

Full-Level 831

Chapter 831: Stay for Lunch

The farce came to an end, concluding with Huangfu Jingzhang and Zhongyu Liuying retreating.

Li Yiran, not qualified to enter the ancestral hall, lingered outside unwillingly.

Quietly, she stood there, gazing up at the ancestral hall. Unaware of the situation inside, her heart brimmed with resentment.

She had anticipated a grand entrance but ended up alone outside, her son unrecognized by the Huangfu family.

Recalling Zhong Yating's provoking gaze, she felt an urge to confront her.

She realized that despite Zhongyu Liuying's efforts to elevate her status, a difference remained between her and Zhong Yating, starkly evident in today's events.

While Zhong Yating could stand proudly by Huangfu Ruixiang's side, she was left outside, even her son unacknowledged.

This fueled her ambition to surpass Zhong Yating and to be recognized by the Huangfu family.

She not only wanted her son to be listed in the Huangfu family genealogy but also insisted on having her own name recorded in the Huangfu family genealogy.

Unbeknownst to her, a strong ambition took root in her heart.

Despite some twists, the sacrificial ceremony proceeded smoothly, not delaying the auspicious time.

Afterward, Huangfu Ruiling added Ye Leng'an's name to the genealogy.

Seeing this situation, Huangfu Jingzhang still wanted to intervene, using the reason that the two were not yet married to stop them. However, when he looked up and met Huangfu Ruiling's icy gaze, the half-step he had already taken forward gradually retreated.

As the ceremony ended, direct descendants returned to the hall while collateral relatives departed, planning to reunite for dinner on New Year's Eve.

As for Li Yiran, she had already returned to the hall well before the conclusion of the sacrificial ceremony. At this moment, her expression was entirely natural, devoid of any resentment. In fact, her countenance appeared remarkably serene, as if the preceding events had never occurred at all.

Upon entering the main hall at that moment, Ye Leng'an's eyes flickered with a hint of surprise when she saw Li Yiran sitting there.

She hadn't expected Li Yiran's adaptability to be quite good! Just moments ago, she had suffered such a huge humiliation, yet now she appeared completely unaffected. However, Ye Leng'an couldn't shake the feeling that something was changing about Li Yiran.

The sacrificial ceremony had ended, and Huangfu Ruiling had no intention of staying longer. He rose to leave with Ye Leng'an.

As soon as Huangfu Ruiling got up, Zhongyu Liuying immediately spoke up, "Ruiling, since you're already here, it's almost lunchtime. Why don't you and Leng'an stay and have lunch before leaving?"

"Yes, yes!" Huangfu Ruixiang chimed in, "Brother, you've been absent during the New Year's celebrations. Why don't we have a meal together now?"

Huangfu Ruiling's absence during the New Year at the ancestral mansion was something Huangfu Ruixiang had only learned upon his return. He had hoped to use these days to bond with Huangfu Ruiling.

During this period, he had been diligently cultivating for the upcoming family assessment. Huangfu Ruiling had already made it clear that if he failed, he would have to leave the Hidden World.

If he failed this time, he would have almost no chance of returning to the Huangfu family in the Hidden World. Despite his efforts in cultivation, he still lacked confidence in himself.

So, he had hoped to use this time to build a good relationship with Huangfu Ruiling. Perhaps, even if he failed the test, he could still stay with Huangfu Ruiling's support.

However, to his surprise, even on such a significant day as the New Year, Huangfu Ruiling had no intention of staying at the ancestral mansion. So, he had to seize every opportunity to improve his relationship with Huangfu Ruiling. Perhaps there would still be a chance for things to turn around.

"No, we'll leave first," Huangfu Ruiling said coldly. "You all enjoy your meal."

With that, he prepared to leave with Ye Leng'an.

Zhongyu Liuying stood up and blocked their way. She forced a smile and said, "Ruiling, we're all family. Can't you stay for a meal?"

As she spoke, there was a hint of pleading in her tone, as if she were just an ordinary mother who wanted to have a meal with her son.

Seeing Zhongyu Liuying in front of him, Ye Leng'an's eyes flickered with doubt. She felt that Zhongyu Liuying seemed particularly eager for Huangfu Ruiling to stay for a meal, which seemed strange no matter how she looked at it.

The mother-son relationship between Zhongyu Liuying and Huangfu Ruiling was not so deep, perhaps just slightly better than strangers. However, Zhongyu Liuying now seemed to attach great importance to Huangfu Ruiling, which seemed odd.

Huangfu Ruiling frowned, preparing to object.

Before he could speak, Ye Leng'an tugged at his sleeve and said with a smile, "Since your mother has said so, why don't we stay for a meal before leaving? After all, we need to eat too."

Initially, Zhongyu Liuying was dissatisfied with Ye Leng'an's interruption. However, upon hearing Ye Leng'an's words, her eyes immediately lit up, and she seemed much happier.

Chapter 832: An Uninvited Guest

Watching the change in Zhongyu Liuying's expression, Ye Leng'an's eyes flickered with interest.

She was curious to see what Zhongyu Liuying was up to.

Usually, Huangfu Ruiling wouldn't object as long as Ye Leng'an spoke. This time was no different, so they decided to stay for a meal.

Lunch was already prepared, and now that Huangfu Ruiling had decided to stay, they immediately headed to the dining room.

Huangfu Ruiling took the main seat, with Ye Leng'an on his right.

Huangfu Jingzhang had intended to sit on Huangfu Ruiling's right, feeling he, as Huangfu Ruiling's father, was most entitled. However, Ye Leng'an ended up taking the seat.

He was quite displeased with this. While Huangfu Ruiling was the head of the family and seated at the head, he couldn't protest. But Ye Leng'an was just engaged – what right did she have to sit there?

Before he could say anything, Huangfu Ruiling's cold gaze silenced him.

Soon, everyone took their seats.

Just as lunch was about to begin, a servant entered and approached Zhongyu Liuying. "Madam, there's a Miss Zhongyu outside, claiming to be from your family, here for a visit."

"Ah, she's here!" Zhongyu Liuying's joy was palpable. She immediately stood up.

"Quickly, invite her in. No, I'll go welcome her myself!"

With that, Zhongyu Liuying strode out, her eagerness evident. Observing her departure, Ye Leng'an's lips curled into a knowing smile. She sensed Zhongyu Liuying's actions were related to the sudden visitor.

Meanwhile, the others exchanged uncertain glances, then focused on Huangfu Ruiling, waiting for his response.

Ignoring Zhongyu Liuying, Huangfu Ruiling served Ye Leng'an and began eating.

Observing this, the others followed suit.

Feeling uneasy about the sudden interruption, Huangfu Jingzhang spoke up. "Shouldn't we wait for the guest? It might be impolite!"

His words drew attention, and everyone found his statement unusual, especially coming from the typically composed Huangfu Jingzhang.

"An uninvited guest is hardly a guest," Huangfu Ruiling retorted, not even sparing Huangfu Jingzhang a glance. "Let's continue eating!"

His words struck like a slap, leaving Huangfu Jingzhang red-faced and speechless. Faced with Huangfu Ruiling, he had nothing to say, especially after their recent conflict.

Today, when Huangfu Ruiling mentioned removing him from the family genealogy, he wasn't joking. So for now, he didn't want to confront Huangfu Ruiling.

For the others, seeing this, they dared not speak up, and lunch resumed.

However, the table was unusually quiet.

Ye Leng'an glanced at Zhongyu Liuying's departure and then at Huangfu Jingzhang. Though unsure of what was happening, she sensed Zhongyu Liuying and Huangfu Jingzhang were plotting something.

Thinking about it, she felt a tinge of excitement. She wondered who this unexpected guest was.

Just then, Zhongyu Liuying returned, accompanied by a girl in a white dress.

The girl appeared to be around twenty years old, dressed in a pure white dress. However, despite her attire, she didn't exude innocence; rather, she emanated a sense of aloofness. With delicate features, she wore a faint smile on her face, yet it lacked warmth and instead conveyed a sense of detachment.

All eyes immediately focused on the girl. It wasn't because she was particularly beautiful or possessed exceptional charisma. Rather, she gave off a familiar vibe, catching everyone's attention.

Zhongyu Liuying noticed everyone had begun eating before her arrival and apologized to the girl. "I'm sorry, Lingshan. I didn't know..."

"Auntie, don't worry," the girl, Zhongyu Lingshan, interjected with a cold smile. "It's my fault for coming at such an inconvenient time and disturbing you."

With her words, everyone realized why she felt familiar.

Because the girl, Zhongyu Lingshan, bore a striking resemblance to Ye Leng'an. Of course, it wasn't about their physical resemblance but rather the ethereal and cold aura emanating from both of them.

As this dawned on them, all eyes turned to Ye Leng'an.

Clearly, everyone was curious about her reaction.

Some stole glances at Huangfu Ruiling.

Facing their discreet stares, Ye Leng'an remained composed, even smiling warmly at Zhongyu Liuying and Zhongyu Lingshan.

Unaware of Ye Leng'an's reaction, Zhongyu Liuying invited Zhongyu Lingshan to join. "No! Your presence already brightens my day. Have a seat and dine with us!"

Chapter 833: Zhongyu Lingshan

Originally, the atmosphere had already become somewhat silent due to Huangfu Ruiling's presence. Now, with Zhongyu Lingshan joining at the dining table, the atmosphere grew even more peculiar.

However, Zhongyu Liuying seemed entirely oblivious to this, even happily introducing her to everyone, "This is my niece from my maternal family. However, that's not entirely accurate. Lingshan isn't from the mortal world; she's from the Hidden World's Zhongyu family."

As she spoke, she wore a proud expression on her face.

The Zhongyu family in the mortal world had long since declined. Unlike the other three major families, there wasn't a single person in the current generation of the Zhongyu family with any cultivation talent.

Because of this, the Zhongyu family in the mortal world and the one in the Hidden World could be said to have no relationship at all. People from the other three major families were not very willing to marry into the Zhongyu family.

It could be said that if it weren't for Zhongyu Liuying marrying into the Huangfu family and giving birth to the current head, Huangfu Ruiling, the Zhongyu family might have already been excluded from the four major families.

Who would have thought that the Zhongyu family in the Hidden World would once again make contact with the one in the mortal world?

For a moment, most people's gazes were focused on Zhongyu Liuying and Zhongyu Lingshan. Obviously, everyone was very surprised by this unexpected turn of events.

Except for Huangfu Ruiling and Ye Leng'an, who continued eating calmly, their attention clearly not on Zhongyu Liuying and Zhongyu Lingshan.

For a moment, Zhongyu Liuying's expressions became somewhat unpleasant.

"So, Lingshan is from the Hidden World!" Huangfu Jingzhang quickly smiled and asked, "Then why did you suddenly come to the mortal world?"

"Nothing much, I just wanted to take a look around." Zhongyu Lingshan had a cold smile on her face. She raised her head, glanced at Huangfu Ruiling, and then said with a smile, "Master Huangfu, I didn't expect to meet you here. It's quite a coincidence!"

Although she smiled, Zhongyu Lingshan's attitude did not seem fawning at all. Moreover, it was obvious that she knew Huangfu Ruiling's identity, but her attitude remained unchanged.

Faced with such an attitude, even a stranger would politely respond. However, Huangfu Ruiling seemed to ignore Zhongyu Lingshan as if she didn't exist.

Zhongyu Lingshan was not embarrassed. She looked around at everyone and said graciously, "I apologize for the disturbance today."

Seeing Zhongyu Lingshan's behavior, everyone's sense of strangeness only grew stronger. The more they looked at her, the more they felt she was very similar to Ye Leng'an.

However, it was clear that Zhongyu Lingshan understood more about worldly affairs than Ye Leng'an did, and she also acted more generously.

Although Huangfu Ruiling didn't say anything from start to finish, the others got along well with Zhongyu Lingshan.

Ye Leng'an, who had been watching coldly from the sidelines, glanced at Zhongyu Lingshan with a cold gaze. She felt she might know what Zhongyu Liuying was up to.

Just as Ye Leng'an was still lost in thought, Huangfu Ruiling picked up another piece of meat and placed it in her bowl, bringing her back to reality. She looked at Huangfu Ruiling and then smiled brightly.

Seeing Ye Leng'an's smile, tenderness flashed in Huangfu Ruiling's eyes.

When others saw this scene, they had mixed feelings.

Huangfu Ruiling didn't say anything from start to finish. He didn't even look at Zhongyu Lingshan, as if she didn't exist.

Zhongyu Lingshan didn't seem to mind. Even when she left, she greeted Huangfu Ruiling and Ye Leng'an.

Such behavior inevitably made people sigh. Indeed, she was cultivated in a prominent family, flawless in etiquette.

After the strange lunch, Huangfu Ruiling left the ancestral mansion with Ye Leng'an.

Huangfu Jingzhang and Zhongyu Liuying seemed to want to say something, but because of Huangfu Ruiling's cold demeanor, they ultimately remained silent.

After Huangfu Ruiling and Ye Leng'an left, the others also went back to rest.

Huangfu Jingzhang and Zhongyu Liuying naturally stayed in the main building, although technically Huangfu Ruiling was the one qualified to reside there now. However, since Huangfu Ruiling didn't actually live there and hadn't given any orders to vacate, they continued living in the main building.

As for Huangfu Ruixiang, he naturally stayed behind as well. Zhong Yating, as Huangfu Ruixiang's wife, also stayed.

However, it was surprising to see Li Yiran also staying behind.

This undoubtedly slapped Zhong Yating in the face, making her very angry. However, this decision was made by Huangfu Jingzhang and Zhongyu Liuying, so she couldn't voice any objections.

Just now, she had barely said anything before Huangfu Jingzhang reprimanded her. He even said she couldn't tolerate anyone and suggested she leave if she wasn't satisfied.

Obviously, Huangfu Jingzhang was venting all his anger on her that he had just received from Huangfu Ruiling.

Perhaps because he had vented his anger on Zhong Yating and regained some self-esteem, Huangfu Jingzhang's mood improved significantly.

After returning to his room, Huangfu Jingzhang looked directly at Zhongyu Liuying and asked, "Is Lingshan staying with the Zhongyu family for the time being or returning to the Hidden World?"

"She'll stay with our family for now." Zhongyu Liuying had a smug smile on her face. "It's said that she has a method to awaken the talent of a few people in the Zhongyu family."

As long as the people of the Zhongyu family could awaken their talent and cultivate, they would be able to contact the Hidden World again.

By then, the Zhongyu family could prosper again, at least catching up. They might even surpass the other three major families.

Huangfu Jingzhang nodded. "The feeling Zhongyu Lingshan gives off is really similar to Ye Leng'an's! If they didn't look different, people might think they were twins!"

“When I first saw Zhongyu Lingshan, I had the same feeling.” Zhongyu Liuying nodded in agreement. “Moreover, in comparison, Zhongyu Lingshan is more suitable for Huangfu Ruiling than Ye Leng’an.”

Chapter 834: Shifting His Affections

“If Huangfu Ruiling could take a liking to Zhongyu Lingshan, that would be wonderful.” A hint of resentment flashed in Huangfu Jingzhang’s eyes. “If it weren’t for Ye Leng’an, I would still be occupying the position of the family head.”

Though it was Huangfu Ruiling who had ousted him from his position as the family head, he also harbored resentment towards Ye Leng’an. Had it not been for Ye Leng’an, Huangfu Ruiling wouldn’t have made such a decision.

“I wonder what’s going on in Huangfu Ruiling’s mind.”

Seemingly recalling the events of the day, Zhongyu Liuying couldn’t help but furrow her brows. “Today, Huangfu Ruiling didn’t even spare a glance at Zhongyu Lingshan.”

“How could a man stay faithful to one woman his whole life?” Huangfu Jingzhang sneered. “I used to fancy Ye Leng’an, but now that Zhongyu Lingshan has appeared, resembling Ye Leng’an yet surpassing her in every aspect, any man would know who to choose.”

He, too, was a man and understood men’s shortcomings. Although he only had one wife, Zhongyu Liuying, he had other lovers outside. Yet, only Zhongyu Liuying could bear his child, hence why he maintained her status as his wife.

Therefore, he doubted that Huangfu Ruiling could solely fancy Ye Leng’an.

Perhaps it was because Huangfu Ruiling had never encountered a woman like Ye Leng’an before, leading him to fall for her. Now that Zhongyu Lingshan had emerged, he could wake up from his infatuation.

“If that’s the case, it’d be great.” Zhongyu Liuying nodded. “A woman like Ye Leng’an isn’t fit to be the matriarch of the Huangfu family. Especially considering Ruiling’s position not only as the family head in the mortal realm but also in the Hidden World. I hope he can see clearly soon; Zhongyu Lingshan is his best choice.”

Especially since Zhongyu Lingshan hailed from the direct lineage of the Zhongyu family in the Hidden World, she was the most compatible match for Huangfu Ruiling.

When Zhongyu Lingshan suddenly appeared in the Zhongyu family, it indeed shocked her. However, upon learning of Zhongyu Lingshan’s intentions, she couldn’t help but feel excited.

With Zhongyu Lingshan’s assistance, the Zhongyu family would surely thrive again. If only Huangfu Ruiling could shift his affections and choose Zhongyu Lingshan, it would be even better.

After all, just as her husband had said, men had their flaws and couldn't stay loyal to one woman forever.

Just like her husband, she was aware of his affairs outside. However, she chose to turn a blind eye, as long as those women didn't threaten her status.

Thus, she hoped Huangfu Ruiling would choose Zhongyu Lingshan, as it would be the best outcome for everyone.

Even if Huangfu Ruiling ultimately didn't fancy Zhongyu Lingshan or remained loyal to Ye Leng'an, it wouldn't concern her.

Because she had only promised to give Zhongyu Lingshan a chance, not to guarantee her success. Whether Zhongyu Lingshan could win over Huangfu Ruiling depended on her own abilities, something she couldn't intervene in.

From any perspective, the Zhongyu family would benefit in the end, which was sufficient.

"Indeed." Huangfu Jingzhang nodded, then frowned unhappily. "This time, Huangfu Ruiling refused to spend the New Year at the ancestral residence. Otherwise, we could have created more opportunities for Zhongyu Lingshan."

"It's already rare for Huangfu Ruiling to return for the sacrificial ceremony," Zhongyu Liuying remarked. "You know his temperament. As for Zhongyu Lingshan, we've done all we can."

Huangfu Jingzhang fell silent for a moment, seemingly recalling the events of the day's rites, his expression souring.

As a couple who had been together for years, Zhongyu Liuying knew what was on Huangfu Jingzhang's mind with just a glance. She furrowed her brows, then spoke up, "By the way, Jingzhang, what should we do about Li Yiran? That child..."

"Hmph, didn't you hear what Huangfu Ruiling said today?" Huangfu Jingzhang's tone was unkind, though not directed at Zhongyu Liuying. "If we insist on including that child in the family tree, we'll be struck off. What? Do you still want to be expelled because of that child?"

"I feel I've done all I can for Li Yiran." Zhongyu Liuying's tone carried a hint of dissatisfaction. "As for the future, she'll have to fend for herself."

She felt she had done enough. She was even willing to let Li Yiran call her mother to elevate Li Yiran's status. Yet, Li Yiran proved too disappointing. What else could she do?

Meanwhile, Li Yiran was in her room.

In the room, only she and the child were present. There had been a nanny caring for the child earlier, but she had asked the nanny to leave upon her return.

Soon after, she heard faint sounds coming from the balcony. She immediately got up, walked over, and opened the balcony door, finding Li Yi entering.

Seeing Li Yi, Li Yiran was visibly anxious and immediately asked, “Brother Li Yi, how did it go? Did you find anything during your trip to the Hidden World?”

Zhong Yating and Huangfu Ruixiang had met in the Hidden World, making it impossible for her to investigate. Thus, she had to rely on Li Yi to gather information.

Although Li Yi was no longer associated with the Li generation, his cultivation talent allowed him to enter and exit the Hidden World.

Seeing Li Yiran’s anxiety, Li Yi felt a chill in his heart.

Because ever since he arrived, Li Yiran only cared about what information he could find, never once asking about him.

He was no longer a servant to the family head. Li Yiran never cared whether his casual entry and exit from the Hidden World posed any danger to him.

“What’s wrong?”

Seeing Li Yi’s silence, Li Yiran grew even more anxious, urging him, “Say something! Did you discover something important? Or did you find some leverage on Zhong Yating?”

Chapter 835: Revealing True Feelings

In the past, she harbored deep-seated hatred towards Zhong Yating for usurping her position. After today’s events, she vowed to use every means possible to dethrone Zhong Yating from her position as Huangfu Ruixiang’s wife.

Li Yi gazed at Li Yiran with a complex expression, a hint of sorrow in his eyes. “Yiran, don’t you even care about my safety? Do you realize? I am no longer a part of the Master’s entourage. I no longer have the privilege to freely come and go in the Hidden World. If the Enforcement Team discovers my current actions, do you know what consequences I’ll face?”

The former Zhongyu Yiran was his goddess, a dream he could never attain in his lifetime. But looking at Li Yiran before him, he couldn’t help but doubt if she was truly the same person he had admired for so many years.

Or perhaps, had Li Yiran always been this way, and he had been deceived by his own dreams all these years?

He had sacrificed everything for Li Yiran. Was it truly worth it? Now, he had undertaken numerous perilous tasks for her sake. Yet, Li Yiran only cared about her own interests, never considering his safety. What was the point of his efforts?

Li Yi found himself lost in confusion for a moment.

Seeing Li Yi’s expression, Li Yiran’s heart skipped a beat. Then, her expression changed, resembling that of someone on the verge of tears. “Brother Li Yi, it’s not that I don’t care about you. It’s just that too much has happened today. Because of Zhong Yating, I suffered immense humiliation. That’s why I’m so concerned about this matter.”

At this point, Li Yiran stepped forward and reached out to hold Li Yi’s hand, speaking earnestly, “You’ve always been an important brother to me. I have no family left, only you.”

Observing Li Yiran's sincere emotions, Li Yi felt a sense of relief. He even reproached himself for his earlier impure thoughts.

He was now ensnared in Li Yiran's tender trap, oblivious to the occasional flicker of disdain in her eyes.

"Don't worry, Yiran. I will protect you."

As he gazed at the gentle Li Yiran before him, Li Yi's heart swelled with tenderness. He almost made a solemn vow. "No matter what happens in the future, I will always stand by your side, safeguarding you forever."

Though he cherished Li Yiran deeply, she only regarded him as an elder brother. He couldn't force her otherwise. Furthermore, despite no longer serving the Master, he remained loyal to the Huangfu family.

Now that Li Yiran belonged to Huangfu Ruixiang and had borne his child, as a member of the Huangfu family, he harbored no desire for her.

"Brother Li Yi, thank you so much," Li Yiran expressed, deeply moved. "From now on, you're my true brother. I'll treat you as such. Whatever you need in the future, just ask, and I'll do my best to help."

"Just focus on living your life well," Li Yi said earnestly, his face reflecting sincerity. "My only wish now is for your happiness."

"Brother Li Yi, you're too kind. Meeting you is the greatest blessing of my life."

Though tears welled in her eyes as she spoke, a hint of bitterness tainted Li Yiran's expression at the end.

Seeing Li Yiran in such a state, Li Yi immediately recalled the words she had just spoken. Then, he began to ask, "Yiran, earlier you mentioned being humiliated because of Zhong Yating. What exactly happened?"

Today was the Huangfu family's sacrificial ceremony, as Li Yi had heard from Li Yiran before. Moreover, at that time, Li Yiran had excitedly informed him that she would be attending the ceremony.

However, it seemed that things didn't go as smoothly as expected.

"I'm fine." Li Yiran shook her head, attempting to force a smile, but it came out bitter. "Today's ceremony went smoothly, nothing happened."

Observing Li Yiran's insincere demeanor, Li Yi knew that things weren't as simple as she made them out to be.

So, after repeated probing, Li Yiran finally relented and revealed what had happened today.

Li Yiran's face bore sorrow as she recounted her inability to participate in the ritual and her child's exclusion from the family tree.

Of course, she deliberately placed all the blame on Zhong Yating. She even claimed that it was Zhong Yating's vehement opposition that led to her predicament.

In the end, Li Yiran seemed unable to contain her tears, her voice tinged with endless sorrow. "I know Zhong Yating doesn't like me. But the child is innocent! It's because of her opposition that my child can't even be listed in the family tree. If I were the third person between her and Huangfu Ruixiang, then I would accept it as my punishment. But I'm not. In fact, I met Huangfu Ruixiang first, and we were together before they got married. Even our child was born before their marriage. I truly don't understand what I did wrong, why she treats me like this!"

Seeing Li Yiran's distress, Li Yi felt a pang of heartache. He quickly reached out and gently patted her shoulder, offering comfort, "Yiran, this isn't your fault. Zhong Yating is simply intolerant. She must fear that your child will threaten her position, hence her targeting you like this."

"I lost my composure because of today's events," Li Yiran apologized, looking at Li Yi with regret. "Brother Li Yi, it's not that I don't care about you. It's just that so much has happened today, and I couldn't think clearly."

Witnessing Li Yiran's remorseful expression, Li Yi's heart ached. He regretted his earlier interrogation. At that moment, he wished he could slap himself.

"It's alright. It's my fault for not understanding the situation and losing my temper. It won't happen again."

Chapter 836: Coming for You

Li Yiran's eyes lit up with a spark as she continued, "So, Brother Li Yi, did you discover anything during your visit to the Hidden World?"

Upon hearing Li Yiran's inquiry, Li Yi promptly recounted the details of his findings. "Zhong Yating was originally just an outer sect disciple in the Huangfu family of the Hidden World, hailing from a remote town within its confines. Through a stroke of luck, she became affiliated with the Huangfu family as a disciple. When the Second Young Master ventured into the Hidden World, they crossed paths. Subsequently, Zhong Yating displayed persistent attentiveness towards him. However, the Second Young Master seemed indifferent to her advances. Later, it came as a surprise when the Second Young Master agreed to an engagement with Zhong Yating. However, post-engagement, their relationship soured upon their return to the Hidden World. Then, an incident occurred, leading to their eventual marriage."

"What incident?"

Upon hearing Li Yi's narration, Li Yiran appeared noticeably anxious. She struggled to contain her inner excitement as she asked, "Brother Li Yi, could you tell me what exactly happened?"

Seemingly recollecting something, Li Yi glanced at Li Yiran before speaking, "A life-saving favor. When the Second Young Master encountered danger during his training expedition, Zhong Yating saved him. Subsequently, rumors of their impending marriage surfaced."

“A life-saving favor?” Li Yiran’s eyes betrayed a hint of confusion after hearing Li Yi’s account. “How could this be?”

Even if it were for other reasons or if Huangfu Ruixiang genuinely favored Zhong Yating, she could handle it. However, she never anticipated such a reason.

A life-saving favor was the most challenging debt to repay. No wonder Huangfu Ruixiang married someone like Zhong Yating. However, it was precisely because of this life-saving favor that Zhong Yating’s position remained secure.

Even with Huangfu Jingzhang and Zhongyu Liuying standing by her side, Zhong Yating’s position remained unshakable.

Seeing Li Yiran’s expression, Li Yi hastily continued, “Yiran, don’t worry. I suspect there’s more to this than meets the eye.”

“What?” Upon hearing Li Yi’s words, Li Yiran seemed to grasp at a lifeline. She immediately reached out and grabbed Li Yi’s sleeve, then asked, “Brother Li Yi, what do you mean? Are you suggesting that this life-saving favor might be false?”

If that were the case, pulling Zhong Yating down from her position as Huangfu Ruixiang’s wife would be effortless for her.

“Um...” Li Yi appeared troubled. “I just feel that there are too many coincidences. No matter how I look at it, something seems off. As for whether there are other undisclosed matters, we’ll need to investigate further.”

Li Yiran’s eyes flashed with disdain, but her face remained sincere. “Brother Li Yi, I’m already grateful for all your help. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t know what to do next.”

“Yiran, don’t worry. I’ll investigate thoroughly.” Li Yi assured her upon seeing her expression. “I’ll make sure to uncover all the details about Zhong Yating. I won’t allow her to continue oppressing you.”

With that, Li Yi intended to leave.

Despite Li Yiran’s insistence on his staying, Li Yi departed quickly. Firstly, he had rushed here immediately after returning from the Hidden World, feeling quite exhausted and in need of rest. Secondly, this was the ancestral mansion of the Huangfu family. If they were discovered inadvertently, explaining themselves would be difficult, potentially jeopardizing Li Yiran.

As Li Yi’s figure vanished into the night, all the smiles on Li Yiran’s face vanished with it, replaced by a trace of disgust and disdain.

If it weren’t for Li Yi being her only ally, she wouldn’t have played along with him for so long.

However, Li Yi turned out to be quite useless. After investigating for so long, he only uncovered shallow information.

At present, she only had a partial understanding of Zhong Yating’s situation. She needed to carefully plan her next move.

After today's events, she had already resolved to pull Zhong Yating down, regardless of the cost. Only then would she have a chance to ascend, and her son could enter the family tree.

Contemplating this, Li Yiran fell into a somber mood.

Meanwhile, Huangfu Ruiling and Ye Leng'an had returned to the villa. They sat in the living room, enjoying tea and conversation, appearing quite content.

"How did it go?" Ye Leng'an raised an eyebrow, looking at Huangfu Ruiling with a faint smile.

"What?" Huangfu Ruiling was puzzled by the sudden question. "What do you mean?"

He wasn't feigning ignorance; he genuinely didn't understand Ye Leng'an's sudden inquiry.

"The girl your mother brought to the Huangfu family's ancestral mansion just now!" Ye Leng'an glanced at Huangfu Ruiling before continuing, "Don't tell me you have no idea that Zhongyu Lingshan came for you today! I don't believe it."

"Zhongyu Lingshan?" Huangfu Ruiling remained perplexed. "What does she have to do with me?"

While he had heard the name Zhongyu Lingshan at the ancestral mansion earlier, he hadn't paid much attention to her appearance. He even found her somewhat bothersome.

Thus, he genuinely didn't know why Ye Leng'an suddenly mentioned Zhongyu Lingshan.

Observing Huangfu Ruiling's expression, Ye Leng'an couldn't help but laugh. She shook her head and said amusedly, "If Zhongyu Lingshan knew what you were thinking now, she would be absolutely livid."

Anyone with a discerning eye could tell that Zhongyu Lingshan was here for Huangfu Ruiling.

However, Huangfu Ruiling's current demeanor made it seem as though he couldn't recall who the other person was. This would undoubtedly be a grave insult to Zhongyu Lingshan.

Huangfu Ruiling's eyes revealed a trace of helplessness. Then, he looked at Ye Leng'an and asked, "An'an, what are you trying to say? You should clarify at least!"

Chapter 837: Something Happened

Seeing Huangfu Ruiling's genuinely surprised expression, Ye Leng'an smiled slightly and then spoke, "You really couldn't tell at all! Zhongyu Lingshan today looks quite similar to me! If I didn't know better, I'd have thought Lian Mengzhu gave birth to a pair of twins!"

No, perhaps more accurately, she and Zhongyu Lingshan gave off a similar vibe. It was just unclear whether it was a coincidence or intentional.

After hearing Ye Leng'an's response, Huangfu Ruiling couldn't help but furrow his brows. "She looks like you?"

“Yes!” Ye Leng’an nodded earnestly. “I believe your mother’s insistence on persuading you to stay for lunch today is related to this. I just wonder if it’s her idea or the Hidden World’s Zhongyu family’s.”

In her heart, she leaned more towards the decision made by the Hidden World’s Zhongyu family. After all, it was not easy for a mortal world family to contact the Hidden World. Besides, she remembered Zhongyu Liuying mentioning earlier that Zhongyu Lingshan was a direct descendant of the Hidden World’s Zhongyu family.

Huangfu Ruiling’s tone carried a hint of coldness. “Their plans have nothing to do with me. However, if they expect my cooperation, it’s out of the question.”

Hearing Huangfu Ruiling’s words, Ye Leng’an chuckled softly. “If your mother saw this, she’d be livid. But I must admit, I admire their persistence! Regardless, they keep stirring up trouble.”

“Probably because they have too much free time,” Huangfu Ruiling said lightly, a hint of danger in his tone. “Seems like we need to keep them busy after the New Year.”

Since Huangfu Jingzhang and Zhongyu Liuying had so much free time, he had ways to keep them occupied.

“If they found out, they’d surely regret it.” Ye Leng’an laughed and shook her head. “But it’s still the New Year; let them enjoy it! However, the ancestral mansion should be lively during the New Year. Especially Huangfu Ruixiang, his days will surely be enjoyable.”

To be blunt, having a doting wife and concubine was quite something. However, this was the 21st century, not feudal times. Coexisting under the same roof wasn’t ideal, considering the potential conflicts between two women.

But none of this concerned her.

“Don’t worry about other people’s affairs,” Huangfu Ruiling said, pulling Ye Leng’an closer. His tone softened, lacking the earlier coldness, replaced with tenderness and indulgence. “Let’s think about how we’ll celebrate the New Year together!”

Ye Leng’an didn’t resist; she simply lay down, resting her head on Huangfu Ruiling’s lap. “Last year, we were overseas for the New Year. This year, celebrating in the capital will be more lively. But there’s one thing...”

She smiled at Huangfu Ruiling and continued, “Neither of us knows how to cook. We’ll probably have to have our New Year’s Eve dinner delivered.”

“Alright.” Huangfu Ruiling smiled back. “There should be plenty of activities in the malls. Let’s go check them out together.”

“Sounds good!”

The two happily discussed their New Year plans, much like any ordinary couple. Or perhaps, it would be more accurate to say they were like newlyweds planning their lives together.

While they enjoyed their sweet, blissful moments, Zhou Cui'an's life wasn't as comfortable.

Previously, thanks to Murong Yumeng's referral, she secured a part-time job. Then, due to Murong Yumeng's recommendation, she was assigned the task of procurement.

Anyone familiar with the industry knew how complex procurement could be. Zhou Cui'an wasn't an expert, but she had heard stories. Still, being a novice, she didn't dare to be too bold. She only dared to discreetly accept some kickbacks from the mall.

The kickbacks weren't substantial, just over twenty thousand. Yet, for Zhou Cui'an, it was a considerable sum. It was even more than what she'd earned working the entire winter break at the company.

She'd heard tales of people buying houses in the capital with such kickbacks. However, being just a seasonal worker and inexperienced, she wasn't daring enough. Still, she found solace in the relatively modest amount she'd received, ensuring a safer path.

However, she hadn't anticipated the trouble that ensued.

Of course, it wasn't because her kickbacks were uncovered but due to a quality issue with the batch of goods she procured.

This time, she was tasked with purchasing New Year's gifts for the employees. Unexpectedly, there was a quality problem with the snacks in one of the gift boxes. Many employees discovered it upon opening.

The incident caused quite a stir, prompting the company to launch an investigation.

As the person directly involved in procurement, Zhou Cui'an was naturally under scrutiny.

Upon hearing news of the investigation, Zhou Cui'an panicked.

This procurement wasn't entirely clean; she'd taken kickbacks to select this particular gift box. However, she'd exercised caution at the time, personally inspecting each option before making her decision.

Though she sought some personal gain, she didn't want any issues to arise and implicate her. Hence, she'd been meticulous in her selection.

Yet, trouble still found her.

Her greatest fear now was that if the company uncovered her kickbacks during the investigation, she'd be ruined.

Taking kickbacks wasn't just a moral dilemma; it was a legal one. If the company pursued the matter, she feared she'd face charges and end up with a criminal record.

Chapter 838: Seeking Help

The more Zhou Cui'an dwelled on it, the more unsettled she felt. At this moment, she was utterly distraught. Yet, outwardly, she had to maintain an appearance of ignorance.

Working at the company every day had become torturous for her. She constantly fretted over when her deeds would be exposed.

This mental torment left Zhou Cui'an visibly distracted, resulting in numerous errors at work.

The supervisor, noticing her state, criticized her several times. However, being introduced by Murong Yumeng, the supervisor restrained his scolding, despite any internal frustration.

With the New Year fast approaching, the company intensified its investigation into the gift box issue. Zhou Cui'an felt on edge every day, especially concerning the over twenty thousand, now akin to a hot potato.

Eventually, she had no choice but to dial Murong Yumeng's number.

She knew she shouldn't be bothering Senior Sister Murong at this time. Her job was already a considerable favor from Senior Sister Murong.

However, she had squandered this opportunity by accepting kickbacks. She knew she had betrayed Senior Sister Murong's trust.

But now, other than Murong Yumeng, she couldn't think of anyone else who could help her. If the company uncovered her actions, her future would be ruined. So, reluctantly, she called Senior Sister Murong.

In the café, Zhou Cui'an sat, looking worn out, her face betraying her anxiety. She glanced towards the door from time to time.

As time passed, her anxiety deepened. Eventually, she fell into a state of panic.

Just as Zhou Cui'an felt she couldn't endure any longer, a glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes. Murong Yumeng had strolled in from outside, calming her restless heart.

Murong Yumeng casually approached Zhou Cui'an and took a seat. After summoning the waiter for coffee, she turned to Zhou Cui'an with a smile. "Junior Sister Zhou, what brings you here today? With the year-end upon us, shouldn't there be plenty to do at the company?"

While Murong Yumeng wore a gentle smile, unnoticed by Zhou Cui'an was a hint of disdain and annoyance in her eyes.

Upon receiving Zhou Cui'an's call, Murong Yumeng's initial reaction was one of disgust. She didn't know why Zhou Cui'an sought her out, but her gut told her it wasn't good. Moreover, she found Zhou Cui'an's constant demands irritating.

If not for the fact that the other party was Ye Leng'an's roommate and still somewhat useful, she wouldn't have bothered answering.

Zhou Cui'an, wrapped up in her own turmoil, failed to sense Murong Yumeng's true feelings.

After pondering for a moment, she took a deep breath and then spoke up, "Senior Sister Murong, I asked you out today because there's something I need your help with. Or rather, I'd like to hear your opinion."

Upon hearing Zhou Cui'an mention help again, a flicker of displeasure and disdain flashed in Murong Yumeng's eyes. However, her facial expression remained unchanged, concealing her true thoughts.

"Junior Sister Zhou, why be so polite? Whether it's about helping or not, we're all friends. If you have something on your mind, I can't just stand by and watch."

Although her words sounded pleasant, Murong Yumeng's heart harbored extreme aversion towards Zhou Cui'an, viewing her as insatiably greedy. After all, she had previously helped Zhou Cui'an find a job.

If it weren't for her intervention, Zhou Cui'an wouldn't have landed such a good job in the capital! Moreover, it was just a winter job. One had to know that companies like that didn't hire winter workers.

However, Zhou Cui'an seemed insatiable, always coming to her for help whenever something happened. She was completely taking advantage of her, wasn't she?

At this moment, Zhou Cui'an was completely oblivious to Murong Yumeng's true feelings. Instead, after hearing Murong Yumeng's understanding words, she felt a twinge of guilt. She felt she had truly let down Senior Sister Murong's trust.

The more understanding Senior Sister Murong seemed, the more Zhou Cui'an couldn't bring herself to confess her actions.

Instead, Murong Yumeng's kind words made her feel guilty. She felt she had betrayed Senior Sister Murong's trust.

Observing the silent Zhou Cui'an, Murong Yumeng's eyes revealed impatience, although her face remained gentle. "Junior Sister Zhou, what's on your mind? If you're facing difficulties, speak up! Keeping it to yourself like this, even if I wanted to help, I couldn't!"

She felt Zhou Cui'an was wasting her time. Since they had arranged to meet, everything should be laid out plainly. But here they were, playing games.

She was unlike Zhou Cui'an. Her time was precious.

Upon hearing Murong Yumeng's words, Zhou Cui'an felt encouraged. She took a deep breath and confessed to accepting kickbacks, which led to the issue with the gift boxes she purchased for the company.

Finally, she produced a bank card from her bag and placed it on the table. "Senior Sister Murong, I truly didn't intend for this. Moreover, I thoroughly inspected the gift boxes before purchase. It's baffling why there were quality issues upon delivery. I genuinely didn't mean any harm. I was just confused. Senior Sister Murong, what should I do now?"

She couldn't fathom her streak of bad luck.

Others had received far more kickbacks and gotten away scot-free. Yet, with just a small commission, she found herself in trouble.

Chapter 839: Only You Can Help Me

After hearing Zhou Cui'an's account, Murong Yumeng's eyes betrayed a hint of disdain, yet her expression showed shock. "Junior Sister Zhou, I never expected you to stoop to such levels. How do I even begin to address this?"

Towards the end, she wore a disappointed look, as if deeply saddened by the matter. Simultaneously, she felt hurt by the betrayal of trust.

However, deep down, Murong Yumeng was filled with disdain upon learning about Zhou Cui'an's kickbacks. Initially, she had only helped Zhou Cui'an in hopes of having someone monitor Ye Leng'an for her. Little did she know, Zhou Cui'an was of a smaller scale but quite audacious. Being just a temporary winter worker, daring to commit such acts.

Though everyone understood the intricacies of procurement, no one dared to take such risks on their first attempt. Any procurement officer, in their initial purchases, would be cautiously meticulous. Yet Zhou Cui'an displayed boldness and greed, barely grasping the ropes before diving in.

And all for a sum of over twenty thousand.

Had there been no mishaps, she might have kept silent. But now, for this paltry sum, she had stirred up trouble once more, showing her foolishness by bringing it to her attention again.

If it weren't for this fool having some connection with Ye Leng'an, she would have left immediately.

Upon Murong Yumeng's words, Zhou Cui'an felt overwhelming shame. Lowering her head, she kept apologizing, "Senior Sister Murong, I'm truly sorry. It wasn't intentional. Initially, I hesitated, but the manager was overly persuasive, claiming everyone did it. My greed got the better of me, leading to this mistake."

"Junior Sister Zhou, I'm at a loss for words." Murong Yumeng's face conveyed sorrow. "Do you realize you're committing a crime?"

Panic-stricken at the mention of a crime, Zhou Cui'an grabbed Murong Yumeng's hand on the table, pleading desperately, "Senior Sister Murong, you're my only hope now. I beg you, help me! I can't afford to go to jail or tarnish my record. Please, I'm in dire straits."

If she didn't intervene, her future prospects would be uncertain. Even her educational pursuits might be jeopardized.

Murong Yumeng withdrew her hand, a hint of displeasure and repulsion flickering in her eyes. Resisting the urge to wipe her hand, she tapped Zhou Cui'an's hand and said, "I understand, but have you considered the consequences?"

"Senior Sister Murong, I was momentarily misguided." Zhou Cui'an pleaded anxiously. "No one else can help me now. Please, you have to help me!"

With no other solution in sight, and considering Murong Yumeng's stature, her words could sway the company's decision.

After hearing Zhou Cui'an's request, Murong Yumeng frowned, unsure. "How can I assist you after what you've done?"

Zhou Cui'an clutched at a lifeline, saying, "Senior Sister Murong, you don't need to do much. Just speak on my behalf to the company, asking them not to pursue this. I'll forego the money."

Now, that twenty thousand felt like a hot potato.

She had a promising future ahead and wasn't willing to jeopardize it over such a meager sum.

"I see." Murong Yumeng's expression reflected difficulty. "Isn't this inappropriate? I introduced you to the company before. Now, I'm defending you again. This..."

"Senior Sister Murong, please help me!" Zhou Cui'an grew more desperate, tears welling up. "If you won't help me, my life is over."

As she spoke, Zhou Cui'an had lost all semblance of composure. The madness and anxiety in her eyes seemed to engulf her. It was no exaggeration to say that if Murong Yumeng refused to help her today, Zhou Cui'an couldn't even guarantee her own fate.

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Observing Zhou Cui'an on the brink of despair, Murong Yumeng's eyes turned cold, her face conflicted. "Junior Sister Zhou, I..."

"Senior Sister Murong, please."

Zhou Cui'an stood and moved closer to Murong Yumeng, ready to kneel.

With her future at stake, dignity was a luxury Zhou Cui'an couldn't afford. Her mind was solely focused on her future. Especially having witnessed the capital's prosperity, she refused to return to her humble beginnings.

Seeing Zhou Cui'an about to kneel, Murong Yumeng promptly intervened, pulling her back. "Junior Sister Zhou, what are you doing? You're putting me in a difficult position."

"Senior Sister Murong, please." Zhou Cui'an couldn't hold back her tears. "If you help me this time, I'll owe you a debt of gratitude. I'm left with no other choice."

"Well..." Murong Yumeng sighed, finally relenting. "Fine. Given our shared school ties, I'll assist you this once. After all, it impacts your future. We can't let this mistake ruin it."

With Murong Yumeng's assurance, Zhou Cui'an breathed a sigh of relief, nearly collapsing. Were it not for Murong Yumeng's support, she might have made a spectacle of herself.

Chapter 840: Agreeing to Help

Soon, Murong Yumeng and Zhou Cui'an were seated again.

Perhaps because Murong Yumeng had agreed to help, Zhou Cui'an heaved a sigh of relief and calmed down. At this moment, she was immensely grateful to Murong Yumeng.

"Senior Sister Murong, I really appreciate what you've done this time," Zhou Cui'an said, looking at Murong Yumeng as if she were her savior. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't know what to do."

In fact, to Zhou Cui'an, Murong Yumeng was indeed like a savior. If Murong Yumeng hadn't been willing to help, her future would have been ruined. Murong Yumeng's assistance this time was as crucial as a lifeline to her.

"It's nothing." Murong Yumeng smiled and shook her head. "However, Junior Sister Zhou, I can help you this time, but if there's a next time, I can't condone such actions."

Though Murong Yumeng's words were stern, Zhou Cui'an was willing to heed them. "Senior Sister Murong, I was acting impulsively this time. I promise there won't be a next time."

As she spoke, gratitude and admiration filled her eyes as she looked at Murong Yumeng. "Senior Sister Murong, you're my benefactor now. Whatever you ask of me in the future, even if it's something drastic, I won't hesitate."

Of course, she was exaggerating, and she wouldn't agree to anything illegal. After all, she didn't want to delve into a life of crime. That was why she had sought Murong Yumeng's help today. She felt confident speaking so boldly because she believed Murong Yumeng wouldn't make things difficult for her.

"What are you talking about!" Murong Yumeng laughed, shaking her head. "I'm not that kind of person. However, this should serve as a lesson."

"I'll definitely learn from this," Zhou Cui'an replied, pushing the bank card towards Murong Yumeng. "Senior Sister Murong, please help me return this money to the company. I can't face my superiors."

When she had approached Murong Yumeng, she had already resigned herself to relinquishing this money, as it was not entirely legitimate. Now, seeking Murong Yumeng's help, she wanted to ensure the money was returned to the company.

Though it had been her plan all along, parting with the money still caused her pain. She had already envisioned how to spend it, and it would have undoubtedly improved her appearance and lifestyle in the city.

Noticing Zhou Cui'an's hesitation, Murong Yumeng's disdain grew, though she kept a composed expression. "It's fine. Since I'm allowing you to keep it, then keep it! The company doesn't need this small amount of money. Since they won't pursue the matter, they won't take it back."

"How can that be!"

Despite her protests, Zhou Cui'an couldn't tear her eyes away from the bank card. "This is a bribe I received, which doesn't belong to me. I'm just relieved the company won't investigate further. How can I keep this money?"

Though she sounded noble, she was still tempted. After all, twenty thousand was a significant sum to her. If she kept it, she could buy many things and make her next semester much easier.

However, she didn't dare to keep it, fearing Murong Yumeng would see her as greedy. She couldn't afford for Murong Yumeng to dislike her, as she owed everything to her.

Murong Yumeng noticed Zhou Cui'an's greed but didn't show her disdain. "It's fine. Since I said you could keep it, then keep it! Besides, you're working hard to pay for tuition and living expenses next semester, right? Though it's not much, it can still ease some of your financial burden."

Zhou Cui'an couldn't bring herself to return the money, so she relented under Murong Yumeng's persuasion. "I... Then I won't refuse Senior Sister Murong's kindness."

With that, she took the bank card and stowed it in her bag. A smile of relief spread across her face.

After Zhou Cui'an put away the bank card, Murong Yumeng took a sip of her coffee and asked with a smile, "By the way, Junior Sister Zhou, I've been busy lately and forgot to ask. How's everything at the company? How are you getting along with your colleagues?"

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Touched by Murong Yumeng's concern, Zhou Cui'an replied, "Senior Sister Murong, everything's going well for me." She hesitated briefly, feeling remorseful. "I'm just sorry I disappointed you."

"It's okay. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes," Murong Yumeng reassured her.

"Oh, and are you planning to stay in the capital for the New Year?"

Zhou Cui'an nodded. "The holiday isn't long, so I'll stay in the company dorms. It's a waste of time and money to travel back and forth."

Most importantly, she didn't want to return to her hometown for the New Year.

"Wouldn't that be lonely?" Murong Yumeng frowned, then suddenly brightened. "Oh, I'm attending a banquet during the New Year. Would you like to join me? And I'll introduce you to my friend, Xiao Lingling. She's my good friend and a student at Capital University. I think you two would get along."