Farmhouse 781

Chapter 781: The Peach Blossom You Attracted

Having said that, she slipped away even faster than a rabbit.

Gu Youyou: "..."

Lun Tong turned to Gu Youyou with a face full of admiration and clicked his tongue, "I really didn't expect that after leaving Qi Mountain for over twenty years, I would be able to return. This place, Qi Mountain, really produces extraordinary women. Come on, young lady, tell me your story."

Gu Youyou stood there dumbfounded, feeling that this Big Sister Lun was quite odd.

She put the book away and said indifferently, "Big Sister Lun, I don't think I have anything to say to you. Since you are a guest of Qi Mountain, you may as well go and find those Taoists. I won't be seeing you off."

Gu Youyou issued an order to see the guest out and turned to leave.

Those Taoists really were too much; she should talk to Jin Zijin about this tomorrow. They can't be allowed to trouble her.

When did she have time to tell Big Sister stories?

What if everyone started asking her to tell stories tomorrow?

"Hey, wait a moment!" Lun Tong ignored the displeasure on Gu Youyou's face and chased after her, saying, "Miss Gu, please, take your time. I won't let you lose out on this deal. You tell me a story, and I'll tell you one as well. We can exchange stories."

Gu Youyou: "..." Who wants to listen to your story? Do I look idle to you?

"Big Sister Lun, I’m truly sorry, but I have no interest in your story."

Lun Tong chuckled and said, "How do you know you’re not interested if you haven’t listened to it? Just give it a listen, or tell me what kind of story you want to hear, and I can tell you that as well."

Gu Youyou took a deep breath and held back her temper, calling out loudly for Xiang Chun.

"Xiang Chun, come out and see the guest off."

Xiang Chun hurriedly dropped what she was doing and ran out. When she saw the beautiful middle-aged woman, she was also slightly taken aback. Being a well-mannered maid, she bowed and gestured for Lun Tong to leave.

"Madam, please."

"Hey, wait a minute, won’t you reconsider? I have all kinds of stories."

Gu Youyou ignored her and turned to enter her laboratory.

Seeing that she not only failed to fulfill the guest’s departure but that Big Sister Lun seemed even ready to follow into the house, Xiang Chun couldn’t help but set her face sternly and lift her chin as she said coldly, "Madam, this isn’t appropriate. Please leave!"

"What do you know, you little maid?" Lun Tong glanced at Xiang Chun with great disapproval,

Xiang Chun was so angry her eyes went wide, and throwing aside all notions of demeanor, she began to push Lun Tong out toward the courtyard.

"Off you go, my mistress has already issued an order for you to leave, you need to get out now, or I will call for help."

"Hey, little maid, let go of me."

"Are you forcing me to pick up a broom?"

"You ill-mannered little maid, what kind of way is that to speak?"

"I've never seen a so-called well-mannered person behave like you, insisting on entering when you're not allowed. Didn't you see the master of the house has already ordered you to leave? Hurry up and get out."

Xiang Chun, combining dragging and pushing, shooed Lun Tong out and promptly shut the door.

From outside the door, Lun Tong's reluctant voice could still be heard.

Searcy stepped out to take a look, then turned back into the 'laboratory' with a laugh, looking at Gu Youyou.

That smile was incredibly eerie, and Gu Youyou found it hard to ignore.

She stood up, crossed her arms over her chest, and asked, "What's so funny?"

"You really do attract admirers!" she said.

Attract admirers?

Gu Youyou choked, shifting her gaze outside in disbelief, "You mean Big Sister Lun?"

Searcy laughed, "Yes, didn't you realize he's a man in women's clothing?"

Gu Youyou was stunned.

That charming and mature Big Sister was a man in disguise?

Chapter 782: The Man Who Changed His Appearance

People who can impersonate that well are not non-existent, and Gu Youyou happened to know one.

Yue Rujing brought over Yi Yan who had undergone a disguise, and gosh, if the young girl dressed as a boy remained silent, she couldn't tell at all.

Even had an Adam's apple.

"How did you figure it out?" Gu Youyou looked at Searcy suspiciously.

Searcy lifted her own hand, striking a very affected and delicate orchid finger pose, and said, "Look at his hands."

"Hands?"

Gu Youyou thought to herself that the guy was a weirdo; she didn't really pay much attention to him.

"Yes, his hands. To look more like a delicate lady, those lifted fingers were just too exaggerated."

Er...

Hehe...

Gu Youyou was left with nothing but a dry laugh.

Weirdos are common every year, but this year there's just an abundance.

Yet Searcy, a poison doctor engrossed in studying various poisons, also had such astonishing observational skills, which she found quite unexpected.

Searcy leaned closer to Gu Youyou, sizing her up and laughing with an increasingly inscrutable smile.

Gu Youyou got the chills and said, "Stop, don’t look at me like that, you’re giving me the ’little mouse’ stare."

Searcy curved her lips into a smile and said, "Lately I’ve discovered that you’re even more interesting than those mice."

Gu Youyou: "..."

"Even if Tianzong’s senior-most disciple can’t become the State Preceptor, he is still the next Heavenly Master. A person like him would never marry you, so if you’re having an affair with him, are you planning on sneaking around for a lifetime?"

Spit-take...

She might as well just die.

Gu Youyou raised the large needle in her hand, threatening, "If you dare to spread this, I’ll stick you with this needle."

Searcy was somewhat cowed by Gu Youyou’s large needle.

"Relax, I’m not that bored." Searcy spread her hands and said, "Maybe we should take a look at the recent research results."

...

The man disguised as a woman, that freak Lun Tong, was of course not so easily driven away. He disrupted Gu Youyou's work daily by coming over to create a ruckus.

Gu Youyou had Xiang Chun summon Qingyang and said, "Here in Qi Mountain, it's either that 'woman' outside or me; if she stays, I can't. You figure it out."

Qingyang's mouth twitched with difficulty, "This... I can't decide on to do."

Gu Youyou raised her eyebrows and asked, "Who can make the decision?"

"She's an old friend of the master. All of us disciples must give her some respect. If we were to drive her away, I'm afraid even the master would find it difficult to speak up."

Gu Youyou: "..." Damn, this freak is someone with connections.

After thinking it over, Gu Youyou added, "Then pass a message to your senior brother, let him solve this."

"Oh, okay!"

"Hey, wait a minute."

"Do you need anything else?"

Gu Youyou said, "I'll write him a letter. Just deliver the letter to him. Once he reads it, he will naturally know what to do."

Gu Youyou went back to her room, and with a flourish of her pen, she quickly produced a letter.

After drying the ink, she put the letter in an envelope, sealed it with wax, and then handed it over to Qingyang.

The disciples of Tianzong from Sanqing Temple and those from Qi Mountain had their own ways of communication, so getting the letter to Jin Zijin was not a difficult task.

Xiang Chun, probably defeated by Lun Tong, came to Gu Youyou looking drained as if the life had been sucked out of her, saying, "Miss Yu, maybe you should just exchange with her. Take pity on me, I can’t always guard the door; I have to attend to you too."

Gu Youyou felt this was indeed a problem.

Telling stories and swapping with a fellow freak wasn’t a big deal.

But since she had started by outright rejecting him with a tough stance, now if she were to call him back for an exchange, that would be a huge loss of face for her.

Chapter 783: A Tremendous Secret

Searcy chimed in from the side, saying, "What’s the use of ’face’ anyway, let’s just send him packing. That sticky rice cake of a man is always lingering outside the yard; I can hardly go out."

Gu Youyou gestured for her to go ahead, a smile creeping across her face, "Be my guest, your turn. I’ll tell him that all those stories were written by you and have her nagging to meet you every day."

Searcy: "...I can’t tell stories."

"There you have it, you’re just the type who talks without feeling the pain of standing. But..." Gu Youyou suddenly thought, that guy claimed he had stories of all kinds, and he had some past connection with Tian Jizi. She wondered if she could hear some of Tian Jizi’s romantic tales from his youth. That would be really entertaining.

But... Tian Jizi is so old now...

Alas! If she can’t hear about Tian Jizi’s romantic stories, perhaps she could find out some about Jin Zijin’s.

Yes, that’s right!

With that thought, Gu Youyou’s eyebrows rose, and she spoke out, "I have my own idea about this matter; you all don’t need to worry about it."

"Ha, you’ve seen the light," Searcy said gloatingly from the side.

Gu Youyou ignored her and opened the yard door.

Lun Tong was leaning against the door, and when Gu Youyou suddenly opened it, it hit him right in the nose.

Ever since she found out this guy was in disguise, Gu Youyou felt weird every time she saw him.

She always felt that this scene was too beautiful, too beautiful for her to dare to look.

She wondered what kind of perverse true nature was hidden under the still charming facade of this man of a certain age.

"Is it true that you can tell any story?"

"Of course," Lun Tong assured, thumping his chest.

Gu Youyou chuckled, "So, if I ask and you know, you must tell me, and won’t pretend you don’t know?"

"Certainly," Lun Tong raised his hand as if swearing an oath.

"Good," Gu Youyou said decisively, "With your word, I can rest easy. It’s a deal."

Gu Youyou looked around and felt that discussing Jin Zijin’s romantic tales here wasn’t quite appropriate, so she said, "Let’s go; we’ll talk somewhere else."

The place Gu Youyou chose was the very same thatched cottage her mother had built, to which Jin Zijin had taken her before.

"It’s quiet here, suitable for storytelling," Gu Youyou said.

To Lun Tong’s great surprise, he exclaimed nostalgically, "I never thought that after more than twenty years, I’d be back here to listen to a story. The story I heard back then was the most heartbreaking one I’ve heard in decades. I just wonder if your stories can surpass hers?"

Gu Youyou’s heart clenched tightly. She felt like she was about to uncover some incredible secret unintentionally.

She quickly ditched her previous arrogance and began to fawn obsequiously.

She wiped clean a broken beam with her sleeve and asked Lun Tong to sit down.

"Big sister, please," she urged.

Lun Tong raised an eyebrow, saying, "It seems you’ve decided what you want to ask me."

"Yes, yes, I didn’t recognize Mount Tai right in front of my eyes. When it comes to storytelling, you’re a master," she admitted.

Lun Tong began to laugh, saying, "I told you, you wouldn’t regret this exchange with me, but you just wouldn’t believe me."

He looked at the beam, sighed with emotion, and then said, "Then I won’t stand on ceremony."

"Don’t stand on ceremony," Gu Youyou chuckled nervously.

"Alright, Miss Gu, please sit down too. This is an exchange; nobody loses. Tell me, what story do you want to hear?"

Gu Youyou glanced around the dilapidated hut and said, "Since you mentioned that the story you heard in this grass hut was the most heart-rending one you’ve heard in decades, then that’s the story I want to hear."

...

Chapter 784: Senior Brother, Someone is Poaching

Jin Zijin received a letter from Gu Youyou, and upon hearing that a pervert disguised as a woman was blocking the entry to Youyou’s residence every day, determined to stir up trouble unless he succeeded in undermining his position, it really infuriated him.

Who the hell is so bold to try to undermine my position in Qi Mountain?

At that time, Yue Rujing was in Sanqing Temple, and Jin Zijin, clutching the letter in fury, went to find Yue Rujing and said, "I must make a quick trip to Qi Mountain. In the days I’m gone, you watch over everything that needs watching, and make sure there are no slip-ups."

Yue Rujing said in surprise, "Isn’t it another fortnight before we go? Brother, why the sudden rush?"

As Jin Zijin was putting on his coat, he replied, "There’s a damn fool who doesn’t want to live, trying to undermine my position."

Yue Rujing: "..."

Someone like Gu Youyou? Apart from you, her visually impaired brother, who else would want her?

Who could be so blind?

Seeing Jin Zijin walking away, Yue Rujing hurriedly chased after him, saying, "Hey, brother, you've got to be quick there and quick back. Jin Ziyuan, that kid, is courting chaos more and more, and recently he even ambushed the food supplies sent to Dongzhou."

"Someone will handle him. Why worry about it? Just keep an eye on Huo Li."

Yue Rujing: "..." This is all for your future plans. We can't just inherit a world full of troubles, can we?

...

Over at Gu Youyou's place, it wasn't a matter of listening to stories, but watching them unfold.

Lun Tong gave her a book that contained the very story she had inquired about.

No wonder he was so interested in her story, for his narrative technique was strikingly similar to Gu Youyou's—vivid and straightforward, unlike the convoluted writing style of most ancient people.

(The story will be told in a modern novelistic way, and within it, hide many truths you've all been curious about.)

The early summer in Beijing still held a touch of coolness. Xiao Qinqin, born into a warrior family, was livelier than most other young ladies from noble families and was less sensitive to the cold.

While everyone else was still wearing thick clothes, she had already donned her light summer attire.

"Miss, the lotus flowers in the pond have only just budded; I'm afraid we won't be able to pick any lotus flowers now. Are you sure you want to go?"

Leading the horse, Xiao Qinqin smiled like the peach blossoms of March and said, "The city's lotuses haven't bloomed, but I know a place where they have. Just follow me."

Alas! With a sigh, Aling resigned herself to lead the horse and follow along.

Seeing the direction her young miss was heading in, she knew they were going to leave the city.

Her martial arts skills were only slightly better than her young miss's—she truly hoped nothing unexpected would happen.

Not long after they left the city, a young man leading a horse followed suit.

His gaze was profound.

Just as he was about to follow, someone suddenly approached him and said something, causing his expression to darken. He glanced in the direction Xiao Qinqin had left, then turned towards another route.

Ten miles south of the city was a large lake, half-covered with lotus flowers, which always bloomed earlier and withered later than other places.

"So this is the place!" Aling exclaimed, "It's strange how these lotuses are in full bloom while others have only just budded."

Closing her eyes, Xiao Qinqin breathed in the fresh scent of water and said with a light laugh, "My mother's favorite is the summer lotus. I must get her the most beautiful one this year. Aling, go quickly and ask a local villager to lend us a boat."

"Yes, miss, wait here for me, and don't wander off!"

Once she had given her instructions, Aling dared to leave her young miss.

"I know, I know, hurry back," Xiao Qinqin said impatiently.

Chapter 785: Yue Tingfang is Such a Person

Xiao Qinqin stood by the lake waiting for Aling, but despite waiting from left to right, Aling had not come. Since she had already caught sight of a beautifully blooming lotus flower on the shore, she could not resist the itch in her heart any longer and could not wait.

Looking around and seeing no one, she no longer hesitated, and with a plop, she jumped into the lake, planning to swim over and pick that lotus flower first.

However, just as she was about to reach the lotus, unexpectedly, someone flew out from nowhere, grabbed her, and with a skillful touch of the water, similar to a dragonfly skimming the surface, tossed her back onto the shore with a flick of a hand.

"You... you..."

Xiao Qinqin coughed out a few mouthfuls of water, her face turning beet red as she struggled for breath.

"Miss, the water is cold. Why risk your health for a joke?"

That voice was extremely pleasant to hear. Xiao Qinqin couldn't help but dry the water from the lashes on her face and opened her eyes wide to see who it was that had no sense to throw her back like that.

To her surprise, not only was the person's voice delightful, but he was incredibly handsome as well, standing against the light, as if a celestial being had stepped out of a painting.

"Who are you?" Xiao Qinqin finally managed to get out a complete sentence.

The man raised his hand in a salutation and said, "I am Yue Tingfang, the Princely Heir of Lingnan. I just arrived in Beijing a few days ago."

"Oh, so you're the Princely Heir of Lingnan." Xiao Qinqin exclaimed in surprise. "I heard from my father that a Commander from Lingnan would come to our Xiao Family's army and would have to stay at our barracks for at least three months. Could that be you?"

Yue Tingfang smiled and replied, "Indeed, it is me. In that case, you must be the only daughter of General Xiao, Miss Qinqin?"

"Yes, yes, I'm Xiao Qinqin."

"Then why did Miss Qinqin fall into the lake?"

Xiao Qinqin, feeling quite embarrassed, said, "I was just... trying to pick the flower, but then... there were no boats available."

Yue Tingfang followed her gaze to the flower, his body lightened, and with a few light taps on the water's surface, he flew to the lotus flower that Xiao Qinqin had her eyes on, effortlessly plucking it.

By the time he returned to the shore, Xiao Qinqin was amazed to find that his white clothes were completely dry, without a single wet spot.

"Miss Qinqin, here is the flower you wanted." Yue Tingfang presented the lotus to her.

Xiao Qinqin happily accepted it, saying, "Thank you!" After a moment, she added, "Will you come to the barracks tomorrow? If you do... I'll repay this favor to you!"

Yue Tingfang's expression stiffened slightly and he said, "I'm afraid I can't tomorrow; I have to see the Emperor."

"Then how about the day after tomorrow?"

"All right, the day after tomorrow!" Yue Tingfang said with a smile.

Although Yue Tingfang was born into a warrior family and was used to military life, his manners were even more impeccable than those of the gently bred scholars from the Governor's Office, which took Xiao Qinqin by surprise.

Xiao Qinqin was always forthright, and the people she usually interacted with were rough men. In her mind, Yue Tingfang, being from a warrior family, should have been as robust and bold as her father and brothers. However, she never expected him to be such a refined and cultured man.

She said, "I also come from a warrior family, so you don’t have to be so polite with me. Just call me Qinqin."

"This... I’m afraid it would be inconvenient, and I wouldn’t want to be presumptuous, Miss," Yue Tingfang said, feeling somewhat conflicted.

Xiao Qinqin laughed and teased, "The year before last, my elder brother went to the Lingnan Barracks. He joked that the customs in Lingnan were very open; he walked down the street and almost got dragged into a house by bold young ladies. If someone like you were there, wouldn’t you dare not to take to the streets?"

Yue Tingfang laughed awkwardly and said, "Miss Qinqin jests. I will... take your suggestion then, Qinqin."

"That’s more like it," Xiao Qinqin said with satisfaction.

"Mount up, I’ll take you to see something up ahead!"

Chapter 786: Leisure Fun

This was a vast grassland where countless noble steeds roamed freely and grazed at their leisure; this was the training ground for the Xiao Family’s military horses.

Lying on a patch of clean grass, Xiao Qinqin gazed at the blue sky and asked, "Which do you prefer, horses or the eagles in the sky?"

Yue Tingfang sat beside her, glanced at the few eagles soaring above, and laughed, "Eagles are even harder to train than spirited horses, so I prefer horses—they’re within reach."

Xiao Qinqin gave a wry smile and said, "How can you compare them like that? Compared to horses, I actually prefer eagles."

"Why?" Yue Tingfang suddenly thought of the cliffs by the Southern Sea where one could capture some young eagles that had yet to fly, a hint of a smile appearing at the corner of his mouth.

If Qinqin liked them, he wouldn’t mind indulging in a bit of nest-robbing for once.

Xiao Qinqin sighed, "Horses may run fast, but they’re corralled on this land. They seem free, but in truth, they are not masters of their own fate. Their ultimate destiny is to become mounts for soldiers. But look at those eagles in the sky—if they wish to spread their wings, they can fly wherever they please."

Yue Tingfang looked at her, her delicate features unable to hide a touch of valiance, making her even more dazzling than the daughters of the Yue Family.

...

Yue Tingfang had already been in Beijing for several months, and thanks to his striking appearance, prestigious background, and gentlemanly demeanor, he had quickly won the affections of a great many women in the city within this short time.

If it weren’t for the restrained local customs of Beijing, he would be afraid to even step outside.

By day, he would join Jin Moning in visiting the Xiao Family’s military camp, while at night, he stayed at the Crown Prince’s residence.

Thus, he had become an extremely important friend to the Crown Prince.

Jin Moning teased, "My butler has received yet another invitation for you today—that’s for the birthday of Official Jian in two days’ time. Will you go?"

"Official Jian?" Yue Tingfang thought for a moment, then responded, "Oh, that Official Jian, yes, I must go. I heard that my father had some old acquaintances with him when he first came to Beijing."

Jin Moning’s smile took on a deeper meaning as he said, "Is that so? No wonder they insisted on inviting you. It appears that their legitimate second daughter came of age last month, and after seeing you on the street, she hasn’t stopped thinking about you. Official Jian dotes on that daughter exceedingly. It seems he’s willing to lose face just to try and secure a chance for her."

Yue Tingfang could only smile bitterly and said, "You’re a Crown Prince, yet you seem to know everything about the private matters of officials’ households?"

Jin Moning paused, his smile fading as he said, "The affairs of the inner court and the imperial court have always been one and the same."

"That... I don’t understand," Yue Tingfang replied as he poured some tea, leaning back in his chair in the Shuixie and laughed, "But there are so many young ladies who can’t stop thinking about me. If I were to lavish attention on each one of them, I wouldn’t have time to live my life."

"You’re asking for trouble!" Jin Moning pushed him and said, "You aren’t getting any younger. If you think Miss Jian is quite good, it would be nice to bring her back to Lingnan. I heard your father has written to my father, asking for help in arranging a suitable match for you."

Yue Tingfang suddenly stood up, shocked, "Really? Is that true?"

"Of course it’s true." Jin Moning felt a touch of schadenfreude and said, "It seems you weren’t aware."

"I had no idea!" Yue Tingfang’s expression turned as though he was facing a great enemy.

Seeing this, Jin Moning no longer felt like teasing him and said, "You needn’t worry too much; I heard from the emperor that he will not force you into a marriage—you must be willing. In a few days, the emperor will likely summon you to discuss this matter. If there is a young lady you fancy, you can tell him in advance, and he will issue an imperial marriage decree for you."

Chapter 787: Does Qinqin Like It?

An imperial marriage decree?

Yue Tingfang suddenly laughed and said, "Being granted a marriage by imperial decree doesn’t sound too bad, does it? As long as His Majesty issues the decree, then it’s a done deal, right?"

"Well... that’s certainly true." Jin Moning suddenly thought of something and seemed to become somewhat unnatural.

...

At sunrise, thinking of the imperial marriage decree, Yue Tingfang rose early.

The girl he fancied, he could of course tell the Emperor and have him help with the marriage decree.

However, he didn’t want to force the girl, he needed to get her consent first.

After a sleepless night mulling it over, he finally came up with an idea.

In the military camp’s horse stable, he finally found her among the throng of fine horses.

She was feeding her beloved sorrel horse.

The gentleman, who normally behaved with decorum outdoors, for once took on a carefree pose, riding a snow-white steed backwards, his left hand resting on the back of his head, his right holding a scroll made of fine silk.

With emotions ready, he cleared his throat and intoned, "There is a beauty, unforgettable at sight.

Not seeing her for a day, my thoughts go wild.

The phoenix soars, searching the seas for its mate.

Regrettably, the fair lady is not by the eastern wall.

I let my zither speak, to express my innermost feelings.

When will she consent, to soothe my wandering heart?

I wish to be matched in virtue, to walk hand in hand.

If I cannot take flight, I'll be doomed to despair.

Phoenix, oh phoenix, return to your hometown, to roam the four seas in search of your mate..."

Xiao Qinqin dropped the grass in her hands, wrapped her arms around her chest, and burst into loud laughter.

"Did you pick the wrong spot to recite poetry? They don't understand, this is a horse stable, not Yixiang Courtyard. If you're really at a loss, go recite in the street; I guarantee the throngs of adoring ladies that gather will out-number the horses here."

Yue Tingfang's face flushed with embarrassment at Xiao Qinqin's teasing, and in his agitation, failed to notice as the horse beneath him suddenly reared up, causing him to fall face-first to the ground.

The sight was utterly comical, prompting Xiao Qinqin to laugh heartily.

"I heard you grew up on horseback, yet who would have thought you could fall off one?"

Yue Tingfang climbed up awkwardly, the dirt on his white clothes refusing to be brushed off.

Frowning, as cleanliness mattered to him, he looked at the silk scroll in his hands and asked quietly, "Qinqin, did you like the poem I just recited?"

Xiao Qinqin, with squinted eyes and a smile, said, "Your voice is clear and transcendent, naturally it’s pleasing to hear."

Yue Tingfang’s heart burned with joy, and he asked again, "But did you like it?"

"Hmm?" Xiao Qinqin looked puzzled.

On the other hand, someone was riding a horse this way with a clip-clop sound. A soldier, seeing Yue Tingfang and Xiao Qinqin, dismounted and knelt on one knee, saying, "Miss, Princely Heir, a eunuch from the Emperor’s side has come to deliver an edict, asking the Princely Heir to enter the palace immediately."

Yue Tingfang shuddered, turned his head sharply towards Xiao Qinqin, and asked anxiously, "Do you like it?"

"What do you mean ’like it’?" Xiao Qinqin, seeing Yue Tingfang’s anxious expression morphing drastically, was completely baffled.

"It’s just..."

Before he could say more, the soldier again said respectfully, "Princely Heir, the eunuch is waiting in the camp."

Seeing his discomfort, Xiao Qinqin hurriedly said, "His Majesty summoned you to the palace; you’d better go quickly. Whatever it is, we can talk about it once you’re back."

Yue Tingfang guessed that being summoned to the palace by the Emperor was most likely about the letter from his father in Lingnan, probably regarding marriage prospects.

But whether Qinqin was willing or not, he didn’t yet know.

Fortunately, the night before the Crown Prince had said it would require his own consent before the Emperor would issue the decree.

Chapter 788: Request for Marriage

If the Emperor asks about this matter today, shall I just say I need to look into it further? To consider it a bit more?

Yes, exactly, just do that.

Yue Tingfang smiled at Xiao Qinqin and said, "Good, Qinqin, wait for me."

...

Xiao Qinqin returned to the Xiao Family estate. The maid, Qiaoyue, helped her bathe and change her clothes. Just as she walked into the courtyard, she heard a deep male voice.

"There is a beauty, unforgettable upon sight.

One day apart, and thoughts of her drive one mad.

The phoenix flies and soars, searching the four seas for the phoenix...

She furrowed her brows and looked towards the man leaning on the railing, asking, "Crown Prince, how do you have so much free time to come to my home and recite poetry?"

Jin Moning approached her with a faint smile on his face.

"I came to deliver a message from the Emperor to General Xiao and heard from Qiaoyue that you had returned from the military camp, so I came to see you."

Xiao Qinqin laughed, "I don’t know what kind of wind blew today, but you’ve all sung this ’Phoenix Seeking Phoenix’ to the verge of weariness."

"Oh? Who else has sung it?" Jin Moning asked with a darkened face.

"Yue Tingfang sang it just this morning," Xiao Qinqin laughed in reply.

"He?" Jin Moning's face showed surprise, and thinking of Yue Tingfang's appearance last night, he instantly understood.

He had felt that Yue Tingfang seemed to have taken a liking to someone's daughter, and it turns out the person he fancied was Qinqin.

Jin Moning curled the corner of his mouth, his eyes dark as ink grew more profound. He pressed Xiao Qinqin against a pillar, tilted up her chin, and asked in a low voice, "So, do you think Tingfang sings better or I do?"

Xiao Qinqin dodged his gaze, her cheeks gaining a tinge of red as she said in a stammer, "This isn't your Crown Prince Residence, Crown Prince, it would be better if you kept your distance from me."

"Qinqin, after all these years, do you still not understand my feelings?" His warm breath sprayed on her cheek, making it even redder.

She smiled and said, "I'm older than you, I've always seen you as a younger brother. My father even mentioned taking you as a disciple, and since I'm also his disciple, doesn't that make you my junior brother?"

"Shush!" Jin Moning placed a finger on her lips, lowered his voice, and said, "I do not want to be your junior brother; I only want to be your man."

The blush on Xiao Qinqin's face continued to her ear tips. As the man drew closer, she pouted and said, "Don't think just because you sang 'Phoenix Seeking Phoenix' that you can be my man. Many have sung to me, including Yue Tingfang who just sang it."

"Oh? Ha... No!" Jin Moning began to laugh and said, "He sang ’Phoenix Seeking Phoenix’, but I sang ’Phoenix in Captivity’. Qinqin, you’ve already imprisoned my heart, so I must imprison you. That way I won’t be at too much of a disadvantage, right?"

Hearing these words, Xiao Qinqin’s smile became knowing. She wrapped her arms around his neck and initiated a kiss.

Jin Moning was ecstatic. He pressed her firmly against the carved column and deepened their kiss...

Because of his words about imprisoning hearts, she was willing to be imprisoned within the small world of the Crown Prince Residence.

Jin Moning released Xiao Qinqin, his face brimming with joy. He treasured her hand against his heart and said, "Qinqin, wait for me."

Xiao Qinqin nodded shyly and replied, "Alright, I’ll wait for you."

But she had forgotten that on the very same day, another person had said the same to her.

Having left the Xiao Family, Jin Moning hurried to the Imperial Palace, partly to report back to the Emperor and partly for Qinqin.

At that moment, Yue Tingfang was playing chess with the Emperor. Jin Moning glanced at Yue Tingfang in surprise, then without hesitation, knelt before the Emperor and said, "Your Majesty, your son humbly asks you to decree a marriage for me with Xiao Qinqin of the Xiao Family."

Chapter 789: She Wasted Her Youth, He Betrayed Her Beauty

Dum...

A sound of a chess piece falling, shattered white jade, resembled someone’s broken heart!

On the night Xin Qiner of the Xiao family got married, Yue Tingfang got drunk, sitting in the Shuixie by the lake opposite their bridal chamber, staring at the flickering red candles across the shore, full of festivity, wishing he could drink all the wine in the Crown Prince Residence until none was left.

Jin Moning told the Emperor that he and Qinqin had known each other for many years and were deeply in love.

They were in love, so all he could do was drown his solitude in drink.

Why didn't they tell him earlier that they were in love? Why wait until his hopes had soared, and his feelings had deepened?

Little did he know, he had it all planned out—if the Emperor had asked, he would not wait for Qinqin's response and would take action first and report later.

But he was still one step too late.

With a bright red bridal veil over her head, Xiao Qinqin sat on the wedding bed, waiting for her groom. As time passed, her heartbeat quickened.

Until she heard his footsteps coming in, her heart finally started to pound as if it was about to burst out.

"Qinqin, I've made you wait," Jin Moning said as he lifted Xiao Qinqin's bright red bridal veil. Her face, shyly lifted, was painted with delicate makeup. She looked less valiant than usual but had an added touch of a woman's unique soft beauty.

"Qinqin, you're so beautiful!" Jin Moning was enchanted for a moment.

The red curtains were warm, and the spring weather was delightful; he personally adorned her with a green Qingluan jade pendant.

This was the jade pendant given by the Empress Dowager, passed only to the Crown Prince's principal wife, the future Empress.

Xiao Qinqin had always thought of herself as an eagle soaring the skies, her world vast and boundless, her man also an eagle capable of flying alongside her. Yet, because of that phrase, "you have captured my heart," she willingly became a bird in a gilded cage, forever by his side.

For those two years, they lived a life that everyone envied, like a fairy couple. He doted on her to the bone, and she loved him madly.

But the good times didn't last. War broke out at the borders. The Xiao family's army suffered a defeat, and Qinqin's father and elder brother both died in battle consecutively, her mother died of grief, and the Xiao family's influence in court plummeted. A once-great Xiao family was now propped up by a mere fourteen-year-old younger brother.

She said, "After my father's defeat, his smiles towards me became fewer and when he did smile, it was always so forced."

One consort after another began entering the Crown Prince Residence—such a small place couldn't accommodate so many beautiful women.

In Jin Moning's large estate, she wasted her youth, and he betrayed her beauty.

When he finally captured her body, his heart no longer belonged to her alone.

She could dance on horseback with a long spear but couldn't engage in the underhanded plotting of the other women. As they drove her to despair time and again, she finally made up her mind, left him a farewell letter, and took the child in her womb, hardly obtained, to escape far away.

"I cannot capture your heart, so neither can you imprison my body," she left him with only this sentence.

But fate wasn’t finished with her; the Crown Prince did not have an eldest son, how could he allow her child to exist?

She fled the Imperial City that had imprisoned her, only to find herself with nowhere to go.

After the downfall of the Xiao family, even he abandoned her—how much less could she expect from the friends of her father’s time?

She didn’t know whom to turn to—the only person that came to mind was Yue Tingfang, who by now had taken over the Marquis Residence of Lingnan.

When Yue Tingfang found her, the loyal Aling had taken her last breath, and she was surrounded and attacked by over a dozen men in black. Rescuing the barely alive Xiao Qinqin, she was still tightly protecting her belly.

Chapter 790: Fleeing to Lingnan

She was afraid he wouldn’t take her in; disregarding the wound that was bleeding on her body, she kept telling him, "I must leave him because I’m pregnant. The Xiao Family is no longer powerful as it used to be, and I can’t win against them. They say that I, the Crown Princess Consort without any value, will be discarded sooner or later. He won’t allow a Crown Princess Consort, who is destined to be abandoned, to give birth to his eldest son, my child. This is the only way I can save him..."

"Qinqin, don’t talk. I will take you to Lingnan; no one will be able to hurt you."

Yue Tingfang, a man of iron and blood, was at this moment overcome with tears.

He took the blood-covered Xiao Qinqin back to the Lingnan Marquis Residence and vigilantly stayed by her side day and night, causing his newly wedded wife to nearly break down.

"The Marquess brought home a pregnant woman and keeps watch over her day and night?"

The maid beside Madam Yue tried to comfort her mistress, whose eyes were red from crying, "Madam, even if that woman gives birth to a child, it will be without legitimacy. With the Marquess’s status, it’s only a matter of time before he takes more wives and concubines. Don’t be heartbroken."

"But if she gives birth to a boy, he will be the Marquess's eldest son. How can I not be saddened if a woman of no status takes precedence over me?"

This was indeed a valid point. She had just married into the family and was still unfamiliar with the Marquis Residence. The mistress and servant could only hide in their room, clutching their heads in agony.

Although Yue Tingfang loved Xiao Qinqin dearly, he was, after all, a man of deep affection and sense of duty.

Fang Cuizhen, his wife, was chosen by his father during his lifetime. Since he had married her, he was determined to take responsibility for her.

Hearing that she had locked herself in her room, nearly crying her eyes out, he decided to go see her.

"What newlywed spends her days crying? Azhen, stop crying now."

"Marquess?" Fang Cuizhen cried even harder upon seeing Yue Tingfang, "Servants are saying the Marquess brought back a pregnant woman and, fearing that she and her unborn child would be harmed by Azhen, stays by her side all day and won't leave for a moment. Azhen has just arrived at the Marquis Residence and can't even tell the front door from the back. How could I harm the woman the Marquess likes? Azhen is wronged..."

Yue Tingfang whispered comforting words, "Don't listen to those idle servants' gossip. The woman is indeed pregnant, but she has no relation to me. She is the daughter of an old friend, and her husband's family has treated her poorly, refusing to let her give birth to the child, which left her no choice but to turn to me.

I am guarding her because she is in constant danger of her life. Fortunately, she is now out of danger, and you can go see her. But please, don't talk irresponsibly in front of her and ruin the lady's reputation."

Fang Cuizhen was stunned for a while before grasping what Yue Tingfang had said, and she immediately burst into laughter.

When they first met, she was lying on the sickbed reading a book, and there stood Fang Cuizhen at the door with a nutritious soup to fortify her, unsure of what to do.

Seeing Fang Cuizhen’s attire, Xiao Qinqin seemed to guess her identity.

She smiled at her gently, "I heard Tingfang has taken a wife; it must be you. Madam Yue, please come in."

She had just married into the Marquis Residence, and she was cautious in every move she made.

"Madam Xiao!" Fang Cuizhen placed the soup on the cabinet beside the bed, whispering, "This is a tonic prescribed by the doctor, which I carefully watched over as it was being prepared for you."

"Thank you, Madam Yue." Xiao Qinqin rose to express her gratitude.

Fang Cuizhen hurriedly helped her to lie back down, saying, "No need for thanks; you’d better lie down quickly. The doctor said you’ve suffered a severe injury, and with the pregnancy not being stable, you need to rest in bed."

"Thank you!"

Soon they were talking freely, and any previous ill feeling had vanished.