Farmhouse 961

Chapter 961: Verbal Sparring

Miss Zhang stepped up to Gu Youyou and asked in a low voice, "Doctor Gu, I've heard your medical skills are remarkable. You once cured the Empress Dowager's leg ailment and were fortunate enough to take Princess Number Nine as your apprentice. It turns out to be true."

The other ladies started to grow uneasy.

Gu Youyou was the Princess's mentor and the Empress Dowager's benefactor. Did they even stand a chance against her?

Thus, when they looked at Gu Youyou again, their eyes were filled with hostility.

These few words made Gu Youyou take another look at Miss Zhang.

An unintentional remark had made her the target of everyone's arrows!

But it didn't matter. After all, they were selecting only one, not a bunch. After these few days, everyone would go their separate ways, and who would remember who was who?

Gu Youyou, with her combined lifetimes, was more than thirty years old. She had no reason to quarrel with these little girls who were in their mid-teens.

"Yes, it is," Gu Youyou said.

After saying so, she hummed a tune and walked away, irritating the girls to the point where their teeth itched.

The first task bestowed upon them from above was to create a piece of needlework themed around spring flowers. They had three days and could go to the managers of the Imperial Palace Affairs Bureau to get whatever they needed.

In this era, whether it was a poor family or a rich family, much emphasis was placed on a woman's needlework skills. If one could not do needlework, they would be severely looked down upon.

Hearing the task, most thought about collecting the finest silk threads to embroider an item symbolic of spring, which was the simplest and most likely to stand out.

But, embroidery was exceedingly difficult for Gu Youyou—she didn't know how to do it.

Her roommates came back, delighted with their silk threads and brocades, while Gu Youyou was still sitting at the desk, drawing and writing.

An insensitive young lady approached and teased her, "Doctor Gu, we are competing in needlework, not prescribing medicine."

Her words amused the other roommates.

Xiang Chun, infuriated, stomped her feet and shouted, "What are you doing, looking to cause trouble?"

Gu Youyou quickly held her back, saying, "We're competing based on skill, not on who has the sharper tongue."

As she spoke to Xiang Chun, she also retorted to the talkative young lady.

The young lady's face turned red and then white with anger, and her maid hurriedly consoled her, "Miss, we don't have much time, three days. Let's not stoop to her level and get on with our embroidery."

What Gu Youyou held in her hand were the measurements for Princess Number Nine. Embroidery was out of the question for her, but needlework didn't just refer to embroidery—it included spinning, starching, sewing, embroidering, braiding, paper-cutting, fabric flowers... and so on.

But under the current circumstances, for these girls, embroidery was the easiest, their best skill, and it did not waste time.

And Gu Youyou, naturally, would choose what she was best at too.

A spring flower theme? Making a skirt fit for a Flower Fairy couldn’t be better. At that moment, she was calculating the size of the skirt and the flowers.

With only three days’ time, Gu Youyou spent one whole day calculating the materials. It was almost nightfall when she, with Xiang Chun in tow, hurriedly went to request the materials.

In the Imperial Palace, it was not easy for low-status girls in the Chuxiu Palace to obtain good materials; they were always troubled by others, especially someone like Gu Youyou, who arrived just as the doors were about to close.

"Who’s going to get that for you at this hour? Look at the time; come back tomorrow," said the Palace Maiden with much arrogance.

Gu Youyou was not annoyed and said, "Please do me a favor, honored ladies." Naturally, she didn’t expect them to do her a favor for nothing; she had benefits to offer.

Chapter 962: What is Gu Youyou Going to Do?

Gu Youyou understood the rules here, she immediately took out some silver notes, handing one worth a thousand silver to each on-duty palace maiden. The palace maidens hurriedly assisted her up and down, and they finally gathered everything needed before the doors closed.

"Miss, that’s five thousand silver gone." Xiang Chun felt heartbroken; as a maid, she only earned four silver a month, and that was because she was the head maid. The second and third-tier maids didn’t even earn four silver, and here were five thousand silver that she could never earn in her lifetime!

Gu Youyou said, "It’s only a small amount of money. Just with this dress I’m wearing, I can earn back double the silver."

Gu Youyou and Xiang Chun, after the evening meal, returned with a bunch of colorful scraps, and were again ridiculed by others.

Xiang Chun couldn’t bear it and began arguing with them.

Gu Youyou ignored it altogether and went to eat.

Time was limited, and they couldn’t go to bed too early.

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The Empress had people keeping an eye on Gu Youyou the whole time, and someone went to report to her now.

"What is she trying to make?"

The palace maiden replied, "Replying to Your Majesty, this servant doesn’t know. She took a lot of fabric, a big bunch of colorful scraps, and it’s hard to tell what she intends to do."

"A massive bunch of colorful fabric?" the Empress turned to nursemaid Li.

Nursemaid Li lowered her voice and said, "Your Majesty, it seems she is trying to puzzle others intentionally, by taking an assortment of things so that no one can guess what she’s up to."

The Empress thought for a moment, then asked, "Did she take any silk threads?"

The palace maiden replied, "She took some, but not much, I guess it’s not for embroidery."

Nursemaid Li added, "Your Majesty, I’ve inquired, and she doesn’t know how to embroider."

"Ha..." the Empress chuckled and said, "Then what is she trying to make? Clothes? But how can she make any clothes in such a short time? If there’s no embroidery, it won’t match the spring theme, and if the clothes lack sophisticated embroidery, who knows how it will look."

Nursemaid Li also laughed, saying, "Her expertise lies in medical skills and painting, which are precisely what we don’t compete in."

"Indeed," the Empress smiled, "But we shouldn’t be careless either. Have someone keep a close eye."

"Yes, Your Majesty." After thinking, nursemaid Li added, "Your Majesty, if necessary, should we..."

The Empress raised her hand and said, "No, we tried to stop her from registering last time and suffered for it. She’s followed by capable people, newly entered the palace. We mustn’t startle the snake; let’s just wait and see. Besides... those young girls are not to be underestimated; we won’t have to lift a finger, someone else surely will."

Meanwhile, Jin Zijin also received a report.

"Doctor Gu took many pieces of fabric; it’s unclear what she intends to do. Your Highness, should we..."

"No need," Jin Zijin said. "She knows what she’s doing. Just keep an eye on those who might want to cause trouble."

But can those who intend to sabotage really be watched all the time?

The next day very early in the morning, Gu Youyou and Xiang Chun were shocked.

The fabric she had taken was initially intact, but now it was all cut into pieces.

Xiang Chun burst into tears and cried out, "Who did this? Miss, we must report this to Noble Consort Sheng, we must inform the Empress Dowager."

The young girls in the same room showed signs of fear, standing beside their own beds, at a loss.

"No... it wasn’t me, don’t look at me like that," said one young girl.

Gu Youyou scanned their faces one by one, merely snorted with laughter, and said nothing.

Chapter 963: Plot Twist

Fortunately, she had already finished the main part of her dress yesterday night and had placed it inside her own clothes.

The damage to the fabric wasn’t a big deal, since it was only meant for decoration.

Gu Youyou said to Xiang Chun, "You sleep in the daytime, and guard the clothes."

A palace maiden outside asked Gu Youyou in surprise, "Miss Gu, how can you compete when your things are destroyed? Do you want to report this to Empress Sheng? Her Highness is sure to stand up for you."

Hearing the palace maiden say this, the other girls became even more fearful.

Gu Youyou’s eyes swept over the girls out of the corner of her eye, and she already had an idea of the situation.

Miss Zhang’s gaze was too calm, yet her maid was too panicked.

It was said that her elder sister was a consort who married into the Prince Jin Residence alongside Lin Qianqing; Gu Youyou had once encountered Madam Zhang leading Miss Zhang into the palace during her first visit, and her aunt had been infuriated by Madam Zhang.

"No need," Gu Youyou said, "Time is limited. Telling Her Highness would surely lead to an inquisition, and by then, none of the ladies in our room would be able to finish their embroidery in time, inadvertently giving the advantage to others."

Today was the day before the deadline for submission, and she did not have time to find the person responsible. That would play right into the hands of certain people. Moreover, Gu Youyou’s words also

served as a warning to those who intended to cause trouble; there were competitors beyond just us, with potential rivals filling every room, all hoping to see in-fighting among us.

The palace maiden walked away disappointed, and Gu Youyou's lips curled slightly in disdain, thinking: Someone's calculations have gone awry; I'm not some fool who flares up at the slightest provocation.

One of the girls, feeling that Gu Youyou made a lot of sense and grateful that Gu Youyou hadn't made a big deal of it and involved them, timidly approached and said quietly, "Doctor Gu, it wasn't me who did it."

Gu Youyou responded gently, "Hmm, I know."

One came forward to declare her innocence, and soon another girl came over, "Doctor Gu, it wasn't me either."

"Hmm, I know," Gu Youyou said.

"It wasn't me either," another girl said.

"Alright, I got it!" Gu Youyou said again.

There were five girls living in this room, and now only Miss Zhang hadn't spoken.

Everyone turned to look at her.

The usually composed Miss Zhang was now clearly uneasy, her complexion turning somewhat pale as she thought: Gu Youyou is indeed formidable, but still not my match. I have the Empress's support, and she will control the content of the competition to favor what I'm good at. I'm naturally talented and only slightly inferior to my elder sister. Besides her, no one in Beijing is better than me; I don't believe I can't outdo these women.

"It wasn't me," she said coolly.

Gu Youyou did not respond, leaving behind an enigmatic look as she departed.

Miss Zhang maintained a smile on her face until she was out of sight, then slowly let it fade.

Anyone who was not too foolish would understand what was going on.

The girls' gazes towards Miss Zhang changed; they now looked at her with the same dislike they had previously reserved for Gu Youyou.

Miss Zhang felt her face turn ashen; she never expected that Gu Youyou, seemingly doing nothing, had already triumphed completely over her.

"Miss Gu, you are truly impressive," Xiang Chun said with a look of admiration.

Gu Youyou chuckled quietly, "This is what you call using a minimal force to move a heavy weight; sometimes, confronting force with force doesn't necessarily reap benefits."

Chapter 964: The Blind Date Mass Selection Turns into a New Product Launch Event

The Zhang Family's position was such that they were an existence that even your Aunt would get a headache from. If she publicly exposed Miss Zhang's sabotage, ruining her reputation in the palace, wouldn't the Zhang Family hate her to death?

Gu Youyou had the Xiang Chun partition screen pulled up and started cutting the damaged fabrics into even smaller pieces, making them into tiny flowers.

The three days passed quickly, and everyone gathered in the Imperial Garden for the occasion.

After the snow stopped, the flowers in the Imperial Garden bloomed swiftly.

The young ladies each brought their own needlework on stage for Noble Consort Sheng to review.

Noble Consort Sheng sat above, inspecting personally, while the Empress and the Empress Dowager oversaw the work, along with many concubines from the Harem who followed to watch the excitement.

It had to be said that the girls of this era were very capable; in three days, there were those who embroidered, those who made jewelry, and even those who made embroidered shoes.

Clothing was more complex to make because a remarkable garment needed to feature embroidery too, and that couldn’t be done in just three days, so apart from Gu Youyou, no one else made clothes.

"Miss Chen’s plum blossom hairpin is extremely exquisite, isn’t it? It’s a flower too, so it fits the theme of spring blossoms, right?"

The Empress Dowager smiled and said, "Of course it fits. The plum blossom is the first flower of early spring."

"Miss Chen is truly skilled and talented. There are many young ladies who can embroider, but not many who can make hairpins," one of the concubines from the Harem said.

"Excellent, Miss Chen is shortlisted!" Then, Noble Consort Sheng personally replaced her token with a shortlisted one.

When it came to Gu Youyou, she was empty-handed.

Gu Youyou didn’t wait for Noble Consort Sheng to ask and explained, "Noble Consort, this piece of needlework I’ve made can’t be appreciated on its own, it must be worn."

"Oh, you’ve made clothes?" Noble Consort Sheng asked with a gentle smile on her face. "So, are you going to change into it?"

The Empress watched Gu Youyou coldly. So, it really was clothes? Let’s see what kind of clothes you’ve made in three days. Just don’t forget, not only does it have to be needlework, but it also has to fit the theme of spring blossoms. Don’t think you can just embroider a flower on it and present that.

"There’s no need," Gu Youyou replied to Noble Consort Sheng, then clapped her hands. A fairy in flowers appeared bouncing and hopping out from among the multitude of blooms, capturing everyone’s gaze because the clothes she wore were truly... unlike any they had ever seen before, vastly different from their usual attire.

The clothes designed by Manxiu Building were bold and eye-catching enough, but this was simply... indescribable.

Nevertheless, everyone understood one thing—it was too beautiful.

So, clothes could be made like this?

Indeed, even without embroidering flowers directly onto the clothes, one could still make attire that was a riot of blossoms.

These three-dimensional flowers were far superior to ordinary embroidered ones.

"Paying respects to Great Ancestral Mother, Mother Empress, Noble Consort,"

the little flower fairy said with a sweet smile, respectfully bowing to the Empress Dowager, the Empress, and Noble Consort Sheng sitting above.

It took a while for everyone to react, and the concubines gasped with surprise, saying, "Doctor Gu, is this the needlework you’ve made?"

Gu Youyou replied respectfully, "Your Grace, this is indeed my needlework. This dress shall be called ’Fairy in Flowers,’ and it will also be the main style for the upcoming season at Jinxiu Building. If Your Graces like it, you may place a preorder now."

At that moment, everyone recalled that Gu Youyou was indeed one of the backers of Manxiu Building.

"Ah, really? That’s great, I want one!"

"I want one too."

"I want one as well..."

This turned awkward as the matchmaking selection event had unexpectedly become Gu Youyou’s new product launch.

Chapter 965: Feeling Stifled, Aren’t You?

"Don’t mention the ladies, even the girls participating in the open auditions couldn’t help but want to say a few words—they just didn’t dare because of the formidable figures seated above."

Miss Zhang’s nails dug into her flesh, turning her face pale. It turned out that those few snips couldn’t really harm her, so was it not pointless to have others bearing grudges against her?

Empress Dowager and the Empress were overjoyed, calling Princess Jiujiu over and looking at her incessantly.

"This really is our Jiujiu, isn’t it? Dressed in these clothes, I almost didn’t recognize her—just like a little flower fairy."

"It’s made by my master, it’s beautiful," said Princess Jiujiu.

"Yes, the one your master made looks beautiful," laughed the Empress Dowager heartily.

The quality was evident to all, and Gu Youyou naturally received her advancement token.

After this round, more than half of the participants were eliminated, leaving roughly fifty.

The Empress wore a troubled expression, as Nanny Li whispered in her ear, "Do not worry, Your Majesty, making clothes is Gu Youyou’s forte. This is only the first round; it’s early days yet."

The girls were sent back to Chuxiu Palace. They needed to rest briefly, as the next competition would be in two days.

What a coincidence—it turned to be Gu Youyou and Miss Zhang who were placed in the same room, and one couldn't help but wonder if it was deliberate.

That night, as Gu Youyou was deep asleep, suddenly someone climbed on top of her, giving her a fright.

The person covered her mouth and gestured for silence.

By the moonlight, Gu Youyou could finally see that it was Jin Zijin.

He let go of her, and Gu Youyou was able to speak.

She nervously glanced at the screen, then the other bed, and whispered, "How did you get here? It's not just me in this room."

Two masters and two more maidens sleeping on the floor.

"I haven't seen you in so long; I came to see you," Jin Zijin murmured into her ear.

Gu Youyou knew Jin Zijin was a person of steadiness. Since he had come, he must have prepared thoroughly.

She gradually relaxed, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

"Zijin, I missed you too!" Gu Youyou hadn't spoken such cheesy words in a long time.

Jin Zijin turned her face towards him, lightly kissed her lips, and said, "Soon, I will be able to marry you openly."

He smiled softly, adding, "You've been under lots of pressure these days. But, Youyou being so clever, you are bound to stand out and leave no room for criticism."

Gu Youyou was taken aback before realizing why he had staged this entire scenario.

People's words were formidable; even if she was the respected Divine Doctor, she was still of common birth.

In this world of clear social hierarchies, let alone a commoner marrying a prince, even as it were, both he and she would face endless gossip.

She could easily be slandered as a seductress enchanting the prince.

He could be criticized as being debauched.

Essentially, a mismatched couple would never hear anything positive from others.

Humans live within societies, not secluded in mountains; nobody can completely ignore public opinion.

But if Gu Youyou could legitimately excel among all chosen girls, it would effectively silence the critics and even spawn praise.

Tears welled up in Gu Youyou's eyes as she spoke softly, "You've put a lot of thought into setting up this play, worrying over it must have been tough."

Zijin: "..." She was still the same, as irreverent as ever.

Chapter 966: Consecutive Victories

He automatically ignored what she said afterward and remarked, "It's good that Noble Consort Sheng still remembers her old master's affections. It wouldn't be too difficult for her to step forward."

Jin Zijin had also omitted the part about convincing the Emperor to agree to his request.

But for Jin Zijin, it wasn't for his sake, it was simply on behalf of his master, or so he comforted himself.

"And how about you? Are things going smoothly?" Gu Youyou knew everything about his situation, so his question was merely casual.

He believed Youyou could handle it herself.

Gu Youyou said, "Naturally, it's not going smoothly. Someone is tripping me up, but I know you must have taken care of the bigger troubles in secret."

Jin Zijin laughed and said, "You really do know everything."

Having tucked her back into the blanket, Jin Zijin sat on the edge of the bed and spoke softly, "I have to go back now. I can't stay with you all night. You should sleep early too. Rest well tomorrow, because the day after tomorrow, the competition will likely involve calligraphy or poetry. The Empress favors Second Miss Zhang from Prime Minister Zhang's family, and her expertise is just calligraphy and poetry."

Gu Youyou smiled and said, "Then isn't she just walking into the line of fire? Unfortunately for her, I happen to be good at those arts too."

...

The next competition was poem writing, an approach rather cliché, themed again around spring flowers.

While others had properly composed poems about spring flowers, albeit most were passable at best, Miss Zhang's poem was outstandingly well-crafted.

Gu Youyou picked up an easy win using a famous poem about flowers.

By this round, twenty people had won.

In the next round, Noble Consort Sheng announced that the day's competition would be for a piece of calligraphy. Each contestant would write a calligraphy piece, and the topic was already set: the "Women's Admonitions."

Families with means would send their daughters to the Women's Private School, where the curriculum focused on the "Four Books for Women," primarily the "Women's Admonitions." Therefore, she believed that these selected girls could recite an article of the "Women's Admonitions" by heart.

Gu Youyou was not well-versed in it but, having been punished frequently by her aunt, she had almost learned it.

She was just uncertain if she could recite it from memory, which made her somewhat worried.

Yet, the Empress above was even more worried than her.

Since the task was assigned to Noble Consort Sheng, the topic was her choice, and the Empress had only just learned that this was the test.

Madam Li spoke in a low voice to the Empress, "Madam Gu Youyou has often been punished by Madam Lin to copy the 'Women's Admonitions.' She's very familiar with it; she had been punished a hundred times just before she came to the palace. Empress, this topic must be changed."

Startled, the Empress agreed with what Madam Li had said.

She straightened her appearance and gently suggested to Noble Consort Sheng and the Empress Dowager with a smile, "Empress Mother, Sister Sheng, I believe every miss here knows the 'Women's Admonitions,' so it lacks competitiveness. Since we ultimately select only one person, we should strive for excellence. Perhaps we should change the contest."

The Empress Dowager raised an eyebrow and asked, "Then, according to the Empress, what should we compare?"

The Empress smiled and proposed, "Why not compare calligraphy? There’s no need to write down the entire ’Women’s Admonitions.’ A few words should suffice."

The Empress Dowager nodded and asked, "In your opinion, what should they write?"

"Let the misses be creative. We could first select and critique the ten best pieces of calligraphy, then present them to the Emperor. We’ll cover the names of the young ladies, letting the Emperor assign the Ministers to make the selection. This way, it’s fair."

Noble Consort Sheng looked worriedly toward Gu Youyou, who responded with a slight smile.

She feared unfairness, and this fair approach seemed favorable.

Chapter 967: Choosing for the Emperor

Since she was confident, Consort Sheng had nothing more to say.

"Ladies, the contest today is about your calligraphy skills. Feel free to showcase your best handwriting."

But what should she write?

Gu Youyou gripped her fine wolf-hair brush and quickly came up with an idea.

Her writing flowed naturally as she penned the characters; it had the delicacy of a woman’s touch, yet the boldness of a man’s spirit.

The Empress understood calligraphy, but she wasn’t in charge of the contest, so she was mostly there for the excitement.

However, the judges, Consort Sheng and the Empress Dowager, were former maids; they recognized a few characters, and even with chicken-scratch handwriting, they could tell the good from the bad. But when everyone wrote well, they couldn’t distinguish who was better and who was worse.

Thus, it was up to the female officials of the palace to decide.

The girls stepped back, and the officials began to inspect their work.

Their names were written on the back, so it was unknown who had written which piece—this was to ensure fairness.

The officials quickly selected ten pieces, presenting them to the Empress Dowager, the Empress, and Consort Sheng for review.

The Empress Dowager said, "The female officials are skilled people in the palace, and their selection is surely the best. What do you think, Empress?"

The Empress had been staring at Gu Youyou’s writing, not expecting her to stand out among the twenty contestants.

She was furious but spoke gently to the Empress Dowager, "Mother, I naturally trust the officials’ choices. Why don’t I personally go to Taihe Hall? The Emperor and the Ministers are likely having their morning court session right now."

A heavy feeling suddenly weighed on Gu Youyou’s heart; the Empress was eager for this task, surely she had ill intentions. She wouldn’t sabotage the process on the way, would she?

As the Empress prepared to stand up, the Empress Dowager pressed her back into her seat.

"Oh, how can we ask the Empress to make the trip? Since the Emperor has entrusted this task to Consort Sheng, she should naturally be the one to go," she said.

Consort Sheng hurriedly stood up and took those ten pieces of calligraphy.

Despite gritting her teeth with resentment, the Empress still had to offer a smile.

"Thank you, Sister Consort Sheng," she said.

Since Consort Sheng personally delivered the calligraphy, Gu Youyou breathed a sigh of relief as there wouldn't likely be any major issues.

In the great hall, the morning court session was nearing its end. A Eunuch whispered something to Wan Decheng, who slightly furrowed his brow before passing the message to the Emperor.

The Emperor laughed heartily upon hearing it and said to the Ministers, "Gentlemen, I'm sure you are all aware that the Empress Dowager and Consort Sheng have recently been selecting a concubine for the Crown Prince. They are disregarding lineage and considering only talent and beauty, so that all the outstanding women in the land might have a chance to marry into the Imperial Family."

All the high-ranking officials naturally knew about this matter. Minister Jie laughed and said, "Your Majesty's decision is wise. The good men of our land can serve the country and the people through the imperial exams, yet many of the land's good women are buried in obscurity due to their family background.

Your Majesty's initiative is perfect for allowing these talented and beautiful women to show themselves. Even if only one is ultimately chosen, the other outstanding women will become known."

"Indeed, giving commoner women a chance highlights the immense grace of the Emperor."

In this situation, even though some highly ranked Ministers regretted not having the chance to send their own daughters to the Crown Prince's harem, there were no voices of dissent because with nobody gaining an advantage, it meant everyone had the chance to.

The court echoed with cheers of approval.

Chapter 968:

The Emperor waved his hand, signaling everyone to quiet down.

He held the piece of calligraphy sent by Wan Decheng and addressed the ministers, "Just now, within the harem, ten exceptionally beautiful and talented ladies have been selected for their calligraphy. The Empress Dowager suggests that we should all help to examine these and pick out the top three as candidates for the top positions."

After saying this, he instructed the eunuchs to spread out the ten pieces of calligraphy for the ministers to appraise one by one.

The carefully selected ten pieces were all well-written, but two of them were particularly eye-catching.

Minister Jie immediately picked up one of them and said to the others, "This one is excellent. The brushwork is bold and imposing, on par with the vigor of a man, yet it possesses a softness of stroke that men lack. It is truly rare for a woman to write such characters, and from the strength of the brushwork, she must have at least twenty years of experience."

Twenty years? Aren't the candidates under twenty and unmarried just one person? Many realized this instantly.

Everyone said that indeed, Lin Xingyi's niece was extraordinary, with remarkable medical skills, and her calligraphy was also excellent.

There was no doubt about her calligraphy making it into the top three.

Some had already begun to congratulate Lin Xingyi in a roundabout way.

Lin Xingyi saw Gu Youyou's handwriting for the first time and thought such writing was on par with those men who were accomplished in calligraphy, only comparable to the famous calligraphy experts.

Yet, he had not expected that Youyou possessed such talent.

The Emperor took the calligraphy and remarked, "Abundant harvest, reflecting the livelihood of the people, good, good."

Next was the second piece. "Peaceful state and safe people," he said, "Your Majesty, look at this one, such excellent writing is rare indeed."

Prime Minister Zhang knew well that these characters were written by his second daughter. Although it wouldn't be proper for him to present them himself, the quality of the writing was obvious, and so he didn't fear others failing to notice it.

His own daughter's calligraphy was good too, but it paled in comparison to the 'Abundant Harvest' written earlier. That was master-level while this was apprentice-level at best, perhaps an outstanding apprentice.

He couldn't help frowning, realizing he had encountered a strong rival.

Prime Minister Zhang's gaze met Lin Xingyi's and he couldn't help but snort coldly.

His eldest daughter had just lost to Lin Xingyi's daughter and became a consort. Was his second daughter now going to lose to his niece?

These were his only two legitimate daughters that he could be proud of.

This Lin Xingyi was always clashing with him, whether in matters of state or otherwise. They truly did not get along.

The Emperor took the calligraphy piece and smiled, nodding, "Peaceful state and safe people are central to the nation's well-being."

With no other notably outstanding pieces, they chose one with a good message.

"Your Majesty, please look at this piece."

The Emperor took a look and said, "Upright and bright, also not bad. Good, since these have been chosen by the ministers, let them be the ones. Wan Decheng, personally deliver these."

Consort Sheng received the calligraphy and announced it herself.

"First place, Chen Qinglian."

A tall woman stood up happily and went to Consort Sheng to receive her nomination badge.

This young lady had not been outstanding before and had not drawn any attention; the Empress whispered to Mama Li, "Go check, who is this woman!"

"Yes, Your Majesty the Empress."

"Second place, Zhang Shiyu."

Miss Zhang gracefully rose and walked toward Consort Sheng.

The Empress smiled contentedly; after all, Prime Minister Zhang and the Ducal Residence always saw eye to eye. Many things that could not be discussed with others were clear to them, and they knew well whom to support if both families were to continue to flourish. Previously, the main wife of King Jin, Madam Zhang, had already been displeased. This time, they definitely couldn't let Madam Zhang down!

Chapter 969: Jin Zijin Goes into Battle Herself

"The third name, Gu Youyou!"

The Empress's face suddenly darkened.

Gu Youyou?

She actually made it onto the list?

Gu Youyou rose and walked toward Noble Consort Sheng. Even from two meters away, she could feel the murderous intent emanating from the Empress.

Gu Youyou sighed. How quickly the world and its people change. The last time she entered the palace and offended Jin Fengzhao, it was the Empress who had saved her.

Now, she must be regretting it so much her guts are green. If it weren't for that act, none of this would have happened.

But was the Empress genuinely kind to her?

Of course not. She was simply trying to preserve her own position. If she had known from the start that Gu Youyou would be useless or even a potential threat to her, she would probably have died a thousand times over.

So Gu Youyou needn't feel guilty. It was her introduction that cured the Empress Dowager's leg and gained the Empress Dowager's trust for her.

"Alright, congratulations to the three of you. That's all for today. You may return to Chuxiu Palace to rest. As for what the next event will be, this palace cannot decide. We will have to follow the Emperor and the Crown Prince's wishes."

Gu Youyou thought: So there's one more event. It might turn out to be Jin Zijin who personally takes the field.

This could get interesting.

...

With fewer people around, she finally got to stay in a single room.

Gu Youyou hoped that Jin Zijin would climb over the wall and reveal his hand to her in the middle of the night, so she could be prepared.

But no matter how long she waited, he didn't come.

Three quiet days passed, and Eunuch Wan personally led them to Zhongcui Palace.

Legend has it that Zhongcui Palace was the Crown Prince's residence before he came of age. Now that Jin Zijin had returned so abruptly, there was initially no place for him to stay, so he was temporarily housed there.

"Going to Zhongcui Palace? Eunuch Wan, are we going to meet Crown Prince His Highness directly?" Miss Zhang whispered.

Eunuch Wan said in a low voice, "This one does not know, Miss Zhang, just follow."

Although Eunuch Wan claimed ignorance, Miss Zhang knew for sure it was the case.

Indeed, if she had known earlier, she would have dressed up carefully. She hadn't even properly combed her hair today.

However, turning her head to see that both Gu Youyou and Chen Qinglian also hadn't made any special efforts to dress up, she felt relieved.

Unexpectedly, not only was Jin Zijin present, but the Emperor, the Empress, the Empress Dowager, and Noble Consort Sheng were all there as well.

For the first time, Gu Youyou saw Jin Zijin dressed so extravagantly, apart from his hunter's clothing from Lotus Village and aside from the white Tianzong academy uniform. He could dress so brilliantly.

Indeed, brilliantly.

The orange-yellow robe, embroidered with fine python patterns and five-colored cloud patterns, his disposition itself was as fiercely hot as the sun. The robe was wide, making him appear much taller, as imposing as the sun high above.

The three ladies respectfully greeted the imperial family seated there, and the Empress Dowager, full of smiles, allowed them to rise.

Miss Zhang, standing between them, had eyes that shone with brilliance. She had seen the grand senior brother of Tianzong and Xuanzong during the sacrifices to the Dragon King and Dragon Mother. At that time, she felt that the grand senior brother of Tianzong was like a ray of sunshine in the winter. Whenever he took the incense stick from her hand, she could feel the fiery warmth coming from his hand.

But back then, she knew that the grand senior brother of Tianzong was destined to become the State Preceptor and would not marry. So, at most, she would blush a bit and think nothing more of it.

She had never imagined that in this lifetime, she might have the opportunity to be his consort, to stand with him, shoulder to shoulder.

Remembering those hands with their burning warmth, her face couldn’t help but blush again.

Chapter 970: The Tao That Cannot Be Spoken

The Emperor turned his head and asked Jin Zijin, "The Prince said he wants to personally investigate; what specifically does he want to investigate?"

Jin Zijin, with a gesture of respect, calmly said to the Emperor, "As a child of the Dao Family, perhaps we might allow the three young ladies to discuss, ’What is Tao?’"

What is Tao?

This question was not only challenging for the girls, but even the Emperor and the Empress found it difficult.

Empress Dowager Chen completely failed to grasp what he was talking about.

By her later years, the Empress Dowager was a firm believer in the Tao, but at that moment, she too fell into contemplation.

According to the order of the tablets, Empress Dowager Chen first called Chen Qinglian forward to answer the question.

Chen Qinglian hesitated for a while, and with reluctance, said, "The Heavenly Master, the State Preceptor represents the Tao."

This question from Jin Zijin was clearly a trap. Gu Youyou almost laughed out loud when she heard Chen Qinglian's response—it was clearly a desperate answer.

"Hmm!" Jin Zijin, expressionless, simply nodded slightly.

"Then... let Zhang Shiyu try to explain." Empress Dowager Chen added.

"Wait," the Empress interrupted and said to the Emperor, "Your Majesty, this question from the eldest Prince is too difficult for them. They are not nuns; how would they know what Tao is?"

Jin Zijin said, "Each person has a different understanding of Tao. I only wish to hear their interpretations of what Tao is, not necessarily whether they answer correctly."

He insisted on not changing the question.

Zhang Shiyu had no choice but to step forward reluctantly.

"Tao, the Dao Sect represents the Tao," she said.

Jin Zijin merely nodded slightly again, then shifted his gaze to Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou didn’t speak, just looked back at him.

Jin Zijin was in no hurry either, simply observing her.

This exchange of gazes between the two was baffling to everyone else, prompting even the Empress to inquire impatiently.

"Gu Youyou, can you provide an answer, or not? If you can’t, could you at least say something instead of making us all wait on you?"

Two girls watched Gu Youyou nervously.

Empress Dowager Chen appeared anxious, while the Emperor watched Gu Youyou with anticipation.

He truly wanted to see how this woman would respond to the question.

Gu Youyou shifted her gaze away, looked towards the Empress, and respectfully said, "In response to the Empress, ’The Tao that can be told of is not the absolute Tao.’ That is my answer."

"’The Tao that can be told of’?" What does this mean?

Everyone felt as if they had been played.

In contrast, Zhang Shiyu sneered and said, "According to Doctor Gu’s logic, does it mean that you looking at the eldest Prince silently is your answer, then?"

"Exactly," Gu Youyou said unflinchingly.

"Humph, really absurd," the Empress scoffed. "Gu Youyou, you are bold."

"Empress, I dare not," Gu Youyou replied respectfully yet firmly. "The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name. This is the first verse of the Tao Te Ching! The Tao that can be explained through words is not the true Tao. And if we name the Tao, that name cannot encompass Tao.

Thus I remain silent because Tao is ubiquitous, present in all things between heaven and earth; from the Tao comes one, from one comes two, from two comes three, from three come all things. Tao is the origin of everything, so I keep silent, for whatever I say is both right and wrong. Therefore, madam, I choose to remain silent."

The Empress was utterly confused; she hadn’t understood a word.