

Indulgence 321

Chapter 321: A Startling Surprise

"Indeed, but it may need to be earlier!"

Yun Jinnian thought of Yun Zhen, who had failed the imperial examinations time and again.

"Is the City Lord's son an imperial scholar?"

"He achieved that status years ago, but after the City Lord, his father passed away, he returned to observe filial mourning and perhaps lacked connections in the Capital City, so ever since he came back, he hasn't been willing to go to the Capital City to pursue further examinations!"

Now that he's willing to offer them his support, to the Liao Family, it truly is an immense gift.

"Speaking of which, this waterway disaster is due to me!"

"No harm done, City Lord Liao is an understanding man!"

The three arrived at the dining hall, where City Lord Liao and several of the Liao young masters were present. After going through pleasantries, they all took their seats in a respectful manner.

Yun Jinnian looked around the room and remembered the man that City Lord Liao had pointedly introduced to her before, unable to help but take another glance.

He was quite lean, of average appearance, but he carried an air of scholarship, spoke with refined gentleness, his voice neither loud nor low, his movements neither hasty nor sluggish. He seemed a very decent man.

And to forsake the grand examinations in favor of returning home to observe mourning, it showed he was a person of deep emotions and loyalty.

Add to that his extensive knowledge of poetry and literature, plus the mentorship from Chu Yu, his potential was boundless.

Suddenly, Yun Jinnian thought of Yun Zihan.

If the two could become...

It seemed she needed to inquire with Chu Yu as to this man's age and temper, and she must also write a letter home, asking her mother to probe the thoughts of Aunt Hemei and her second sister.

One must not act rashly.

Liao Shijie's face turned beet red under Yun Jinnian's gaze, but his amiable nature meant he couldn't voice a reminder to Yun Jinnian that she had been watching him for quite some time now.

He was also one of only a few in the City Lord Residence who knew of Yun Jinnian's true identity.

And he was merely a son born out of wedlock, raised by his stepmother after his mother's early demise—how could he dare to fancy someone like Yun Jinnian, who seemed as divine as a celestial being?

His face grew even redder, when suddenly he stood up with his cup of wine and walked over to Chu Yu, "Prince Rui, Shijie toasts to Your Highness!"

Chu Yu lifted his cup of wine and nodded in acknowledgment.

He had noticed Yun Jinnian's attention focused on Liao Shijie and was feeling quite bothered by it.

Liao Shijie was perceptive, using the toast to escape Yun Jinnian's gaze. By doing so, he not only avoided discomfort but also didn't offend Yun Jinnian—a sign of someone clever.

Yun Jinnian withdrew her gaze, picked up her wine cup, sipped and swallowed slowly, then picked up her chopsticks to serve food to Han Tianci.

She also ate in small, delicate bites.

After the meal, Chu Yu left some instructions with City Lord Liao, and shortly after, Hemei came to fetch him.

It was rare for Yun Jinnian to seek him out actively, and Chu Yu was extremely pleased, hurrying to the courtyard where Yun Jinnian was staying.

"Jinnian, you were looking for me?"

Yun Jinnian smiled tenderly, gesturing for Chu Yu to take a seat, "Indeed, I need your help with something!"

"Tell me!"

Yun Jinnian poured Chu Yu some tea and handed it to him, and after seeing him take a sip, she asked, "The Liao family's young master from earlier, the one who toasted you, what kind of man is he?"

"Cough, cough, cough!!"

Chu Yu suddenly burst into coughing, his face turning red from choking.

Alarm bells rang in his heart.

Could it be, could it be that Yun Jinnian was interested in Liao Shijie?

This was simply...

Yun Jinnian, puzzled, stood up to pat Chu Yu on the back, "Look at you, did I ask something that shocking?"

She completely missed just how tenderly she was treating Chu Yu, her eyes and eyebrows soft with affection.

The intimacy resembled that between spouses or lovers.

Wasn't this serious?

A young lady, unless she was interested in someone, would never ask such questions.

He felt so anxious that his heart ached, yet he dared not confront her directly, only left to guess wildly, wishing he could grab Liao Shijie and give him a good beating.

Chu Yu exhaled deeply and inhaled just as deeply before looking intently at Yun Jinnian and asking, "Why do you inquire about him?"

Chapter 322: Fortunately, Fortunately

Thinking to herself, she determined that she would soon tarnish Liao Shijie's reputation severely, making him stink worse than a rock in a latrine.

"My second sister is already fourteen this year, and will turn fifteen after the New Year, it's time to discuss her marriage. But my aunt, in appearance, seems very just and unbiased, yet in reality, she is quite petty and selfish. How could she possibly find a good match for my second sister?" Yun Jinnian said, sighing softly before continuing, "What I fear most is her marrying off my second sister to some merchant family in order to secure a lavish dowry for my eldest sister. If it was to a young gentleman, that would be fine, but I dread that she might be married off to someone whose children or even grandchildren are older than my second sister. Then what are we to do?"

"That's impossible!" Chu Yu said in a deep voice.

Having grasped what Yun Jinnian meant, he wasn't as upset anymore.

Impossible?

How could it be impossible!

In the previous life, Lady He indeed married Yun Zihan off to a distant place. Officially they claimed she was married off, but in fact, she had become an old man's concubine, a man in his fifties, whose grandchildren were much older than Yun Zihan.

Yun Jinnian didn't know what kind of life Yun Zihan led after her marriage, nor whether she survived it. But as far as she knew, after marrying away, Yun Zihan never returned to the Yun Family. Their Aunt Cui also went mad the year after Yun Zihan's marriage and eventually wandered away from the residence, never to be seen again, her fate unknown.

They never saw each other again.

With that in mind, Yun Jinnian continued her persuasion, "Life is unpredictable, so could you help me find out more about Young Master Liao? In the Yun Family, only my second sister and Aunt Cui truly care for me. Their positions are such that they can hardly step out of the main door, let alone the side gate. As for whether this future husband is good or not, it all depends on the matchmaker and my aunt's words. My second sister and Aunt Cui have no chance to resist. If I can support them, then I will!"

Her voice was gentle and soft, the light of the dim yellow oil lamp cast a glow as if jade herself was speaking softly, Chu Yu found her words quite enjoyable, as if they were already together, simply chatting idly in this moment.

"You continue!"

Continue?

Yun Jinnian was momentarily surprised, unsure what Chu Yu wanted her to continue with, but she went on, "Though my second sister is a concubine-born daughter, she is also skilled in music, chess,

calligraphy, painting, and poetry, and she's gentle and harmonious with others, not inferior at all to any noble maiden or legitimate daughter of a distinguished family. The man who marries my second sister will have boundless good fortune!"

Chu Yu started to laugh.

In the more than a year he had known Yun Jinnian, he had never heard her speak so freely and at length.

"I don't know which man will have the good fortune to marry your second sister, but I know that having you for a sister is her good fortune!" Chu Yu said.

At this, Yun Jinnian actually smiled, "I am not as good as you say!"

"Whether you are good or not, only those who are close to you would know. But since you asked, let me first share with you what I know," Chu Yu replied.

"Good!"

Yun Jinnian poured Chu Yu another cup of tea.

Chu Yu then spoke with composure, "Liao Shijie is the fourth son in his family, and originally he was born from a concubine. His mother died when he was six, and since then he was raised by the City Lord's wife. He did well in his studies, and the City Lord's wife treated him quite well, never being stingy with food or clothing, and the City Lord himself devotedly instructed him. As a result, he grew up somewhat ignorant of worldly affairs, focusing solely on studying the Sages' Books. That's why, when he went to the Capital City to take the examinations, his excessive forthrightness offended some people. Coupled with a bereavement in the family, he returned to Tortoiseshell City feeling rather disillusioned!"

Chapter 323: Wishful Thinking

Yun Jinnian immediately became a bit anxious, "This...?"

Chu Yu hurried to console him, "Don't panic, let me finish speaking!"

Yun Jinnian could not help but laugh, "Then continue!"

"This young man is actually quite commendable. Although he is a concubine's son, he is very filial and sensible. He returned home in low spirits only to be called over by his stepmother, who made him kneel and scolded him harshly. Then she had him assist his three older brothers in managing the household affairs, which taught him a bit about the ways of the world!"

Yun Jinnian was also puzzled.

He knew that some people became fools from too much reading, but this was his first encounter with an actual person like that.

"This, this..."

Yun Jinnian hesitated, wondering if he should play matchmaker for Yun Zihan or not.

Seeing this, Chu Yu could not help but laugh. "What's that saying? A scholar should be viewed with newfound respect after three days of absence. He was originally planning to go to the Capital City for the exams. He was delayed only because his stepmother fell ill. He vowed to take the exams in three years, and despite the beatings and scoldings, he refused to leave her side—a true show of filial piety!"

Yun Jinnian still hesitated.

"As you mentioned, with the status of your second sister in a place like the Capital City and the unscrupulous family reputation of the Yun Family, who doesn't know about it in the entire Capital City? Prestigious families are unwilling to marry into it, and if they are, they'd only take her as a concubine, tucked away in an obscure corner, ignored, or tormented to death by his legitimate wives and sisters-in-law. Families of lower social standing wouldn't offer sufficient bridal gifts, and Mrs. He would probably be reluctant to marry her off. As a concubine's daughter, your second sister is powerless. What good family could she marry into based on hers and her mother's scheming?" Chu Yu analyzed slowly.

Yun Jinnian listened attentively.

Chu Yu continued, "If Liao Shijie goes to the Capital City and succeeds in the exams, and with my assistance from behind the scenes, and considering his abilities, it's not out of the question for him to reach the ranks of a marquis or even a prime minister. At the very least, securing high official positions is within reach. That would certainly be better than your second sister marrying a concubine's son, or becoming a widower's subsequent wife. Moreover, Liao Shijie's mother, father, and brothers and their wives aren't likely to go to the Capital City. Even if they did, it would be your second sister who would be in charge. If she is smart enough, she can manage well. She'd only need to return to Tortoiseshell City for holidays. When you write to her, you can inform her of these matters and let her make the decision. Once she decides, we can plan our next steps."

The more Yun Jinnian heard, the more feasible it seemed.

With no in-laws above, no sisters-in-law in between, they could lead a simple life behind closed doors. As long as she could please her husband and manage her own dowry well, and run a couple of businesses and estates...

Yun Jinnian paused slightly, wondering how much silver Yun Zihan could possibly have?

"I will go write a letter!" Yun Jinnian declared.

Chu Yu also stood up, "I'll go ask City Lord Liao his thoughts, in case he's already betrothed, or has some other cousin in mind!"

"Thanks for your trouble!"

Chu Yu began to smile, "How will you thank me?"

"What would you like?" Yun Jinnian asked reflexively.

Chu Yu possessed far more valuable things than she did.

"I haven't thought of it yet; I'll tell you when I do," Chu Yu said, and seeing Yun Jinnian's face flush, he left laughing.

This matter had to be settled properly.

Even if it wasn't Liao Shijie, he had to find a good match for Yun Zihan, to let Yun Jinnian see his good side.

Watching Chu Yu's retreating figure, the smile in Yun Jinnian's eyes gradually deepened until it reached her gaze.

Warmth spread through her.

He was good, she knew, she always knew.

But how could she, bruised and shattered as she was, dare to long for someone as glorious as the morning sun, who smiled so genuinely and warmly, like basking in a spring breeze, and was as clear as the moonlight and gentle as the wind?

How could she dare—she didn't dare...

Chapter 324: Inquiry

Yun Jinnian thought of this, turned around, and went back to his room. Sitting on the stool by the window, he watched the bright moon and stars in the night sky.

"What's wrong, Miss?" Henuan whispered.

Hemei shook her head.

Everything was fine just before...

Chu Yu returned to his own courtyard and immediately sent Luo'er to summon City Lord Liao, the Lady of the City Lord, and Liao Shijie for questioning. Soon, the three of them arrived, respectfully saluting and greeting Chu Yu.

"May I know why Your Highness has summoned us?" City Lord Liao asked softly.

Chu Yu gestured for them to sit, and only after they were seated did he inquire, "Has the fourth son of the Liao family been betrothed yet?"

The expressions of City Lord Liao and the others conveyed mutual bewilderment, before City Lord Liao stood and responded, "Your Highness, we haven't arranged a match!"

"?" Chu Yu was puzzled.

A gentleman like Liao Shijie had not been betrothed yet?

"To not conceal from Your Highness, Shijie is twenty this year. In earlier years, he was always studying and didn't have the opportunity to be betrothed. Later, he went to the capital to take the imperial examinations. Then, with the passing of his father, he returned to observe mourning. Moreover, his mother fell ill some time ago, and thus, until today, he has not been betrothed!"

Chu Yu nodded slightly and looked toward Liao Shijie, "What do you say?!"

After saluting Chu Yu with a clasped fist, Liao Shijie then asked, "Is Prince Rui offering to arrange a match for me?"

"Yes!"

"May I know the age and temperament of the other party?"

"Fourteen years of age, kind-hearted and considerate, a concubine-born daughter of her family!"

After pondering for a moment, Liao Shijie said, "Prince Rui, may I meet the lady first before giving an answer?!"

"That would be good!"

Whether or not the match would succeed, they should at least meet each other and express satisfaction on the surface before proceeding.

Not wanting to say more, Chu Yu found himself oddly uncomfortable in the role of matchmaker for the first time.

Had it not been for Yun Jinnian, he wouldn't have interfered.

After City Lord Liao and his family excused themselves and returned to their courtyard, City Lord Liao said, "Shijie, what is your opinion on this matter?"

After some thought, Liao Shijie replied, "Father, I don't have anyone I like, nor do I have a childhood sweetheart. Eventually, I am to marry, but I wish to marry someone I truly adore. If I don't take a fancy to that girl upon meeting her, I will refuse!"

"You..." City Lord Liao was furious.

The Lady of the City Lord sighed and said, "My child, why are you still so obstinate? Prince Rui is arranging the match; do you think you have the right to refuse?"

"But..."

"Shijie, whether you like her or not, you must marry that girl. Moreover, you must treat her well after the marriage. Listen to your mother. Even if you meet her later, approach the situation with a normal mindset. Don't feel you are being forced and thus harbor resentment towards her!" the Lady of the City Lord earnestly advised.

Fearing Liao Shijie wouldn't take her words to heart, she added, "Your mother cherishes you, and that's why she hasn't rushed you. If I were colder by a fraction and hastily arranged a marriage for you, would you marry or not? Prince Rui has royal connections, and he has his reasons for arranging this match. Perhaps the girl is not unworthy; it might simply be because she is a concubine-born daughter without control over her own marriage. Having sought Prince Rui's mediation, he chose you because he saw some merits in you. You should be grateful. When you meet the girl eventually, you'll have to consider all aspects!"

City Lord Liao nodded, "What your mother says is indeed true!"

"It's just a concubine-born daughter; why the fuss? Haven't several of the concubine-born sisters in our family also married very well?"

The Lady of the City Lord began to smile, "You, oh you, do not understand the hidden intrigues of the inner courtyard. If you don't believe your mother, how about we make a bet?"

"Mother, if you have orders, I dare not disobey!" Liao Shijie said, subsequently kneeling in front of the Lady of the City Lord.

Instantly, the Lady of the City Lord's eyes reddened, feeling that her years of heartfelt care for him had not been in vain!

Chapter 325: The City Lord's Wife Teaches Her Son

Liao Shijie was helped to his feet and had his clothes tidily arranged by the City Lord's wife before she spoke. "That's because I've never made things difficult for them. They too are clever and sensible, never giving me trouble now and then. The housemaids also know their place, never jumping up and down causing problems. I naturally reciprocate their goodness by finding them suitable marriages and providing generous dowries so they can live their lives without worry about food or clothing. If I were unkind, not to mention anything else, just with this matter of marriage, I could easily find a match that looks perfect on the surface, but whose male counterpart has all sorts of vices. Even if your father were to question me, I could excuse myself by claiming ignorance beforehand!"

City Lord Liao nodded as well.

His wife's generosity and kindness also earned his respect and affection.

"Shijie, since you are going to the Capital City for the examinations, if you have connections, you'll naturally stay there, but if not..." the City Lord's wife paused.

Liao Shijie was quick on the uptake and understood immediately.

The thought of having to rely on a woman to stay in the Capital City left him somewhat dismayed.

"Silly child, this is not what I meant. You are capable, it's just that the timing isn't right. Wait for the right time, when you earn the emperor's favor, and your future will be bright. That will be the time for you to grant titles to your wife and ensure a future for your children. But before that, wouldn't it be better to have a support to reduce obstacles?"

Liao Shijie was silent.

After a moment, he turned to the City Lord's wife and performed a respectful bow, "Thank you for your teaching, mother. Your son understands!"

Despite his mixed feelings, he found himself looking forward to meeting the woman he had initially disliked.

It was then that he truly accepted the idea of this marriage.

Seeing this, City Lord Liao was overjoyed, "You mother and son talk, I'll go discuss some other matters with His Royal Highness Prince Rui!"

"Farewell, father!" Liao Shijie bowed respectfully.

After the City Lord had left, the City Lord's wife took Shijie by the hand and sat him down, speaking earnestly once more. "Your father is set on you joining the official ranks, but I could never bear the thought of you alone in the Capital City. Should anything happen, without anyone to rely on, my heart..."

After all, he had been raised by her side since he was five or six years old, and was more considerate and understanding than his three brothers. The thought of him being alone in the Capital City, with no one to turn to in times of trouble, caused the City Lord's wife's eyes to swell with tears.

"Mother, I have learned from my past mistakes and won't be fooled a second time. Rest assured that during this trip, I will act carefully and not behave recklessly again," Liao Shijie hurriedly comforted her.

"That's good as long as you're aware. Also, regarding this marriage, I couldn't speak freely with your father present. But now, privately, I'll tell you—if that girl is truly arrogant and rude, with neither talent nor virtue, then even if it goes against His Royal Highness Prince Rui's goodwill, you must not agree to this marriage!"

"Mother..." Liao Shijie's heart clenched with emotion, overflowing with joy.

"It doesn't matter if she is beautiful or not; what's most important is that she is virtuous and has a good character. If you desire someone with good looks and she isn't to your liking, you can also refuse the marriage. But one thing you must promise me—if you accept this marriage, you cannot be fickle-hearted. The Capital City is a place of temptation, but you must remain pure and not take concubines easily or have countless liaisons. Even if you play the field, you must have limits. You need to have a gauge in your heart and not let down others. Everyone has feelings; if you are devoted to her, she will naturally be devoted to you. A peaceful home will allow you to concentrate on advancing your career. Do you understand?"

Chapter 326: Transformation

"Understood!"

Even if he didn't understand, his mother had made it so clear that naturally, he understood.

He understood even more the depth of his mother's loving heart.

Kneeling by the City Lady's side, his head resting on her knee, "Mother, after going to the Capital City, I do not know when I will be able to return to see you..."

The City Lady's eyes also reddened, "As long as you are well, mother will be at ease. As for whether you can come back..." After a moment of silence, she continued, "If you can't come back, then mother will come to see you. You must make us proud, understand?"

"Mhm!" Liao Shijie nodded firmly.

The City Lady patted Liao Shijie's shoulder, "Get up, my son. Mother has something to give you!"

Liao Shijie stood up, and the City Lady went into the inner chamber. She returned after a while with a purse in her hand, "There are three hundred thousand taels of silver notes in this purse. Take it to the Capital City and see if you can buy a residence. A nest of gold and silver isn't as good as one's own doghouse. Consider this as a secret gift from mother. Don't let your sisters-in-law know!"

"You can buy a residence with two courtyards in the Inner City, and in the Outer City you could buy one with four courtyards!"

Liao Shijie had inquired about this while he was in the Capital City.

The City Lady pursed her lips, "I see. Then I will discuss with your father about openly giving you more so you can at least buy a three-courtyard residence. You should live comfortably. Sooner or later, your elder brothers will also have to go to the Capital City, and it's always better to stay at home than outside!"

"I will listen to mother!"

"Good boy, go back and rest. Don't overthink; focus on your studies, that's what matters!"

"Yes, son will take his leave!"

Back in his courtyard, Liao Shiejie looked at the purse in his hand and felt an unusual heaviness.

If his aunt were still alive, as a concubine's son, he might not have been entitled to so much family property...

Not to mention there were other expenses; buying a residence was a must, then there was the cost of a wedding and various other expenses. All in all, it would surely amount to a million taels of silver.

Although the Liao Family was of the City Lord Residence and quite wealthy, they could not afford such wasteful expenses...

With City Lord Liao's reply, Chu Yu knew the matter was settled and hurriedly informed Yun Jinnian of this good news. Yun Jinnian, of course, was overjoyed, "If that's the case, it's truly wonderful!!"

If Liao Shijie was willing to put in the effort, Yun Zihan would inevitably become the wife of an official, and it was not impossible for her to be granted the title of a first-class noblewoman.

The following morning, Yun Jinnian and his party set off. Chu Yu left Luo'er behind to organize the drought relief efforts,

Liao Shijie was also going to the Capital City. City Lord Liao called his sons together and gave Liao Shijie a million taels of silver notes, instructing him to buy a three-courtyard residence in the Capital City. The remaining silver was to be used to establish a shop, with goods brought from Tortoiseshell City. The leftover funds were to be used for his marriage.

"Although it's not much left, daily life has to continue, and you shouldn't worry about the merchandise for the shop, for the family will supply it. The family will also prepare the marriage gifts, and will send the butler and the nanny to arrange everything. All you need to do is focus on your studies and preparing for the exam!" City Lord Liao instructed.

Although a million taels of silver, after purchasing a residence and setting up a shop, were left with some surplus, there were also expenses for furniture, maids, and other costs.

Therefore, the family secretly gave Liao Shijie another two hundred thousand taels of silver.

Each of his three elder brothers, keeping it from their wives, also gave Liao Shijie fifty thousand taels of silver.

With this, Liao Shijie understood that from then on, the properties in Tortoiseshell City would have no relation to him. In the future, whether he lived in poverty or wealth, he would have to make it on his own.

Kneeling to bid farewell to his parents, he left first. As for the marriage gifts and the shop goods, he would arrange for the Escort Agency to send them to the Capital City. He needed to go ahead and arrange for both the residence and the shop.

At the moment he boarded the carriage, Liao Shijie made a resolution that he must strive and climb up in life, to carve out a place for his father, brothers, and mother, so that no one would dare to bully them, and they would not need to dispense large sums of silver for favors...

He would work hard, he definitely would!

As for his future wife, Liao Shijie began to look forward to it even more!

Chapter 327: Evil Intentions Arise

As soon as Yun Jinnian and Chu Yu had left, Zhou Yunshen knew and immediately ordered Teng Fei and Teng Mu to prepare for their journey to Nanjiang.

After taking the medicine prescribed by Yun Jinnian, he felt much better in body, and he didn't feel as cold.

If possible, he really wanted to take Yun Jinnian back to Great Zhou directly, but it was not feasible.

It might be easy to abduct someone to Great Zhou, but to have Yun Jinnian willingly treat him would probably be difficult...

"Sigh!"

Zhou Yunshen sighed.

Teng Fei and Teng Mu, standing by his side, also heaved a sigh.

The Crown Prince, aside from not being as handsome as King Birui, was superior in every other aspect, so they didn't understand what Miss Yun of the Yun Family saw in King Birui. Could it be his face? If so, if King Birui's face were ruined, would Miss Yun not be so inclined to help King Birui then?

If that were the case, Teng Fei was willing to risk danger.

"Achoo!"

Chu Yu sneezed.

Yun Jinnian, holding her medical books, glanced at him indifferently, "Caught a cold?"

"No, just an itchy nose!" Chu Yu said, pinching his nose and smiling at Yun Jinnian.

Yun Jinnian also smiled faintly and continued to read her book.

Chu Yu then ruffled Han Tianci's hair, continuing to teach him about the Five Elements and Eight Trigrams.

The carriage moved slowly, a gentle warmth filling the inside.

Capital City

Yun Residence

Mrs. He furrowed her brows deeply.

The Marquess Yuanshen's residence had sent a message. The Marquess was willing to form a matrimonial alliance with the Yun Family; he wanted to marry Yun Muyou, but there was a condition—the dowry had to be substantial.

"..."

Mrs. He hesitated.

The old Marquess of the Yuanshen Marquis Residence had passed away ten years earlier, leaving the Marchioness to fend for herself with three children, which was extremely difficult. Now that she had raised them, the eldest son, Weng Jianrui, who was the current Marquess Yuanshen, had come of age, but his marriage prospects weren't too smooth, mainly because the Marchioness had high demands, particularly for a substantial bride's dowry.

This unabashedly told everyone that the Yuanshen Marquis Residence had fallen on hard times and was now dependent on their future daughter-in-law's dowry to maintain their livelihood.

Of course, it was also possible that the old lady was thinking of her two younger children; the second son and the youngest daughter were also of marriageable age and would require a significant amount of silver.

"Nanny!"

"Madam?" Nanny Jiang called softly.

Mrs. He's previous nanny had left because her son had made a considerable amount of silver in business and had asked her to come home to retire. Nanny Jiang, who had taken over, was exceedingly respectful of Mrs. He and was eager to carry out some big tasks to catch Mrs. He's eye and become her trusted confidante.

"Go and discreetly find out about Marquess Yuanshen. What rank is his official position? What is the situation with his family? Try to get as much detail as possible!"

"Yes!"

Nanny Jiang went down to carry out the orders.

On the nineteenth of June, the Minister of War Mr. Ruan's daughter was to be married, and the invitation had arrived at the Yun Residence well in advance. Mrs. He wondered if Mrs. Han, since she was on good terms with Yun Jinnian, would go to contribute to the dowry, and if so, what valuable items she would bring.

Speaking of valuable items, who in the residence had more than Yun Jinnian?

The Empress's gifts, and those from the Zhuangyong Marquis Residence and Princess, and what Yun Qi bought from outside...

Mrs. He instantly felt a surge of sourness in her heart—if only all those things that Yun Jinnian had could be given to Youyou...

Mrs. He shook her head, "I mustn't think about it, I mustn't think!"

But her heart was indeed consumed with envy.

A feeble and fragile girl had changed so unexpectedly and in a short time had gained favor from the Marquis Residence, Princess Residence, and the Empress, receiving so many precious things. How wonderful it would be if her Youyou were in that place?

The more Mrs. He thought, the more obsessed she became, suddenly standing up, "To Cixin Academy!"

She might not be able to ask for those items, but the dowager lady could...

Chapter 328: Agreeable in Appearance but Detestable at Heart

Cixin Academy

Ever since both daughter-in-laws became titled ladies, the old lady didn't receive a single cent, and then she fell ill.

It wasn't a serious illness, just a feeling of oppression in her chest, thinking of her son and daughter-in-law coming to attend on her illness, revolving around her, Mrs. He was busy with the day-to-day affairs of the household and couldn't come at all, while Mrs. Han did come for a day but ended up exhausting the old lady.

Medicine was spilled over the old lady, the room was heavily scented with incense, and all the food was greasy meat. Several vases were broken, and in no time, the old lady's feigned illness became a real one.

She repeatedly demanded Mrs. Han to get out.

Mrs. Han left with a shallow, beaming smile, and then never visited Cixin Academy again.

"Lady, Mrs. He has arrived!" Ming Liu called softly.

Her complexion was a bit off.

Ever since she returned from attending Ming Yang's wedding feast, Ming Liu had not been feeling well.

Now that Ming Yang was married off to a family where the man was a shopkeeper, though she was a concubine, she was still the main wife, with no children to worry about, and both her parents did not live together with her, so Ming Yang had the final say in everything. She also owned a residence in the Outer City, a grain shop, and it was said that she managed over a hundred acres of fertile farmland in the countryside.

Even Danxia, Dangui, and Ru Yang had been married off, leading prosperous lives. How different they were from her, still the Head Maid by the old lady's side, with no future prospects in sight.

Had she known that the fourth young miss would soar into the heavens, she would have gone to serve her back then.

The old lady glanced at Ming Liu, "Let her in."

Mrs. He entered the parlor, paid her respects to the old lady, and then sat down, hesitating to speak.

The old lady gave Mrs. He a look, "If you have something to say then speak, what's with all the fidgeting?"

"Mother, we've found a match for Muyou!"

The old lady lifted her eyebrows, "A match? With which family?"

"Marquis Yuanshen's residence!"

"Marquis Yuanshen's residence?" The old lady frowned.

In reality, for many years no one had invited her as a guest, so how could she know the current situation outside, nor could she possibly know that Marquis Yuanshen's residence had long since fallen into decline, and was perhaps even worse off than the Yun Family.

But upon hearing 'Marquis residence', the old lady perked up, "The eldest legitimate son?"

"The old Marquess passed away long ago, and the current Marquess is the eldest son, who has just come of age. They are asking for a generous dowry for Muyou!" Mrs. He explained, eyeing the old lady.

"A generous dowry, huh..." The old lady had been swindled out of some silver, and Mrs. Han had taken another amount. She did have silver, but that was for her old age and she certainly wouldn't take it out for Yun Muyou.

After much consideration, the old lady thought of Niannian Garden, and of the valuable items in Yun Jinnian's hands.

With Yun Jinnian gone and Mrs. Han unlikely to go to Niannian Garden, if she could secretly take them out and quietly prepare them as Muyou's dowry, once the items had been given away as dowry to the Marquis Residence, would Mrs. Han have the shamelessness to demand them back?

But the old lady feared Mrs. Han, and now with Han Xuizi in the Capital City, she feared him even more.

So it was just a thought, when it came to actual action, she dared not follow through.

After a good while, she spoke faintly, "I will contribute fifty thousand in silver, and an additional two hundred thousand from the public fund, which should suffice for a decent dowry."

Upon hearing this, Mrs. He gasped.

Two hundred and fifty thousand in silver for a dowry and calling that 'decent'?

It was laughable; look at the other great families whose dowries for the eldest legitimate daughter were over a million in silver. If it weren't for the Yun Family's declining fortunes in recent years, she wouldn't have come to discuss with the old lady.

"I understand, mother, but we still need to investigate the Marquess's character. If he is not virtuous, I will not agree to this marriage!"

The old lady nodded, "She's your daughter, you make the decision. I'm tired, you may go now!"

Mrs. He rose and left Cixin Academy, casting a backward glance at the placard above the entrance and covertly spitting in its direction.

With the mouth of a Buddha and the heart of a snake, how dare they label it 'Cixin' — 'Merciful Heart'!

Chapter 329: Chance Encounter

Returning to Nuanxin Garden, Mrs. He felt out of sorts and decided to start inventorying the warehouse, re-registering everything anew.

Tianmi returned to report that Mrs. Han had gone out.

"Gone out again!" Mrs. He said, feeling a sour twinge in her heart.

Mrs. Han actually lived quite freely. Seeing that the two concubines in the manor were now pregnant, she was not anxious at all. Whether they bore sons or daughters, she would spend her days either at Qiyue Academy living her own life or going out. It was said she went to the bookshops to buy paintings, and who knows what she wanted with so many paintings. But Mrs. He had never seen Mrs. Han bring any paintings back, so she assumed they were sent to the Han Family.

"Flush with cash to burn!" Mrs. He said bitterly, her jealousy towards Mrs. Han growing stronger.

When Mrs. Han arrived at the bookshop, the shopkeeper greeted her enthusiastically, "Madam, are you here to buy more paintings?"

Mrs. Han nodded slightly, "Mm, do you have the artworks of Scholar Han Shan today?"

"We do indeed. Yesterday, twenty pieces arrived. Scholar Han Shan said he's preparing for the imperial examination and will thereafter not send anymore paintings!" the shopkeeper said as he brought out all the paintings that Feng Wushuang had sent.

It was unknown to him why this madam, out of all the masterpieces by famous artists available, would have a preference for Scholar Han Shan's works.

Though Scholar Han Shan's artworks were indeed respectable, he was yet unknown and a scholar from a humble background. It was also uncertain whether he would come out on top in the upcoming imperial examination.

"Just bring them all and calculate the cost," she instructed.

Mrs. Han didn't particularly like any paintings, but Yun Jinnian had chanced upon them once and bought a few back. Since Mrs. Han thought Yun Jinnian liked them, she often came to buy more and left them at the Han Family's place for Yun Jinnian to enjoy upon his return.

After Mrs. Han had left the bookshop with the paintings, Feng Wushuang stepped out from behind the counter, momentarily unable to regain his composure.

It was her, the lady he had seen at the entrance of Xufuji—presumably the mother of Yun Jinnian's fourth sister.

Why would she want to buy all his paintings? Was it appreciation, or did she know of his difficult life?

But the difficulties were all part of the past. Now that he had sold so many paintings, his mother's illness had improved. Life would get even better after the examination. He had already decided to stop selling his paintings, but now...

Feng Wushuang hurriedly followed her out.

As Mrs. Han was about to board her carriage, he called out to her in haste, "Madam, please wait a moment!"

Mrs. Han frowned, while Bai Que was already on guard and watched Feng Wushuang closely.

"What is it you want?" Mrs. Han asked indifferently, looking at the young man standing before her.

He was clad in simple blue attire, and although he looked quite presentable, his plain clothes could not mask his inherent refinement and grace.

Feng Wushuang bowed respectfully, "Madam, are you purchasing Scholar Han Shan's paintings?"

Mrs. Han nodded.

"I have Scholar Han Shan's paintings in my possession. Since madam likes them, perhaps I could give you a few?" Feng Wushuang ventured tentatively.

It was really just a ploy to get more familiar with Mrs. Han.

Should he achieve success in the examinations...

At this thought, Feng Wushuang felt a surge of excitement.

"I am not fond of paintings. It is my daughter who likes them, which is why I've been buying them. If you have any, deliver them to this bookshop, and I will come every now and then to purchase them!" With that, Mrs. Han boarded her carriage.

Feng Wushuang stood rooted to the spot, taking a long time to recover his senses.

She likes them. She likes his paintings.

She actually likes...

"Heh heh!" Feng Wushuang began to laugh foolishly to himself, overjoyed as he went home and directly into his room.

He was determined to paint a few even better ones to keep, so he could personally give them to her in the future!

In the carriage

Bai Que hesitated, wanting to speak.

Mrs. Han glanced at her, "Speak your mind!"

"Madam, I found that scholar a bit odd. How could he possibly have Scholar Han Shan's paintings?" Bai Que said.

Mrs. Han laughed, "Because he is Scholar Han Shan!"

Chapter 330: Black Heart

Bai Que was shocked.

"Otherwise, how would he have paintings by the Hermit of Cold Mountain? Upon learning that I like them, he offered to give me a few. These scholar-officials pride themselves on their integrity yet also fancy themselves as romantic, relying on righteousness but often acting like butchers. They forget favors and are mostly bookworms. How many of them are genuinely good?" Mrs. Han said with a sigh.

People like Yun Qi are truly dime a dozen.

Self-righteous and cowardly, full of themselves yet disregarding others.

A man who can even neglect his own legitimate daughter, what kind of real man is he?

Bai Que fell silent.

Mrs. Han took Bai Que to the largest jewelry shop in the Capital City and bought two sets of gemstone headwear.

"Is the madam getting these for Miss Ruan's dowry?"

"With Jinnian not around, I can only make this trip myself. I wonder how they are doing now?"

"They will be safe on their journey!"

Mrs. Han nodded, "I hope so!"

June 19th

Ruan Wanrong was already dressed up and waiting for Duan Qimeng to come and escort her. Mrs. Han personally came to add to her dowry. Ruan Wanrong understood that Yun Jinnian had important matters to attend to, but with all her good sisters around and only Yun Jinnian absent, she couldn't help feeling uncomfortable.

It took quite a bit of consolation from everyone before Ruan Wanrong sniffled and managed to hold back her tears.

However, there was a sense of regret.

Mrs. Han had not shown herself in the circles of high society ladies in the Capital City for many years and thought she would be ignored. To her surprise, the Marchioness of Zhuangyong Marquis Residence pulled her to sit at a table with the Countess Xuanping, Minister Chen's daughter-in-law Chen Danyan's mother, and several marchionesses from the Princess Residence, which drew many sideways glances.

Compared to Mrs. Han's treatment, Mrs. He was in a pitiful state. She was seated at a table where the officials were of lower rank than Yun Chen, where everyone, though flattering her, showed a stark contrast to the preferential treatment received by Mrs. Han.

Mrs. He was frustrated inside.

And resented Mrs. Han for not helping her.

She thought to herself that she must marry Yun Muyou off to the Marquess Yuanshen Residence and would find a way to solve the dowry issue.

Meanwhile, Yun Muyou and the others were quite embarrassed because Xu Xinmo had had an argument with someone and was still red-faced and twisting her handkerchief in anger.

It didn't help that the person was a Commandery Princess, and she was nobody, without even the right to fight back.

No matter what, Ruan Wanrong married into the Duan Family, blissfully and successfully.

Although Mrs. He felt aggrieved during this event, she also gathered quite a bit of news, such as merchants from Tongqu City wanting to marry daughters of official families in the Capital City, regardless of whether they were born of the wife or a concubine, with particularly generous dowries.

Mrs. He thought of Yun Zihan, who was also quite pretty and of marriageable age, and perhaps it was worth a try.

So as soon as she got home, Mrs. He called for Nanny Jiang, "How is the inquiry into the Marquess Yuanshen Residence going?"

"The outside opinions are mixed!"

"What are they saying?" Mrs. He asked.

"They say the Marquess Yuanshen Residence has declined, and now the Marquess only holds a fourth-rank official position in court. There are also good words about Marquess Wu, but whether he is truly good or not still needs careful investigation. Although, Marquess Wu is indeed quite handsome," replied Nanny Jiang.

Mrs. He frowned, "Have you seen him in person?"

Considering that she hadn't seen the women of the Marquess Yuanshen Residence today at the Ministry of War Residence, she was puzzled.

"I caught a glimpse from a distance. Marquess Wu also went to the Ministry of War Residence for the wedding feast today. Didn't madam see him?"

Mrs. He shook her head and then said, "We're not in a rush about this. Go and find out if there's a merchant from Tongqu City staying at the Huiquan Tower!"

Nanny Jiang was puzzled, "Madam wants to?"

"Don't ask so many questions, just go and find out!" Mrs. He snapped angrily.

Without a word, Nanny Jiang left obediently.

Mrs. He rubbed her temples, feeling exceptionally irritable.

Tianmi hurried in, "Madam, madam, the master has brought a woman and is heading this way to Nuanxin Garden!"