okay, I will take the medicine as prescribed by Doctor Gu."

"Hmm!" Youyou started writing the prescription and added, "Even if your body returns to a normal state, your appearance will not revert to its original form. However, once you are healthier, you won't have to shave as often, your voice will no longer be rough like a man's, your temperament will become more feminine, and your facial contours will gradually soften."

Chapter 736: The Legendary Flame Pool

Madam Lu sighed deeply, wiped away her tears, and said, "It's been so many years, I've gotten used to looking this way. As long as there's nothing wrong with my body, I'm fine. I'm just afraid that the poison that woman gave me was not only meant to disfigure me but also to take my life."

If one's body is in a state of hormonal imbalance over a long period, indeed, they wouldn't live as long as normal people. The hermaphrodites don't live long, do they?

Of course, the poison that woman gave Madam Lu was certainly more complex than ordinary hormones.

She was indeed talented, but what a pity she didn't use it in the right place.

"Take this medicine for a few days, then come back to see me."

Gu Youyou handed the prescription to Madam Lu and then left Jisheng Hall to take the carriage back to the Imperial Palace.

...

With the noble ladies entering the palace, the rules had been tightened these past few days. The Cui family, fearing that Cui Yingying would cause trouble while with Princess Jiujiu, had taken her back home.

She hadn’t come to lessons for several days now.

Princess Jin Liuying found it boring to study alone, but fortunately, Gu Youyou had arrived.

As the class for the Four Books for Women began, she happily took Gu Youyou’s hand and whispered to her, "All the noble daughters have entered the palace. These days, all the Madams are focused on the noble daughters in Chuxiu Palace, so no one is paying attention to my Liuying Hall. Master, don’t you like Fire Lotus? Should Jiujiu take you there?"

Today offered the chance to see the Fire Lotus in Flame Pool, so Gu Youyou was overjoyed for a moment.

She was about to agree when she suddenly felt a bit worried.

What would happen if she were caught?

The Princess could claim her young age as ignorance, but what about her?

"Master, what are you thinking about? I’ve sent the palace maids away, let’s hurry! There’s no one there. We’ll just sneak in and sneak out. I went there secretly a few days ago," Princess Jiujiu urged, seeing that Gu Youyou hadn’t replied.

Gu Youyou tapped her forehead and laughed, "Alright, let’s go."

No need to be scared, staying in ancient times had made her increasingly timid.

If anything happened, she'd just say she didn't know that the Fire Lotus was off-limits. She had done a favor for the Empress Dowager, after all. Just taking a quick look, she couldn't believe the always filial Emperor would refuse to save her face.

Princess Jiujiu led Gu Youyou through the vast Imperial Palace, past several halls and gardens, before they finally saw a pool of fiery red.

From afar, the legendary Flame Pool was reflecting red against half the sky.

The surroundings were very quiet, with no people around, not even the sound of birds could be heard.

Looking at the pool of fiery red, Princess Jiujiu exclaimed with joy, "There it is! Master, let's hurry."

Only when they reached the edge of the Flame Pool did Gu Youyou get a clear view of the Fire Lotus in its true form.

Yue Rujing once brought Gu Youyou a Fire Lotus, but by the time it reached her hands, it had withered. Apart from a dark red clump, its original appearance was indiscernible.

The leaves of the Fire Lotus here were large, like jade lotus leaves, forming big round pads. The leaves were green, but the stems were red.

The blossoms were red as fire and slightly smaller than the usual lotus flowers. The pond, where they were planted, was as red as blood. It constantly bubbled with bubbles of various sizes as if the blood was boiling, which was oddly enchanting and yet repulsive.

How did Jin Zijin ever get poisoned by this Fire Lotus?

"It's so beautiful!" Princess Jiujiu leaned over the edge of the pond and marveled.

Gu Youyou: "..." She couldn't help but disagree.

Perhaps, if picked and examined separately, the Fire Lotus might be beautiful.

But in a pool of blood water, it didn’t seem beautiful whatsoever.

Chapter 737: Captured

Gu Youyou took out a small bottle, lifted her skirt, and bent down to collect some pond water to take home for further research.

She speculated that besides the unique species, the growth of the lotuses was probably related to the water.

"Stop!"

Just as Gu Youyou had filled the water, she heard the commanding voice of a middle-aged man.

Startled, the bottle slipped from her hands and fell into the pond with a plop.

She hurriedly turned around and saw a man dressed in a robe embroidered with dragon patterns.

Even a fool would recognize that this man was the Emperor of Zhuzhao Country, the adoptive father of Zijin.

Gu Youyou quickly knelt down with Princess Jiujiu to pay her respects.

"This commoner greets Your Majesty."

"Jiujiu greets Father Emperor!"

Jin Moning’s gaze fell on Gu Youyou, yet he gestured for Princess Jiujiu to come over.

Princess Jiujiu stood up, gave Gu Youyou a worried look, and walked over to Jin Moning.

Gu Youyou pressed her lips together, keeping her head down, not daring to look up at the Emperor, wondering how to explain the situation.

She wasn’t foolish; the absence of even a single bird around the lotus pond made her realize this place was most likely forbidden territory.

The lack of guards meant that everyone in the Imperial Palace knew that this place was off-limits.

And here she was, not only had she come here, but she had also led the Princess and even stolen the pond water, getting caught in the act.

Fortunately, the evidence had fallen into the pond.

The Emperor watched Gu Youyou for a long time without saying a word. He didn’t seem angry, but it was unclear what he was thinking.

"Father Emperor!" Princess Jiujiu called to him softly, looking up.

The Emperor looked down at Princess Jiujiu, then returned his gaze to Gu Youyou and finally spoke sternly, "You’re quite bold, coming here. Do you not know that this is a forbidden area that one must not enter?"

Gu Youyou hurriedly responded, "This commoner... truly did not know."

After all, she was determined to play dumb.

The Emperor snorted coldly and said, "A good ’truly did not know,’ but you should know that in this Imperial Palace, ignorance does not equate to innocence. Ignorance... often leads to a quicker death than knowledge."

Gu Youyou was startled but kept her head down and did not dare to speak.

Princess Jiujiu, concerned for Gu Youyou, said to the Emperor, "Father Emperor, it was I who brought my teacher here. If you wish to punish someone, punish Jiujiu."

The Emperor looked at Princess Jiujiu, and there was not a hint of a different color in those deep eyes. Without a word, he took Princess Jiujiu and left the Flame Pool.

As the sound of footsteps faded, Gu Youyou breathed a sigh of relief, switched from kneeling to sitting, and plopped down on the ground.

There were too many unexplained deaths in the Imperial Palace. This time it was her bad luck. To be caught by anyone else would have been better, yet it was the Emperor who had caught her.

Had it been someone else, she could have sought the protection of the Empress Dowager, at worst bringing the matter before her.

Gu Youyou looked around; there was no one nearby. After the Emperor took Princess Jiujiu away, he had left her alone, and she didn't know what to make of it.

She guessed that perhaps this incident was over.

Since there was no one around, she decided not to care anymore, planning to head back to Liuying Hall and then find a way to visit Lin Qianqing at Chuxiu Palace.

Gu Youyou stood up, patted the dust off her body, and walked away, but she hadn't gone far when she saw several eunuchs. The leader pointed at Gu Youyou and said, "Catch her."

Gu Youyou: "..."

Without another word, the following eunuchs grabbed Gu Youyou.

Just as Gu Youyou was about to ask something, the damn eunuch stuffed a piece of white cloth into her mouth.

"Doctor Gu, whatever you have to say, you can tell it to the Emperor later," said the eunuch.

Had the Emperor sent the eunuchs to capture her? Wasn't the incident from earlier resolved? This truly frightened her.

Chapter 738: You Did Not Tell the Truth

Why would the Emperor do this? He could have just taken her away with him earlier; now he sends someone to capture her... does he intend to deal with her secretly?

Is that really necessary? After all, my research on the Fire Lotus was for the sake of saving your son.

Gu Youyou was led by several eunuchs into a palace. Before entering, she glanced at the name of the palace, Baohe Palace; that was where the Emperor prepared his appearance before court sessions. Why would they bring her here?

In the Baohe Palace, several palace maidens and eunuchs stood on either side. The eunuchs who had captured Gu Youyou pushed her to the ground and then reached out to remove the white cloth from her mouth.

The Emperor sat on a chair above, and Youyou didn't see the Ninth Princess who had left with the Emperor.

"So you are the doctor from Jisheng Hall, the one who treated the Empress Dowager's leg disease, Gu Youyou?"

Gu Youyou didn't understand what the Emperor meant and could only honestly respond, "Answering His Majesty, it is indeed this commoner."

"Why did you go to the Flame Pool?"

Without looking up at the Emperor’s expression, Gu Youyou could tell from his voice that it was authoritative and cold.

She felt a bad premonition and inadvertently placed her hand on her waist.

If the Emperor truly intended to kill her over that lotus pool, perhaps the Qingluan Jade Pendant could save her life.

If she wasn’t wrong, that jade belonged to Jin Zijin’s mother, Xiao Qinqin, and the person who had given it to her was the very man before her eyes.

"This commoner..."

"I hope you are telling the truth."

Just as Gu Youyou was about to feign ignorance again, the Emperor interrupted her with a statement.

She bit her lip and, after weighing the pros and cons, felt that pretending not to understand might not fool him any longer.

She said, "This commoner has been frail since childhood, possessing a severe chill within her body. Accidentally, I heard the Ninth Princess mention a red lotus in the Imperial Palace that resembled fire, so I guessed that this red lotus might be the Fire Lotus with the effect of expelling cold and dampness. Hence, I beseeched the Ninth Princess to take this commoner to see it. But unexpectedly, just as we arrived there, we were seen by His Majesty."

"Were you trying to steal the Fire Lotus to make medicine for yourself?"

Gu Youyou hurriedly said, "No, no, this commoner wouldn’t dare to steal the Fire Lotus; after seeing that pond, my interest in the Fire Lotus dissipated. It was the pond water... it was very special, and I only wanted to take some back to study."

That was indeed the truth; the Emperor had seen her filling a bottle with water, not picking the Fire Lotus.

After hearing this, the Emperor remained silent for a long time, and Gu Youyou couldn’t help but lift her head for a quick glance.

The Emperor wasn’t looking at her; instead, he rested his elbow on the armchair, his gaze seemingly fixed elsewhere in thought.

After a while, he looked back at Gu Youyou again.

Gu Youyou caught the Emperor’s gaze and quickly lowered her head again.

It was said that emperors liked others to submit to them and were capricious in their emotions.

Even the State Preceptor had to fabricate some charge when killing someone, to have a pretext.

In this world, the Emperor was the only person who didn’t need a reason to kill.

"Lift your head and speak to me," said the Emperor.

Unsure of his intentions, Gu Youyou boldly lifted her head.

"You haven’t told the truth," said the Emperor lightly as he looked at Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou was shocked into stupefaction, increasingly feeling that it was impossible to deceive the Emperor.

He was nearly fifty years old, an age that in this era could be considered elderly.

With gray at the temples and the relaxed skin of old age on his face, he appeared much older in contrast to the Empress.

Surely someone of his pampered stature shouldn’t appear so aged.

The Emperor’s eyes, sharp as eagles’, stared at Gu Youyou, making her feel very uneasy.

"Your Majesty, this commoner..."

Chapter 739: Let the Master Pretend to be Sick

"This is your last chance," the Emperor reminded her.

Gu Youyou clenched her teeth and had no choice but to tell the truth.

"The water I took from the Flame Pool wasn’t for myself but for... a friend of mine who suffered from the Fire Lotus Flame Poison, beyond the help of any medicine or magic. In order to formulate an antidote for him, I had to take the risk to visit the Flame Pool to observe the environment where the Fire Lotus grows, perhaps to find a way to detoxify. This is the truth, and if the Emperor still doesn’t believe me, then there’s nothing more I can do," she said.

...

In the Sanqing Temple, Jin Zijin removed a piece of paper from the leg of a white pigeon and then released the bird into the sky.

Upon opening the note, his body instantly stiffened.

The young Taoist beside him, seeing his worried expression, asked, "Big brother, what’s wrong?"

Jin Zijin did not speak but turned and headed toward Qianyuan Hall.

He didn’t see Tian Jizi, only Yixi tidying up a bookshelf that Tian Jizi had left in a mess.

"Where is Master?" Jin Zijin asked anxiously.

Yixi looked around and said, "Master was just here a moment ago, he must have... probably gone out."

Jin Zijin’s expression darkened, and he pursed his lips tightly.

Yixi asked, "What’s wrong? Big brother, has something happened?"

Jin Zijin said, "You need to go to the Imperial Palace right now to see the Emperor and tell him Master is sick... No, I’ll go myself. You find Master as soon as possible, don’t let him wander off, and it would be best if you could coax him to sleep."

Yixi stood there dumbfounded. Master was fine, so how had he suddenly become sick?

But before he could express his confusion, Jin Zijin had already left swiftly.

Grabbing his head in puzzlement, he muttered, "What is going on, asking Master to feign illness?"

Yixi shook his head, not understanding.

Jin Zijin rode into the city and entered the palace, all in less than half an hour.

He did not want to see Jin Moning, but since Yue Rujing hadn’t returned yet, it seemed he had no choice but to meet him now.

In the Imperial Palace, Jin Zijin submitted a note, which was quickly delivered to the Emperor’s hands in Taihe Hall. After looking at it, the Emperor nodded slightly, and the eunuch who brought the note respectfully invited Jin Zijin to enter.

Gu Youyou sat cross-legged opposite the Emperor, her heart in turmoil, without any sense of stability.

She couldn’t figure out the strange Emperor’s intentions. It was clear that he intended to pursue the matter of her stealing water from the Flame Pool, yet he asked her to accompany him in a game of chess.

The game wasn’t the elegant Go that literati took pride in, but the fierce Xiangqi that marked the boundaries of Chu and Han.

In today’s game, Gu Youyou was seriously off her game, losing horribly time and time again.

Her heart wasn’t on the chessboard at all, and she simply couldn’t fathom the Emperor’s reasoning.

She had told the truth, and he didn’t say a word or continue to inquire, just brought out the chess set and asked her to play against him.

And he actually knew she played Xiangqi, not Go.

Gu Youyou sighed and said, "Your Majesty’s skill in chess is superb, and I’ve lost again."

The Emperor sat quietly, staring at the chessboard.

His eyes resembled those of both Jin Zijin and Jin Ziyuan.

Gu Youyou guessed that probably all the males in their family had such eyes.

"Let’s play another round." After a quiet moment, Gu Youyou heard this response.

Gu Youyou was speechless, having already played several rounds.

She had never been allowed to lose consecutively like this in her life.

Helplessly, without the right to object, she could only reset the pieces and start another game.

Jin Zijin followed the eunuch who was leading the way towards Baohe Palace, walking briskly due to his urgent journey, which made his breathing uneven.

Chapter 740: Father and Son Meet

He had been worried that Gu Youyou might meet with some mishap, and had never expected that upon entering Taihe Hall, he would witness such a scene.

Gu Youyou was kneeling opposite the Emperor, staring at a chessboard with a face full of worry, yet her mind didn’t seem to be on the game. Hearing the noise behind her, she immediately turned to look.

The moment she saw Jin Zijin, she was both shocked and overjoyed.

Shocked because he had actually come; elated because he had finally come to rescue her.

She really didn’t want to continue playing this inexplicable chess game with her so-called father.

After his initial surprise, Jin Zijin nonetheless bowed respectfully to the Emperor, but as the eldest disciple of Tianzong, he did not have to kneel like everyone else.

Finally, the Emperor stood up from beside the chessboard and walked toward Jin Zijin.

"Dispense with the formalities. What brings the Master here?"

Jin Zijin glanced at Gu Youyou and said, "I come on behalf of my master."

"Your master, the Heavenly Master Tian Jizi?" the Emperor asked, surprised.

"Indeed, my master is presently in Sanqing Temple."

Gu Youyou observed the two men from the side.

From their expressions, she couldn’t discern the abnormality she was hoping for.

He was a Taoist of Tianzong.

He was the supreme Emperor of Zhuzhao Country.

Their conversation seemed ordinary, like that between two strangers.

Seeing Jin Zijin’s anxious arrival, Gu Youyou even speculated that the strange Emperor had detained her to play chess simply to lure Jin Zijin here.

Perhaps he also knew that the daughter he doted on was not his own flesh and blood, but someone else.

Yet, the way the Emperor looked at Jin Zijin was like what she’d seen on television: a king meeting a somewhat skilled swindler Taoist, with a mix of reverence and caution.

Maybe Gu Youyou was overthinking it.

The Emperor had already ignored Gu Youyou, inviting Jin Zijin to sit aside, immediately instructing a palace maiden to serve tea.

The indifference on his face was gone, replaced by uncontrollable delight.

"The Heavenly Master actually came to Sanqing Temple? Alas, it must have been over a decade since the Heavenly Master last visited. Since the Heavenly Master has come, naturally, I must visit him personally. Master, how has the Heavenly Master been feeling lately?"

Jin Zijin cupped his hands and said, "Zijin is here precisely because of my master's health! My master has been feeling unwell recently, and my junior brother is not in the capital. Knowing that Doctor Gu possesses remarkable medical skills, I rushed to Jisheng Hall to request Doctor Gu to treat my master. Unexpectedly, the Shopkeeper informed me that Doctor Gu was not in Jisheng Hall, but at the Imperial Palace at this time."

He looked at Gu Youyou and continued, "Zijin had no choice but to seek an audience with the Emperor, and I certainly didn't expect such a coincidence – Doctor Gu just happens to be here with the Emperor."

The Emperor also followed Jin Zijin's gaze toward Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou pursed her lips, smiled bitterly, and her smile was full of woe.

The Emperor chuckled, "In that case, please take Doctor Gu with you as soon as possible to treat the Heavenly Master. The Heavenly Master is getting on in years and cannot afford to wait."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, I shall take my leave," Jin Zijin stood, and bowed deeply to the Emperor.

He gave Gu Youyou a look and then followed an eunuch out.

Gu Youyou hurriedly stood up, asked to be excused from the Emperor, and quickly followed Jin Zijin.

The Emperor stroked his beard and gazed at the empty doorway for a long time without speaking.

The Emperor's personal eunuch stepped forward and said, "Your Majesty, seeing the bearing of this Master Jin, he seems somewhat better than Xuanzong's Huo Li. Perhaps he could be the next State Preceptor..."

The Emperor raised his hand to stop him from continuing and said, "The affairs of the Dao Family must not be discussed rashly."

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