Farmhouse 951

Chapter 951: Wind and Water Take Turns to Shift

The maid sitting at the entrance of the courtyard hummed to herself, leisurely cracking melon seeds and continued to joke and laugh with the other maids.

"Hey, have you heard? The Crown Prince's consort selection doesn't care about family background; as long as she's pure and untouched, that's enough. Over the years, I've saved quite a bit of Silver and have enough to buy back my own Servitude Contract. If I redeem it, then I'm also someone pure and untouched, don't you think I could also go and participate in the selection?"

The maid next to her burst into laughter and said, "You wish, they want someone who has both beauty and talent. Do you have either?"

"You little wretch, how dare you insult me..." The speaking maid immediately got up and chased after the other maid.

Laughter filled the courtyard, contrasting sharply with Jin Fengzhao inside the house, who was fuming with rage and starving.

Unable to contain her anger, she grabbed a stick used to prop open the window and rushed out, starting to hit the maids indiscriminately.

The maids jumped up in fright and scrambled to get away.

"You wretched slaves, did you not hear me calling you? I'll beat you to death, stay where you are."

"Ah... Who do you think you are, acting like a princess? You're just a fake, the real Crown Prince is already back, and who knows which little beggar you are, running into the Imperial Palace to deceive the Emperor..."

"Even if I'm not a princess, I'm still the Madam in charge of the General Residence."

And so, the most luxurious courtyard of the General Residence became the stage for an intense chase.

Those women who were eager to make a mockery of Jin Fengzhao heard the news and one by one, braved the cold wind to watch the spectacle.

Concubine Xu, accompanied by her maids, stood at the entrance of the courtyard, laughing out loud, and asked her maids, "What did you do to anger her this time? She's so furious she's come to discipline you herself."

"Who knows? This servant thinks she's going mad. The Emperor has announced to everyone that she's not the real Princess, yet she still goes around acting all high and mighty. Perhaps it's to remind herself that she's just an imposter?"

This Concubine Xu was the very same one who had miscarried because of Jin Fengzhao's doing. Back then, she was too afraid to speak up, but her hatred for her tore her up inside.

Now that she had a chance for revenge, how could she let it go?

"Oh my, Madam, that's where you're wrong," said Concubine Xu in a mocking tone. "It's one thing to say such things in our own home, but if word gets out and the Emperor learns of it, that's the crime of deceiving a monarch. Oh, but right, you're not afraid of deceiving a monarch, are you?"

Jin Fengzhao stopped in her tracks, so hungry that her front stuck to her back, gasping for breath with hunger.

She glared at Concubine Xu standing at the entrance with eyes poisoned with malice. Under normal circumstances, Concubine Xu would have been scared to death by her, but now things were different. Jin Fengzhao was no longer a princess, while Concubine Xu was a young lady born from a concubine in the Xu Family, with an elder sister who held a prestigious position in the Imperial Palace. In terms of family background, she, Jin Fengzhao, was now inferior.

Concubine Xu stood there as if watching a comedy, her smiling face challenging, "What's wrong? Or are you planning to devour me?"

This was a real-life case of a phoenix being less than a chicken after falling from grace.

Jin Fengzhao was so angry that her face turned ashen. She had been proud her entire life; living so meekly now was worse than death.

Even if she were to die, she would take this vixen down with her.

Brandishing a stick, she stepped towards Concubine Xu, cursing, "You filthy and smelly vixen, even if I chopped you up to feed the dogs, they wouldn't eat you. I'll kill you..."

As she swung the stick at Concubine Xu, Concubine Xu turned pale with fear and scrambled backward. But unlike the nimble maids, these pampered ladies were not as agile and she was struck, letting out a loud cry of pain.

Chapter 952: The Outcome of Jin Fengzhao

"Jin Fengzhao, how dare you come to me? What gives you the right to hit me, you shameless bastard who emerged from nowhere? I'm going to fight you to the end."

Thus, Jin Fengzhao and Concubine Xu grappled with each other.

The maids and older servants, upon seeing this, panicked and hurried forward to separate the two, until a commanding male voice came from behind.

"What are you doing?" Xiao Jinfei, twenty-seven or twenty-eight, had already grown a light beard.

His slightly dark skin and firmly set features on a tall frame left no doubt that he was a man long accustomed to the battlefield.

The two stopped fighting, and right away, Concubine Xu began to cry softly.

"General, she hit me."

"You little wretch, don’t play the victim first, Jinfei. This wretched girl disrespects me and even insults me."

"I did not!" Concubine Xu protested to Xiao Jinfei through her tears. "General, I was merely reminding Madam that she is no longer a princess and should not constantly refer to herself as if she still were in the Imperial Palace. It would be a crime of deceiving the emperor if word got out... but Madam, without a word, started hitting me with a stick."

"You..." Jin Fengzhao swayed, glaring ferociously at Concubine Xu. "It’s none of your business to interfere in my affairs."

"Silence." Xiao Jinfei spoke sternly. "Madam Xu is right; you better understand your position."

Having said that, he helped Concubine Xu to her feet.

"My own position?" Jin Fengzhao muttered to herself, nearly unable to stand steady.

Seeing the triumphant smile on Concubine Xu’s face made her so furious that she nearly fainted.

She pointed at the man and yelled fiercely, "Xiao Jinfei, you are just a vain and greedy man. When I was a princess, you married me and only then did you receive your military rank. Now that I am no longer a princess, you discard me like a worn shoe. You are heartless..."

"Heartless?" Xiao Jinfei looked at her indifferently. "You’re talking to me about heartlessness? Do I need to remind you of how you came to marry me?"

Jin Fengzhao turned pale and stepped back.

Xiao Jinfei let go of Concubine Xu and advanced two steps forward.

His gaze filled with unresolvable hatred.

"You are four years older than me. To force me into marriage, you begged the emperor for a decree. Because of you, I had to marry at the age of twelve. Riding on horseback to the Imperial Palace for the wedding, all of Beijing stood by the roadside and laughed at me; this has been the shame of my life."

He still remembered the quietly mocking laughter of the onlookers.

That year, he was only twelve, dressed in the festive garb of a groom, marrying a princess, while everyone laughed that he wouldn't know how to consummate the marriage...

This humiliation had followed him for more than a decade.

But for the Xiao Family, and for Jin Zijin, he had endured it all.

What does the Imperial Family want now? They already know she is a fraud, so why not simply execute her? Why send her back to continue humiliating him?

Xiao Jinfei's eyes, venomous as a snake's, made Jin Fengzhao slightly afraid. She said, "I remember when you were a child, you liked to play with me."

As a child, he did not know his cousin was fake; he found her pitiable because she had lost her mother young and was always bullied by the Empress in the palace.

But later, her arrogance became apparent, and even the Empress couldn't bully her. Once he knew she wasn't his real cousin, his disgust only grew.

Remembering their past interactions only deepened his revulsion.

Xiao Jinfei scoffed coldly and said indifferently, "Jin Fengzhao has damaged the virtues expected of a wife, indulged in pride, and exhibits disruptive and domineering behavior, truly unfit to be the wife of this general. As of today, she is demoted to a lowly concubine."

Chapter 953: The Cheap Concubine

She had been disowned by the Imperial Family's Zong Family, which made handling her all the more convenient.

Madam Xu burst into a grin that seemed as if her mouth couldn't close, while Jin Fengzhao's eyes widened, and a buzzing noise filled her head.

A concubine, or rather, a lowly concubine?

She couldn't accept this reality, and finally fainted.

Xiao Jinfei simply had his men carry her into the courtyard and then walked away with Madam Xu.

Madam Xu was overjoyed and took this opportunity to say to Xiao Jinfei, "General, it's said that the eldest Prince's selection of a consort doesn't consider one's birth. My sister is a talented and outstanding woman who has also registered to participate. My family asked me to inquire with the General: what kind of woman does His Highness the eldest Prince fancy?"

Xiao Jinfei's face changed instantly as he stared at Madam Xu and said coldly, "Don't try to outsmart your betters. You will gain no favors from me."

...

The news of the Imperial edict reached Gu Youyou. She finally understood Jin Zijin's painstaking intentions.

At the same time, Madam Lin was also very clear about the situation, but that morning, the Empress had sent someone to relay a message to her, instructing her to keep a close watch on Gu Youyou and not to let her go out.

Helplessly, she could only seek Lin Xingyi for consultation.

"What do you think we should do? The eldest Prince has staged this scene obviously for Youyou, but if Youyou doesn’t go, wouldn’t it all be for nothing?"

"What exactly did the Empress say to you?" Lin Xingyi asked, his brow furrowed.

Madam Lin sighed, "What else could it mean? Given her character, she would definitely not want the eldest Prince to get his way. She wants me to keep a close eye on Youyou, to not let her out at all costs. What do you think, should I watch her or not?"

Lin Xingyi’s face turned grave, and he remained silent for a long while.

Indeed, this was a predicament. It was not yet time for them to openly defy the Empress. If she were to find out they harbored ulterior motives, then that would put Qianqing at risk.

"Let’s do this, just hint about this situation to Youyou. As for the rest, don’t interfere."

He believed that Gu Youyou must have her own way of dealing with this.

Gu Youyou indeed had her way. Jin Zijin had fought for such an opportunity that even a commoner like her could participate in the selection. He must have put in a lot of thought.

How could she possibly drag him down, right?

At night, Gu Youyou called Searcy and Lun Yu to discuss.

"They say that registration requires one’s personal attendance, Youyou what do you plan to do? Shall I poison the well water and knock out everyone in the house, so you can walk out freely?"

"What a bad idea," Gu Youyou replied irritably, "I’ve already thought of a way, though it’s a bit troublesome."

Everyone looked at her as Searcy said, "Since you've already come up with a plan, why did you call us here to discuss?"

Gu Youyou replied, "This requires the cooperation of the three of us, which is why I didn't tell anyone else and only called you two."

In the room, lit by candlelight, Xiang Chun and Yin Shuang stood guard outside.

Miss Gu had instructed that no one was allowed to enter, and nobody knew what they were discussing inside.

Gu Youyou said, "Tomorrow morning Lun Yu will help me with my makeup, making me look like Searcy. And Searcy will pose as me at home. We'll go to Jisheng Hall first to revert our disguises and then proceed to register. We don't have to be too secretive about it, as it can serve as a way out for my aunt and uncle."

Gu Youyou was no fool; she was clear about everything.

The things she wanted to know managed to reach her, and given that the freedom of others in the courtyard was not restricted, that was the path her uncle had laid out for her in secret.

That was enough.

The next day, Lun Yu and Gu Youyou, who was disguised as Searcy, left the house, claiming they were going to change the account books at Jisheng Hall for the month.

They used this method to successfully leave the residence and switch their disguises back at Jisheng Hall.

Finally, Gu Youyou arrived safely at the registration site.

Chapter 954: The Long Queue

The long queue scared Gu Youyou considerably—was it Jin Zijin's charm that was astonishing, or was it the identity of the Crown Prince?

Previously, as a Taoist who would not marry, he was surrounded by none of the so-called "peach blossoms" of romance.

Now, it seemed that Gu Youyou had to learn a new skill: cutting off peach blossoms.

"The competition is fierce, Miss Gu, do you have confidence?"

Standing in the queue, Gu Youyou answered Lun Yu with annoyance, "Go to the front and see what they're evaluating."

Soon, Lun Yu came back and said, "They're inquiring about ancestors up to the eighteenth generation; the first hurdle is about having a clean family background. There's no history of thievery or banditry in your family, right?"

"Of course, not," Gu Youyou huffed. "Such a registration method is too bothersome, how many people are there?"

Lun Yu said, "Only three days in all, not too many. Look, there's no shortage of those with unattractive appearances, and few pass the first hurdle. I heard to reach the final contest one must pass three challenges and defeat six competitors."

Gu Youyou: "..."

Not far behind Gu Youyou, two people holding a portrait focused their attention on her.

"Is it her?"

"It looks very much like her, it should be."

"Her Majesty is divinely astute. Hmph, she really came. Let's go!"

Gu Youyou, with her sharp ears, suddenly became alert.

She swiftly turned her head around but saw that the two men were already restrained by another two and walked away arm in arm.

What was this situation?

Seeing her odd expression, Lun Yu asked, "What's wrong?"

Gu Youyou spoke in a lowered voice, "Someone's trying to harm me, but there are also those helping me."

Perhaps Jin Zijin had foreseen such an incident and had arranged for protection in advance.

It was a false alarm after all.

The queue had taken more than an hour before it was her turn, and she was genuinely worried that something unexpected might happen.

Of course, as long as her name was reported, she could rest easy. With official registration, she could later make an appearance openly and honorably.

"Here, fill out this form," said the person opposite Gu Youyou as she approached, handing her a form to fill out.

The form was to check one's birth details.

Name, age, birthplace, parents' names, and grandparents had to be written down.

Understanding why so many had fallen at the first hurdle upon seeing the form, Gu Youyou realized that not many women in this era were literate. And look, the plainly dressed woman behind her was holding the form upside down, bewildered.

So, the women who could ultimately stay were those with decent family backgrounds.

Gu Youyou completed and handed the form to the examiner in front of her, who saw no issues except that her age was a bit high.

He asked, "Twenty-three?"

Gu Youyou nodded lightly.

"Twenty-three and not yet married? You don’t have any hidden ailments, do you?" The examiner’s face was filled with disbelief.

Gu Youyou calmly replied, "You can rest assured on that, I am a doctor myself, and Jisheng Hall over there is my clinic."

"Oh, Gu Youyou?" The examiner looked even more astonished, "You are Doctor Gu?"

Gu Youyou nodded slightly, somewhat embarrassed.

The person opposite her wore an odd look; the Doctor Gu he imagined was akin to a legendary figure, seldom seen. She would not treat minor illnesses, and ordinary families could not enter the grand doors of the Lin Residence.

Thus, the legendary Doctor Gu had been made out to be almost otherworldly in skill.

But she... was also participating in the selection for the Crown Prince’s consort?

"Is it acceptable?" Seeing the examiner lost in thought, Gu Youyou reminded him.

"It is... acceptable." The examiner hurriedly replied, then personally handed Gu Youyou the official approval.

Chapter 955: Infuriating Lady Li

Returning to Lin Residence, Searcy had already exposed herself, sitting on the ground with an air of reckless abandon as if a dead pig not fearing scalding water, while Madam Lin sat on a chair above her, her chest heaving with anger. Beside her stood a palace maid, who was not unfamiliar; it was Empress's most trusted Maid Li.

This was something Gu Youyou had anticipated. A play had to be performed to allow her aunt to account for herself to the Empress.

"Aunt!" she, disguised as Searcy, knelt next to Searcy.

At this moment, Gu Youyou was indistinguishable from the actual Searcy beside her.

Madam Lin couldn't stand to see her like this and had someone fetch a basin of water to wash off the makeup from her face.

Such superb disguise skills shocked both Madam Lin and the maid standing behind her.

"What is the meaning of this?" Madam Lin asked, pounding the arm of her chair.

Gu Youyou spoke assertively, "The Imperial Family has issued a decree for the selection of the Prince's consort, and I'm not getting any younger. I cannot burden my uncle and aunt in my old age, so I decided to offer myself in marriage."

"Hmph, you sure are bold," retorted Madam Lin. "With your appearance, you still dream of marrying into the Imperial Family, to become the Prince's consort?"

Gu Youyou replied calmly, "I didn't dare to dream of it before, but now..." She smiled briefly before continuing, "I've heard that even the Bun Shop next to Jisheng Hall sent their daughter. I run a medicine shop, after all; why can't I go?"

The surrounding servants couldn't help but laugh.

Meanwhile, Maid Li from the palace looked displeased and scoffed, "Isn't Doctor Gu afflicted with a hidden illness and not long for this world? Besides, you are too old. Those who registered are fifteen or sixteen-year-old girls. I've heard Doctor Gu is already twenty-three, right?"

Gu Youyou thought to herself: They sure spread news quickly. I had only gone back to Jisheng Hall to change my makeup, and they had already found out everything.

Gu Youyou replied, "I had a hidden illness, but fortunately, I am a doctor with decent Medical Skills, so my illness has been cured, and I won't die early. Secondly, precisely because I am no longer young, I wanted to try my luck at becoming the Prince's consort. At my age, to ravish those fifteen or sixteen-year-old boys, I truly cannot bear to do so. I have heard that the Prince himself is not young, so I find him rather suitable."

Searcy, sitting beside her, laughed at her shamelessness.

Madam Lin above and the palace maid's faces went from red to white with embarrassment and disgust.

Just when they were fuming with no place to direct their anger, Searcy's laughter drew their attention to her.

"This shameless wench dares to impersonate the young lady? Someone come here, I must sell her off!"

"Hey, hold on," Searcy lifted her chin and said, "Madam Lin, I think you might be mistaken. I am not a maid of Lin Residence; I am a pharmacist hired by Gu Youyou. Without me, she would not have been able to develop her medical cure so quickly. You can't sell me; you owe me a hefty fee before I'll leave."

"What?" Madam Lin stood up angrily, the insolent girl was trying to extort her?

Maid Hen Xiang reminded her, "Madam Lin, Miss Searcy is indeed telling the truth, she is not a maid of our residence. She's a doctor who helped Miss Gu in treating the illness."

Madam Lin was at a loss for words. She shot a glance at the palace maid, who almost had her eyes bulging out of her head.

What kind of people did the Lin Residence harbor?

Madam Lin declared, "Such a person cannot stay in Lin Residence any longer. Get her out of here."

"Hey, hey, my consultation fee! I won't leave without it."

Chapter 956: Punishment

"How dare you try to swindle me?" Madam Lin snapped. "Another word and I'll have you sent to see the officials!"

So Searcy was cast out of the Lin Residence's main gate, cursing all the way, stopping only when she'd put some distance between herself and the house.

Then she headed toward Jisheng Hall.

Thereafter, she would be the resident doctor at Jisheng Hall.

Madam Lin looked again toward the palace maid, who said, "Just like that? I dare not report this to the Empress. Hmm, your family's Miss is quite something, possessing both medical skills and disguise techniques. Who knows who might be Miss Gu in disguise on the streets tomorrow. But someone adept in these lower arts of disguise may not be suitable for marrying into the Imperial Family. I will certainly report the truth of this matter to Her Majesty in the palace."

Gu Youyou bowed her head, maintaining her composure even on her knees.

She said, "I do not know the art of disguise; it's just the maid I bought recently who knows a bit."

After speaking, she looked up at Lun Yu, who was kneeling beside her.

Lun Yu felt like he had ’messed up big time.’

"Dang it, you’re the master, so what if you disguised yourself, but why drag me into this?"

Lun Yu quickly forced a laugh and said, "It’s just a small skill, good enough to earn a living, Madam. Please sell this servant off."

The crowd: "..." They swore this was the first servant who actively requested to be sold. Shouldn’t she be wailing and begging not to be sold?

Madam Lin paused in surprise, then snapped, "You crafty servant, if I’m selling you, you’re going to a brothel. Go, get me her servitude contract."

Hen Xiang hesitated, "Madam, this servant’s servitude contract isn’t in our possession."

Madam Lin’s expression darkened as she turned to Gu Youyou and said, "Youyou?"

Gu Youyou also hesitated, "Aunt, I don’t have it either. She... She was bought by Searcy to sort the medicines at the hall."

"Ah, right, right, since my master has been thrown out, I should leave too, Madam Lin, Miss Gu, until we meet again!"

So none of the crafty servants she intended to punish were punished, they all escaped?

The palace maid’s face turned ashen, and Madam Lin’s face wasn’t looking any better as she said, "Madam Li, what do you suggest we do now?"

"Humph!" Madam Li huffed coldly, clearly not willing to let it go just like that.

Left with no choice, Madam Lin turned to Gu Youyou, "Youyou, since you live in Lin Residence, you should abide by its rules. Do you agree? If you agree, your sneaking out of the residence must be punished. If you disagree, you can leave with the other crafty servants, and I won't bother you anymore!"

Being expelled now would hardly be favorable for her, staying at Jisheng Hall? Would that make it easier for the Empress to act? Moreover, being expelled from the Lin Residence at this critical moment would likely be turned into a big issue by the Empress and affect this selection event.

Gu Youyou said, "Youyou has received care from my uncle and aunt and naturally considers herself as a part of the Lin Family. Since Youyou has broken the family rules, she will accept any punishment from Aunt."

"Hmm." Madam Lin nodded in satisfaction and said, "Then we will follow the family laws. What is the usual punishment for the young ladies who sneak out, Hen Xiang?"

Hen Xiang hurriedly replied, "Madam, previously when the young mistress sneaked out, you punished her by having her copy the women's precepts a hundred times."

"Good, then go back and copy the women's precepts a hundred times."

Gu Youyou obediently accepted the punishment and returned to her courtyard to start copying.

Madam Li's eyes nearly bulged out of her sockets.

"What? Just copying is enough? Madam Lin, is this how you plan to explain to the Empress?"

Chapter 957: The Right Person in Mind

Madam Lin said, "Copying books is what she fears most. This is already the severest punishment. Otherwise, what do you propose we do, nanny?"

"I say? If you ask me, she also deserves to be beaten with twenty strokes at least."

Madam Lin snorted, "Do you think I'm the only master around here, giving her twenty strokes? She isn't just any servant who can be beaten casually. It's just a matter of her leaving the estate. If we beat her for that reason, the old lady would flay me alive. Are you trying to replace me with another Madam Lin?"

...

Ever since Old Madam Lin found out that Gu Youyou had signed up for the selection of the eldest prince's consort, she was so pleased she couldn't contain her joy.

She said, "I was always worried that Youyou would never marry off, but now, thank goodness. Right, Xingyi, did she go of her own accord?"

"Mother, of course, she went on her own. Youyou's temperament is just like my eldest sister's used to be; no one else can decide for her. If she doesn't want to go, even if tied up with a rope, she won't budge."

"Ah, that's good. As long as she's willing, that's fine. Ayuan, Youyou is going to compete to become the prince's consort, you must fully support her."

Madam Lin was quite worried, yet she still smiled and replied, "Yes, Mother."

With Old Madam Lin's support, Gu Youyou's confinement finally came to an end.

The Empress, on the other hand, was very disappointed in Madam Lin. When Nanny Li left, she took Madam Lin's favor, recounting the events truthfully to the Empress and did not forget to put in a few good words for Madam Lin.

"Empress Madam, that Gu Youyou is quite cunning. I don't think it's that Madam Lin is unwilling to help us, but rather that Madam Lin is simply no match for her. Her name has already passed the initial selection. For what follows, we'll need to handle it ourselves to feel assured."

The Empress glanced at Nanny Li indifferently, saying, "Then do you have any good suggestions?"

Nanny Li pondered for a moment, then whispered into the Empress's ear, "Does Your Majesty have a suitable candidate in mind for the prince's consort?"

A flicker passed through the Empress's eyes as she responded, "If Gu Youyou were on our side, she would indeed be a good choice, but unfortunately, she's too rebellious, a difficult person to control. Besides her, there's the Zhang Residence's Second Miss who just turned fifteen this year.

Zhang Family's eldest miss was a candidate for Jinwu Consort, but I chose Qianqing as the primary consort to win over Lin Xingyi, which made Madam Zhang quite unhappy as the most honorable eldest daughter became a mere consort.

If this time we could help the Second Miss get selected, it would also be an opportunity to ease the relationship with Madam Zhang."

Nanny Li suddenly sneered mischievously, saying, "Empress Madam, the final few tests examine genuine talent and knowledge. The Zhang Family is known for literary achievements, and the misses of the Zhang Family have always been talented, especially the eldest miss who is widely acknowledged as a talented lady. I suppose the Second Miss wouldn't be far behind. Given that, there's nothing for us to worry about. Your Majesty need only ensure the fairness of the selection."

The Empress's eyes brightened, "Hearing you say that, it seems to make sense. What's the use of Youyou's strange medical skills? What we're comparing here isn't medical skills."

"Exactly, we're comparing their talents and knowledge."

"Alright, then go and find out immediately what the Zhang Family's Second Miss excels at." She planned to ensure that the Second Miss's strengths would be included in the contest.

...

It was almost April, and in the north, it no longer snowed, but the weather was still chilly.

Gu Youyou, who hadn’t been out for a long time, put on warm clothing, a cloak, and prepared to step outside.

She was going to the palace tomorrow and decided to go out to purchase some items to bring along.

Chapter 958: A Chance Meeting with Officer Jie

Xiang Chun followed Gu Youyou with a large cloth bag on her back and said, "Miss Gu, the bag you made is really convenient. It can hold a lot of things and is easier to carry."

Gu Youyou glanced at it and said, "We won’t be buying a lot of things; you don’t need to carry such a big bag."

However, Xiang Chun said, "This time we’re going to stay in the palace for half a month. It’s easy to get in but hard to get out. If we don’t bring everything we need, how will we get by? She lowered her voice and said, "I have found out that life in the palace is tough for those without a background; they might not even get enough to eat. I’ve prepared some extra buns just in case."

"You’re going too?" Gu Youyou said in surprise.

"Of course, I’ve checked. Those who have conditions at home all have maids with them."

Gu Youyou: "..." It seems Xiang Chun was taking this seriously.

Xiang Chun joyfully said, "The old Madam said that to ensure you marry successfully, the entire Lin Residence will support you fully."

She was right. Xiang Chun was not arranged by the lady of Lin Residence, but by the old lady.

The items Gu Youyou intended to buy were almost all arranged; all the clothes were custom ordered from Manxiu Building. Under this circumstance, she did not forget to promote her own business.

Handkerchiefs were something girls of this era all needed to have on hand.

Various hair accessories were also necessary. She was going to stand out through her abilities, not being eccentric.

Others were all wearing makeup; if she appeared with a bare face, wouldn't that just attract resentment?

Unknowingly, she arrived near Jie Residence. In the cold wind, Jie Residence looked desolate and bleak.

She coincidentally saw Lord Jie stooping his back as he exited the main gate; a servant offered him a thick cloak, which he refused with a wave of his hand.

He exhaled a puff of white air and hurried on his way.

After walking a few steps, he saw Gu Youyou, who had just come out of a ready-made clothes shop in Manxiu Building.

Having not seen her for a long time, Gu Youyou thought Lord Jie seemed to have aged a lot. He was only in his fifties, but now he looked somewhat hunched.

Miss Jie was married; both young masters were not at home; in the large Jie Residence, there was only this old man.

When people get old, what they most desire is to have grandchildren around them. In this era, capable men have lots of wives and concubines; sons, daughters-in-law, and numerous grandchildren whose names can't even be recalled. Like Lord Jie, he was the only one so solitary in all of Beijing.

"Lord Jie!" Gu Youyou bowed slightly in greeting.

"Ah, Doctor Gu!" Lord Jie showed a smile and said, "I haven't seen Doctor Gu for a long time. You encountered difficulties last year; I should have sent someone with a gift to visit you, but I got busy and forgot."

Gu Youyou smiled and said, "Thank you, Lord Jie, for your concern."

"Doctor Gu, you have been kind to the Jie family; I have long been looking for an opportunity to repay this kindness."

Gu Youyou said, "Miss Du, Miss Jie; they are Youyou's good friends. Helping friends doesn't count as a favor."

Lord Jie laughed heartily and nodded, saying, "Doctor Gu is a person of great wisdom and benevolence; surely you will also be a person of good fortune."

He adjusted his clothes and said, "I am in a hurry to go to the Ministry of Personnel, so I will not talk more with Doctor Gu now. When my daughter returns to the Jie Residence, you must come and visit."

Gu Youyou nodded and said, "Thank you, Lord Jie."

As Jie Huanzhi passed by Gu Youyou, the old man's stooped back in the cold wind looked even more worn. Gu Youyou could not bear it and called him back.

"Lord Jie, please wait."

Jie Huanzhi stopped and said, "Doctor Gu, is there anything else?"

Chapter 959: Entering the Palace

Gu Youyou slightly lowered her eyes and said indifferently, "Last year, Youyou visited Fusang City in Dongzhou once and saw the second son of the Jie family. He was a guardsman there."

Jie Huanzhi's expression darkened, and his body slightly swayed, then he clasped his hands towards Gu Youyou, "Thank you, Doctor Gu, for informing me."

Gu Youyou continued, "Fusang City is neither hot in summer nor cold in winter, being a guardsman there is not as hard as in Beijing. With the eldest son looking after him, I think he will not suffer too much."

Jie Huanzhi gently nodded and turned to leave.

However, this time, his back seemed even more bent.

Xiang Chun curiously asked Gu Youyou, "Miss, when did you go to Fusang City last year?"

Gu Youyou replied, "It’s none of your business, let’s go, go back."

...

Just as when she bid farewell to Lin Qianqing, Gu Youyou boarded the carriage to the palace.

What Gu Youyou did not expect was that, even though many were eliminated in the first round, there were still hundreds of competitors.

This is really...

So many girls are trying to steal her husband.

Gu Youyou: "..."

What surprised her even more was that the first test to enter the palace was an identity check? Wasn’t this pomp reserved only when the Emperor selected his concubines? Could she have remembered wrongly?

It turned out Jin Zijin was telling the truth. Perhaps at that time, he already calculated today's situation, or rather, had long decided on this move. That's why, he'd rather hide behind a bed and endure than not.

To marry a woman with no family background righteously was indeed not easy, this vile feudal society made her life even harder than Cinderella's.

An elder maid came out to lecture them.

"So, every woman who steps through these palace gates must go through this test, whether she is to be the noble Empress or a common Palace Maiden, before entering through this front door, everyone must be clean."

After this round, several more girls were disqualified.

The elder maid showed no sympathy to these crying girls, saying, "Dared to come here with your body violated? And still crying. Someone come, chase them all out."

"Elder Maid, I am wrongly accused..."

"Yes, elder maid, I didn't do anything, how can this be?"

In fact, Gu Youyou knew that not every girl preserved "that thing" before getting married; a slightly larger movement, or just any accident, could break it.

Being a doctor, she understood this better than most. There might be some who tricked their way in, but others were falsely accused.

However, she merely felt pity for these girls, she would not speak up for them.

But being expelled for this reason, they would find it difficult to marry someone later.

The elder maid was unsurprised as she often discovered such cases.

Only those who passed the identity check were arranged to stay in Chuxiu Palace because there were too many people, often four to five would be housed in one room, their beds lined up next to each other, fortunately, it wasn't one big shared bed.

Just after Xiang Chun had made Gu Youyou's bed, a maid came to talk to her.

"Which family does your young miss come from? She seems quite mature."

Being in her twenties, Gu Youyou indeed looked different from those childish fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girls.

Xiang Chun pouted and said, "The eldest prince is also not young anymore. He needs someone a bit older to match him. What would he talk about with these young girls?"

Their voices were very low, only they themselves, and Gu Youyou could hear them.

Chapter 960: Recognized

Thankfully, or Xiang Chun's remark might have stirred up a hornet's nest.

The little maid's face turned white and then red as she huffed, "Your miss will surely end up an unmarried spinster."

"Hey, what did you say? I'll tear your mouth apart!" Xiang Chun threatened to hit her, raising her voice quite a bit, which drew the attention of everyone else.

Gu Youyou quickly called Xiang Chun back.

"Xiang Chun, come here."

Only then did Xiang Chun, still huffing, spare the little maid and asked, "What other instructions do you have, cousin miss?"

Gu Youyou said, "Let’s tidy up our things. We’re living together in tight quarters; leaving a pile here takes up space."

There, the little maid muttered Xiang Chun’s words to her own miss, who, after glimpsing at Gu Youyou, said thoughtfully, "You must be Doctor Gu."

Gu Youyou nodded lightly and said, "You must be Miss Zhang."

She seemed even more surprised and asked, "How did Doctor Gu recognize me?"

Gu Youyou motioned for her to look at the handkerchief.

Sure enough, she held in her hand an exquisitely embroidered handkerchief with the delicate character "Zhang" stitched onto it.

Miss Zhang broke into a smile and said, "Doctor Gu is truly meticulous."

Although the people here might not all have met Gu Youyou, the name of Doctor Gu from Jisheng Hall was well-known; once mentioned, everyone knew of her.

Under normal circumstances, they might have swarmed her to make connections, but in this situation, as competitors, they thought better of it.

They whispered among themselves instead.

"Who would have expected Doctor Gu to come here as well."

"Yes, I heard that Doctor Gu is in her twenties and still without a husband's family. I thought that someone like Doctor Gu, who dedicates her life to medicine, wouldn't marry. I didn't expect she had such hopes."

In the face of these comments, Gu Youyou just smiled.

When Princess Jin Liuying heard that Gu Youyou had come to the palace, she rushed over that very day.

"Master, master, are you going to be my sister-in-law?" The ten-year-old princess still had a child's mentality.

Gu Youyou didn't answer her question; any response would have attracted harsh reactions. She was already conspicuous enough as an older girl among others; there was no need to stand out more.

She bent down to gently tap the princess's nose, saying with a smile, "Your Highness, what are you doing here? Come, let your master see if you've grown taller."

Gu Youyou hadn't seen Princess Jin Liuying for quite some time. Pulling her in front for comparison, then raising her hand to mark the height, she said, "You've grown this much."

In another year or two, she would enter the golden period of a girl's springtime growth, innocent and vivacious just for a year or two more.

"Really? Have I grown that much? I can't tell," said the princess in delight.

Gu Youyou replied, "After you return to Liuying Hall, mark your current height on the wall. After some time, compare it again and you will know."

At that moment, her palace maiden rushed over, relieved to find Jin Liuying safe and sound.

"Princess, why have you run off here? You gave your servant quite a scare."

Jin Liuying put away her smile and said to Gu Youyou, "Master, I must go back now. I'll come see you when I have time. If you need anything, send someone to find me."

"Alright, go on!" Gu Youyou said with a light smile.

The roommates, having seen the princess come to find Gu Youyou and even calling her master, were all filled with envy.