

## **Noble Wife 421**

### Chapter 421 The Troublemakers Bumped into each Other

Dowager Consort Qu had already fallen asleep, and after taking the medicine, the drowsiness started to overcome her, making her feel extremely weak.

A palace maid carefully covered Dowager Consort Qu with a blanket and walked to the window, partially closing the curtains, obscuring the light in the palace. Then she went to where the incense burner was previously placed and noticed its absence, furrowing her brow. She approached the door and called over another palace maid, lowering her voice as she asked, "Where did the incense burner go?"

"Just now, Dowager Consort Qu ordered it to be removed, stating that the air inside was not circulating," the young palace maid replied softly.

"Air not circulating? That can't be right. It was perfectly fine before. Dowager Consort Qu's health is not good, and she can't arbitrarily change things in the room. Go bring the incense burner back and light it again." the displeased palace maid retorted. She was Dowager Consort Qu's personal attendant and was not present when Qu Moying and the others entered as she had gone to fetch something.

"But it was the Dowager Consort's order..." the small palace maid hesitated.

The palace maid furrowed her brow and looked around. "But did the two young ladies from the Qu Mansion come in?"

Being Dowager Consort Qu's confidante, she naturally knew that the Qu Mansion had sent two young ladies to visit her.

"What did they say that made the Dowager Consort remove all her favorite incense?" the palace maid asked, her displeasure evident.

"They didn't say much. I couldn't hear clearly from outside, but it seemed like they mentioned something about poor air quality. So, Dowager Consort Qu had someone remove the incense." the young palace maid explained.

“Go and bring the incense burner back. If Dowager Consort Qu is well, we won’t use it for now. Let her decide when she wakes up. If her sleep is disturbed, then light it up. It’s rare for Dowager Consort Qu to sleep so peacefully, so let her rest.”

The palace maid suggested after contemplating.

“Yes!” The young palace maid nodded. It was indeed the best solution.

The incense burner was brought back in, and a stick of incense was inserted, but it remained unlit, placed in its original position. The palace maid examined Dowager Consort Qu’s complexion and saw that she was sleeping peacefully, so she decided against lighting the incense.

During this period, Dowager Consort Qu’s condition had been worsening. She couldn’t eat during the day and had trouble sleeping at night, causing great discomfort. Dowager Consort Qu even felt as if her time was running out and had lost her appetite for medicine. Those by her side were extremely worried. Now, being able to sleep well was the best outcome.

Qu Qiuyan walked outside and took the main road, walking for a while before turning a corner. There was another road adjacent to it, similar in size, so she casually turned onto it. The scenery seemed even better there, and she enjoyed the view as she strolled.

However, Qu Qiuyan’s mind wasn’t focused on the scenery. She walked slowly, frequently glancing around. Surprisingly, she hadn’t encountered anyone on the entire journey, which puzzled her.

Could it be that no one was surprised that a person like Dowager Consort Qu suddenly appeared in the palace? Hearing that her father had sent someone to say that the emperor had issued an edict to prepare medicine for Dowager Consort, it could be seen how much importance he attached to her. Why didn’t anyone pay attention to this matter?

Wasn’t it said that the slightest movement in the wind would make many people feel uneasy?

Suddenly, a court eunuch appeared on the road and stopped Qu Qiuyan, saying politely but with a touch of arrogance, “Please stop, our master is ahead.”

Qu Qiuyan's heart leaped with joy. Finally, someone was here!

"Who is your master? Our lady is an esteemed guest invited by Dowager Consort Qu!" Qing Ju stepped forward and intercepted, answering first.

"Our master is Beauty Li, and who is your young lady?" The eunuch looked Qu Qiuyan up and down with confidence and a hint of disdain.

Qu Qiuyan had heard from Crown Prince, Pei Yusheng, that this Beauty Li seemed to have a good relationship with Noble Consort He and was favored in the palace. However, she wasn't sure if this Beauty Li was the same person she had heard about.

"Our young lady is the third daughter of the Vice Minister's Household. Today, she has been ordered to visit Dowager Consort Qu's illness in the palace," Qing Ju replied, trying to overcome her nervousness. The recent life-threatening experience had made her realize her own worth. If she had no value, her young lady wouldn't have protected her.

Now was the time to prove her worth!

"Third Lady Qu?" The eunuch squinted his eyes, as if he had heard of this name before. His gaze shifted towards Qu Qiuyan, who stood there with a dignified smile.

Being accompanied by a eunuch beside a Beauty wasn't enough to make her flustered.

"Yes, I am the third daughter of Vice Minister Qu's Mansion," Qu Qiuyan confirmed.

"Wait here." the eunuch turned around and went back. Qu Qiuyan noticed a nearby pavilion where there seemed to be figures. Although the view was partially obstructed by trees, it appeared that there were several people present.

As expected, the eunuch entered the pavilion and had a brief conversation before returning. This time, his demeanor was completely different. The arrogant expression from earlier had transformed into a flattering smile. It only took a moment for him to change completely.

“Lady Qu, our Lady requests your presence for a conversation.” the eunuch said, making way and extending his hand.

Qu Qiuyan nodded, maintaining her composure, and led Qing Ju forward.

Passing a few trees that obstructed their view, they indeed saw four or five people in the pavilion. Among them, one was likely the mentioned Beauty Li—a remarkably beautiful woman who appeared delicate but carried a hint of arrogance. She was surrounded by palace maids and eunuchs.

Judging by her appearance and demeanor, she seemed to be highly favored.

Qu Qiuyan composed herself, took a couple of steps toward Beauty Li in the pavilion, and gracefully bowed, her sleeves gathered to the side. “Your Ladyship.”

“The third daughter of Vice Minister Qu’s Mansion, Lady Qu?” Beauty Li raised an eyebrow, examining Qu Qiuyan.

Qu Qiuyan was aware of her bad reputation, and Beauty Li seemed to share that sentiment. However, upon seeing Qu Qiuyan in person, Beauty Li couldn’t help but admire her. Indeed, she was an exceptional beauty. Even with her tarnished reputation, her looks alone were outstanding. It was no wonder that Crown Prince, His Highness, was so reluctant to let her go. Despite her poor reputation, she possessed such allure.

But it wasn’t just her reputation that was lacking; she truly had an unpleasant disposition, just like her birth mother Yu.

If a woman like her entered Lord Jing Mansion, it would undoubtedly cause chaos. She couldn’t even tolerate her own sister, let alone others.

“That is correct.” Qu Qiuyan replied, lowering her head and speaking softly. She appeared to be a gentle and charming beauty, easily arousing favorable impressions. However, Beauty Li wasn’t a man and wouldn’t be swayed by appearances. The palace was filled with such treacherous beauties.

Beauty Li had seen and encountered many of them, even engaging in similar behavior herself.

“Did Lady Qu come to the palace for Dowager Consort Qu’s illness?” Beauty Li raised her eyebrows, still not allowing Qu Qiuyan to sit down, casually inquiring.

“Yes, it is for the sake of Dowager Consort’s health,” Qu Qiuyan honestly replied.

“How is her health? Despite the numerous visits from physicians, have they not found any effective remedies?” Leaning against the fence behind her, Beauty Li asked indifferently.

She appeared completely nonchalant in her inquiry.

“Dowager Consort Qu’s health is very poor. As for the specifics... it depends on the diagnosis and treatment of the physicians.” Qu Qiuyan hesitated for a moment, realizing that she had almost revealed too much before continuing, “We will have to wait for the physicians’ assessment.”

“And how is her complexion?” Beauty Li asked in a different manner.

“The Dowager Consort’s complexion was very unpleasant as she leaned there to speak. Two out of three sentences she responded weakly. When my fourth sister spoke to the Dowager Consort, the latter also rarely replied. She has taken medicine and is currently resting.” Qu Qiuyan said softly, as if unaware that certain matters in the palace were not meant to be casually revealed to others.

“Fourth Lady Qu? Is she the young lady with the eye condition?” Beauty Li asked with little interest.

“Our fourth sister has had poor eyesight since childhood, but it has been mostly cured now. It should be fine soon.” Qu Qiuyan, the loving elder sister who solely protected her sister, replied.

However, a significant portion of her bad reputation was due to Qu Moying, making it challenging for people to believe that she genuinely cared for her sister.

“Why aren’t you together?” Beauty Li asked, smoothly changing the topic without exposing her knowledge.

All the topics seemed casual, flowing naturally from Qu Qiuyan’s remarks.

“She left the palace first, and I waited at the entrance of the main palace for a while. When I came out, she was nowhere to be found. I have no idea where she went.” Qu Qiuyan responded.

If Beauty Li hadn’t previously gathered information about the sisters’ situation, even she would have been fooled by Qu Qiuyan.

Although Beauty Li resided deep within the palace and was generally unaware of external events, she had specifically inquired about the third Lady Qu of the Qu Mansion due to her sister’s desire to enter the Crown Prince’s Mansion. Thus, she had some knowledge of the Qu family’s affairs.

Given the confinement of the second madam, it was absurd that the third Lady Qu was still affectionate toward the fourth Lady Qu.

However, whether it was ridiculous or not had little relevance to her; she was currently seeking information.

“This palace is vast, accommodating all kinds of esteemed individuals. If she were to encounter any of them, it wouldn’t bode well!”

Beauty Li slowly uttered, her eyes filled with a trace of mockery.

“Yes, of course. I’ll go find her soon to prevent her from accidentally offending any noble figures.” Qu Qiuyan nodded and replied gently.

“Did the physicians say when Dowager Consort Qu will recover?” Beauty Li changed the subject again.

“No, they didn’t. I met the Medical Officer earlier, but he didn’t say anything either.” Qu Qiuyan furrowed her brows. “Just now, my fourth sister cleaned the inner chamber of the Dowager Consort because she felt the air wasn’t circulating well. She even helped the Dowager Consort get out of bed and took a few steps.”

“The Dowager Consort listens to your fourth sister?” Beauty Li asked in astonishment.

“Not entirely, but when the fourth sister makes sense, the Dowager Consort listens. Her words have always been reasonable.” Qu Qiuyan replied, pulling the handkerchief in her hand and lowering her head.

“Fourth Lady Qu’s words have always been reasonable?” Beauty Li raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, both our grandmother and father have always praised her for being reasonable. Now that she’s in the palace, even the Dowager Consort acknowledges her wisdom.” Qu Qiuyan explained.

“Given Fourth Lady Qu’s remarkable wisdom, I can’t help but be curious. Did you say that she left Consort Dowager Qu’s palace and went out for a stroll?” Beauty Li asked, giving Qu Qiuyan a sidelong glance.

“That’s right. I asked a palace maid at the gate, but I came out later and didn’t see Fourth Sister,” Qu Qiuyan replied. “Fourth Sister’s health hasn’t been great, but it has improved considerably. Just now, she personally checked Consort Dowager’s pulse and must be more aware of the situation than I am.”

To gather information about Consort Dowager Qu, it would be more suitable to approach Qu Moying than Qu Qiuyan. Qu Qiuyan’s words consistently hinted at this fact, emphasizing that even Consort Dowager Qu listened to Qu Moying’s words...

Chapter 422 Third Lady Wanted Someone to Deal with You?

“Does Dowager Consort Qu value Fourth Lady Qu so highly?” Beauty Li asked with a smile.

Qu Qiuyan lowered her head, a bitter smile on her face. “My younger sister has always been smarter and more capable than me, but it’s just that mother underestimates herself...”

Her words trailed off, as if she realized she had spoken too much. She immediately stopped and let out a low cough, trying to hide her slip-up. “Beauty, please forgive me. I misspoke.”

Observing her cautious demeanor, Beauty Li tilted her head and smiled. “Could it be that not all the rumors about your household are true?”

“Rumors are seldom reliable. My younger sister has always possessed remarkable beauty, but her appearance has been concealed by a veil. Moreover, she is intelligent, yet people spread baseless claims about her lack of talent and beauty. How can those who have never seen her judge her appearance? And how can they say she lacks talent?”

Qu Qiuyan cleverly addressed Beauty Li’s inquiry about the rumors surrounding her own reputation while subtly touching upon the rumors about Qu Moying.

The deflection was executed skillfully, even making Beauty Li skeptical. After carefully observing Qu Qiuyan for a few moments, Beauty Li suddenly burst into laughter. “Lady Qu, you truly are an intriguing person!”

“You flatter me, Beauty!” Qu Qiuyan replied softly.

Her appearance and demeanor piqued Beauty Li’s interest to some extent, as they differed greatly from her preconceived image of the Third Lady of the Qu Mansion.

In her imagination, the third young lady of the Qu Mansion displayed a delicate and weak demeanor that was quite repulsive and made people want to vomit at first sight. However, unexpectedly, she appeared to be quite clever.

Leaving aside the authenticity of her words, the implications behind them were somewhat intriguing, suggesting that she was not entirely ignorant. In fact, she seemed to possess a certain degree of intelligence, albeit mixed with a hint of arrogance.

In the palace, everyone had their own intricate thoughts. After all, how else could they have survived?

“Someone, bring a reward!” Beauty Li smiled and looked relatively satisfied. She raised her hand and instructed the palace maids behind her.

A maid approached and presented a pair of jade bracelets. Qu Qiuyan graciously expressed her gratitude and took her leave. Beauty Li did not detain her and watched her departure with a pensive expression.

If this Lady Qu possessed such intelligence, she wouldn’t mind establishing a favorable connection. Although it was inconvenient to maintain close contact within the palace, it would be much easier to communicate with her in the future. All she needed was to know when the Fourth Lady Qu would enter the palace again...

Qu Qiuyan returned to the palace of Dowager Consort Qu and took a few steps before gesturing for a palace maid to approach. She inquired, “Has the fourth sister returned?”

“The Fourth Lady Qu has not returned.” the palace maid replied with a bow.

“Still in that direction?” Qu Qiuyan extended her hand and pointed towards the direction from which Qu Moying had departed earlier.

“Yes!” confirmed the palace maid.

Qu Qiuyan nodded, waved her hand to dismiss the palace maid, and proceeded towards the path Qu Moying had taken before.

It would be ideal if Qu Moying went outside the palace. That Beauty Li seemed far from a good-natured person. As Qu Qiuyan had made clear in her previous words, if Qu Moying headed outside the palace, she would undoubtedly be intercepted by Beauty Li.

At that point, Qu Qiuyan would have no control over what would be said and done.

If she could insert her own influence into the situation, Qu Moying would eventually encounter trouble. Even if Qu Moying possessed exceptional abilities, she would have no choice but to comply and say whatever was demanded. If anything were to happen to Dowager Consort Qu afterwards, it would not be traced back to Qu Qiuyan but rather fall upon Qu Moying.

If Qu Moying chose not to go out this time, it would still be fine. Judging by Dowager Consort Qu's appearance, her illness was severe. Qu Moying would likely enter the palace occasionally in the future. If Beauty Li had any intentions, she could easily intercept Qu Moying and engage her in conversation.

Qu Qiuyan had positioned herself in such a way that Qu Moying would inevitably encounter trouble sooner or later!

Moreover, this matter had nothing to do with Qu Qiuyan. She couldn't help but feel a surge of satisfaction. During her time at the Qu Mansion, she had been at a disadvantage. To regain her position, she needed to exercise caution and be even more careful. It would be best to avoid any involvement with herself.

Recalling her second brother, Qu Qiuyan couldn't help but snort disdainfully. She had always considered her second brother to be quite intelligent, and his words had always been reasonable. However, since the arrival of this maid named Qing Mei, things had taken a peculiar turn. Qing Mei not only caused her and her second brother great embarrassment but also had a suspicious background. Surprisingly, her second brother continued to trust her.

Based on what Qu Qiuyan had observed before, she hadn't noticed anything unusual between her brother and this maid. It must be the person behind this maid who caught her brother's attention.

This thought made Qu Qiuyan very uncomfortable.

She had always believed that her brother should treat her the best and that no one could replace her in his heart.

Fortunately, this maid had been severely beaten by their father and sold off. Otherwise, Qu Qiuyan would never have tolerated her. Just because she had caused her second brother so much trouble and strained his relationship with herself, she would not spare her.

“Lady, the fourth lady is over there.” Qing Ju, who was following closely behind, spotted Qu Moying leaning against the window on the second floor, enjoying the view. She promptly alerted Qu Qiuyan in a low voice.

Qu Qiuyan raised her head and looked at the grand window on the second floor of the opposite pavilion. Qu Moying leaned against it, seemingly enjoying the view. It was a great spot to appreciate the scenery, as it offered a high vantage point. Qu Qiuyan hesitated for a moment but ultimately decided not to go up.

Her brother’s words were wise. She needed to be cautious when dealing with Qu Moying, not rushing for immediate gains. She couldn’t let Qu Moying sense her intentions. If it didn’t work this time, there would be another opportunity.

“Let’s just walk around casually, no need to go over there.” Qu Qiuyan continued walking forward. When her gaze silently met Qu Moying’s in mid-air, she smiled faintly and continued confidently.

It appeared as if they accidentally bumped into each other.

Privately, they had nothing much to say, so they met without displaying a close sisterly bond. It was better for both of them that way.

Otherwise, they would become suspicious no matter who came close.

Qu Qiuyan confidently strolled past the pavilion where Qu Moying stood, seemingly unfazed by her presence.

Qu Moying responded with a subtle smile, a slight curl at the corner of her lips. Qu Qiuyan had become smarter this time.

“Lady, why didn’t the Third Lady come over? When she was at the palace gate earlier, she asked twice about the direction you were coming from. Now she directly came here and even saw you, but she didn’t come up?” Yu Dong was quite surprised. She clearly saw that the Third Lady looked up and spotted the Miss.

Moreover, the repeated questioning at the palace gate was not just a casual inquiry. It was understandable to ask once when leaving, but to ask again upon returning and then come towards their direction— it seemed like the Third Lady wanted to find the Fourth Lady. Yet, in the last moment, she didn’t make her way up.

Yu Dong couldn’t help but feel perplexed.

“She must have encountered someone when she went out. I wonder who it was.” Qu Moying speculated with a smile. Qu Qiuyan didn’t spend much time at the palace, and at this moment, Dowager Consort Qu was likely still asleep. Since Qu Qiuyan had returned so quickly, it meant she had achieved her desired outcome.

“The Third Lady found someone to deal with you?” Yu Dong’s heart skipped a beat.

“More or less. It’s likely someone approached her.” Qu Moying dismissed it lightly. Qu Qiuyan wasn’t influential enough to be a concern when she entered the palace.

Dowager Consort Qu’s sudden appearance made the emperor take notice. The concubines who previously had no knowledge of Dowager Consort Qu couldn’t sit still anymore. There must be someone lurking near Dowager Consort Qu, trying to gather information. So, when Qu Qiuyan unexpectedly left, it was just the right timing.

“My lady, then in the future—when you enter the palace, don’t leave through this palace gate.” Yu Dong suggested after giving it some thought.

Qu Moying gently shook her head. “It’s pointless. Even if I visit Dowager Consort Qu without leaving through the palace gate, I still have to enter or exit the palace. On my way, there are plenty of ways to stop and question me. As a mere daughter of a low-ranking vice minister, I am no match for the favored concubines. It’s only natural that they will inquire and I will answer.”

Listening to her, Yu Dong realized she was right. Her face changed slightly as she pondered, about to say something, but Qu Moying interrupted with a smile and a wave of her hand. "Actually, it's not a big deal. They only pull me aside for a chat. After all, I'm here to see the Dowager. As long as they haven't uncovered the true depth of the Dowager's influence, they won't dare to act against me. Of course, it's possible that someone has been instigated..."

Qu Moying paused, her face turning serious, and a chilling glint appeared in her watery eyes. There was indeed a possibility!

Under normal circumstances, the palace concubines wouldn't dare to make a move against her. However, among these concubines, there were some who were foolish enough to be swayed by others or secretly given orders. They might directly target her.

It seemed she needed to be extra cautious.

"Lady!" Yu Dong realized the same thing and spoke urgently.

Qu Mo Ying nodded, lightly pinching her fan with her fingers, and calmly said, "I understand. I will be more cautious the next time I enter the palace."

It's not just the next time, but every time she entered the palace, she wouldn't take it lightly. However, one thing she could be certain of is that even if someone does try to harm her, that person's status wouldn't be too high. The concubines in the palace, especially those with high positions, were all astute and careful. They would never give anyone an opportunity to gain leverage over them.

It was usually the young and lower-ranked ones who act recklessly, thinking they are favored and even daring to approach the empress. They were the ones who might attempt such things.

Although it was initially just a vague thought, there are countless possibilities for how it could be executed. The palace was never a stable place.

Her long lashes blinked twice as she gazed into the distance, and she inexplicably thought of Pei Yuanjun. The coldness in her eyes and brows softened slightly. Since they first met, it had been Pei

Yuanjun's first time leaving, and it has been some time since he left the capital. What could have happened in the North?

"My lord, there is news from Duke Xing Mansion." Ji Hai said cheerfully, handing over a letter. It was a message from the lord's own brother.

The lord had a close relationship with Duke Xing, as they were true brothers and both legitimate sons of the former Lord Yun. They were close in age and had been practicing martial arts together since childhood. The title of Duke Xing was also earned by the lord. As a result, their bond grew even stronger.

Every time the lord received a letter from Duke Xing, his mood was uplifted!

The duke resided in another city at the border, quite far from their current location. However, it formed a strategic angle with this place and another city, collectively safeguarding this region. It was an important defensive position on the border.

Pei Yuanjun lazily accepted the letter, the sunlight gleaming on his earrings, flashing briefly and revealing a sharp, icy aura that sent a shiver down Ji Hai's spine.

#### Chapter 423 The Woman Hiding in the Guardian General's Mansion

"Indeed, the person is no longer in the capital of the North!" Pei Yuanjun concluded after reading the letter, lazily remarking. He then set the letter aside and walked towards the desk, where a large map of the North was placed. The map was mostly complete, with a few areas still requiring further investigation. Currently, his focus was primarily on the location where the two armies were facing each other.

Pei Yuanjun gestured with his hand and a faint smile curled upon his thin lips, revealing a chilling demeanor. "I have been here for quite some time, yet only letters have arrived."

"You mean... he left?" Ji Hai followed along, his eyes widening in astonishment. "But wasn't it said that there was no definitive conclusion over there? After all, they are still family!"

“To achieve what the Second Prince has accomplished in this situation is no simple feat. He is truly extraordinary. No wonder he has been causing unrest and disturbances in the North for so many years, preventing the court from enjoying peace.” Pei Yuanjun remarked calmly, devoid of any anger. However, his demeanor sent shivers down one’s spine, as if at any moment, that coldness could pierce one’s heart like a sharp dagger.

“What do you mean, my lord?” Ji Hai cautiously inquired.

Knowing more about the matter made him increasingly wary. This issue has entangled the imperial dynasty for decades, affecting countless individuals, from the Empress to ordinary citizens. Moreover, it has occurred more than once, indicating that the actions on the other side are far from ordinary.

“Let him go. It ensures his safety and, when necessary, Duke Xing can assist him. Since he went through Duke Xing to get there, it’s evident that there is more to this matter.” Pei Yuanjun spoke leisurely, taking a seat in the chair. He reached up to his forehead, pressing it lightly, his captivating eyes exuding an icy air.

The sharpness in his gaze contained a hint of bloodlust. Border soldiers who have truly witnessed bloodshed often possessed this temperament to some extent. However, for it to accumulate to such an extent, manifesting as a domineering presence in the furrow of his brow, was rare. It revealed that he had indeed claimed numerous lives. This aura of hostility, typically concealed beneath his grace and elegance, now permeated through, betraying his innate nobility.

Only at times like these could one witness the true essence of his character.

“Just let him go like that? Isn’t that too easy on him?” Ji Hai pondered for a moment before asking.

“Naturally, he cannot be allowed off so easily. By concealing this from me, he must understand that I am aware to some extent. He ought to pay more for this.” Pei Yuanjun replied with a smile that held both amusement and cruelty.

“But... considering his current circumstances... does he have more to spare?” Ji Hai hesitated, wondering how much capability remained after fleeing.

"Perhaps he doesn't, but isn't there still the entire North?" Pei Yuanjun responded nonchalantly.

At first, Ji Hai did not comprehend, but he soon caught on, clapping his hands forcefully. "Right! I was mistaken. Even if he doesn't have any now, there is still the future, not to mention the possibility that he may possess some now. After all, they are family!"

"You're right!" Ji Hai beamed, relieved.

"Inform Liu Xiangshan that I will be returning to the capital in a few days. I have been here for quite some time, and the emperor has already urged my return." Pei Yuanjun stated lazily.

"My lord, what about Lady Liu?" Ji Hai asked tactfully. This Lady Liu was persistent indeed. Previously, when she accompanied the Guardian General to meet the lord, he did not show her any favor, nor did he pay her much attention. However, she remained persistent, frequently coming over to deliver various items and displaying unwavering care.

For the sake of the general, the lord also couldn't do too much.

Considering the relationship they shared as fellow soldiers, their connection was closer than that of typical courtiers.

"Is it related to me?" Pei Yuanjun raised an eyebrow, his expression turning cold. A sense of nobility emanated from him, yet it was accompanied by an air of aloofness.

"It has nothing to do with you, but what if Lady Liu intends to enter the capital again this time?" Ji Hai became increasingly cautious, as this matter was not without reason. The emperor had previously inquired about it, questioning the relationship between his lord and Lady Liu. It appeared that the emperor intended to facilitate their union.

"If she wishes to enter the capital, then let her. However, as for me, I can't be involved anymore." Pei Yuanjun said with a slight smirk, exuding both handsomeness and elegance. His words grew increasingly mocking, "If she wants to enter the capital, let's make things difficult for her. The emperor's choices are his own business. If the emperor takes a liking to her, he can include her in the palace."

"My lord... I think the emperor might..." Ji Hai hesitated and glanced at his lord's expression, unsure whether he should speak or not.

He believed that Lady Liu wouldn't be so easy to deal with, and there was a high possibility of her following them into the capital.

"If the emperor wishes to summon her to the capital, then so be it. It has nothing to do with me. I still need to visit my second brother. It's not convenient to have a woman following me." Pei Yuanjun said in a leisurely manner.

"Yes, as you say, my lord!" Ji Hai nodded repeatedly, understanding in his heart that Lady Liu no longer had any hope. Despite her good reputation in this border region and the rumors linking her eye injury to the lord's involvement, the fact that his lord dismissed it meant that none of those tactics would work.

Ji Hai had served the lord since childhood and witnessed his defiance of the emperor on many occasions. Although he felt that it was not right to defy the emperor, since the emperor didn't say anything, as a servant, he didn't think much of it.

After considering it carefully, besides the Fourth Lady Qu, his master hadn't shown any interest in any other woman.

Even if this Fourth Lady Qu became a side princess in the mansion, so what?

His master's word was final. No one could surpass her. Moreover, his master was fiercely protective. If he really cared, he would never let her suffer. Ultimately, his master's decision determined everything. Even if the emperor took a liking to her, it would be in vain if his master disagreed.

If his master were pushed to the edge, he would even say it in front of the emperor...

The General's Mansion was one of the two largest mansions in the city, with the other serving as the Lord Yun's temporary palace.

Despite being in a border region with limited resources, the back garden of the General's Mansion had everything one could ask for. It was no less impressive than the mansions of the great families in the capital.

The garden was adorned with exquisite pavilions, their construction cost even surpassing those in the capital. After all, in a place like this, everything was scarce. Whatever was desired had to be obtained at a high price. Some items might even have been brought from the Jiangnan area. Not to mention the cost itself, just the transportation expenses were beyond the means of ordinary people.

On the second floor of one of the pavilions in the garden, two women were sitting.

One of them was Lady Liu Lanxin, who had been frequently visiting the Lord Yun's Palace. At this moment, she had removed her eye bandage. It was true that her eyes had been injured before, but the reason behind the injury had nothing to do with Pei Yuanjun. It was simply an accident that occurred while she was accompanying him.

Unexpectedly, they encountered the enemy, and she was injured by a stray arrow that grazed her eyelid while she was inside the sedan chair. Since then, the vision in one of her eyes had become blurred. Although she had received medical treatment for some time now, it still wasn't clear.

Sometimes she would take medication, and Liu Lanxin always felt that since the injury to her eye, the size of her eyes had become different. Therefore, until her eyes fully recovered, whenever she went out, she would use a bandage to cover her eyes. Later, she discovered that this had a more pitiful and charming effect. In addition, when news of this spread outside, her reputation improved even further.

After all, as a woman, she was respected for risking her life in battle to save Lord Yun.

People couldn't help but admire the daughter of a great general, calling her a heroic woman. She was different from those pampered young ladies raised in the capital.

Sitting across from her was a beautiful woman who appeared to be around twenty years old. She not only surpassed Liu Lanxin, who was known as the first beauty of the frontier, in terms of appearance, but also possessed a mature charm. Her every movement exuded a feminine allure. With a slight glance, she could captivate hearts and souls.

The two women sat there playing chess, and as a move was made, Liu Lanxin furrowed her brow.

“What’s wrong? Is your heart in turmoil?” The woman across the table asked gently with a smile, and she also made a move.

“How can it be like this? I’ve done everything I can. Why is it still... like this?” Liu Lanxin said, frustrated. She furrowed her brow and placed the chess in her hand back into the chess basket. Wearing a troubled expression, she genuinely desired to marry Lord Yun.

She had done everything she could, so why wasn’t it having any effect?

“That only means that Lord Yun hasn’t taken a liking to you.” the woman across the table replied, smiling softly. There was a hint of coquettishness in her voice as she spoke gently, “I haven’t seen Lord Yun for several years either, but back then, he was quite different. He didn’t push people away like this, or... perhaps something has made Lord Yun angry.”

“What happened?” Liu Lanxin asked, somewhat irritated. Although she believed the woman opposite her, she couldn’t help but feel angry at this moment.

“Well... I’m not really sure. I only remember that Lord Yun at that time was a gentle and noble young man. He doesn’t seem to be the same person you described.” the woman said with a delicate smile, her gaze shifting to a point outside the window. It seemed like she was recalling something or perhaps seeing something. The smile on her lips became even more tender.

It inexplicably gave people a sweet feeling.

“Was Lord Yun really different back then? Aren’t those just appearances?” Liu Lanxin questioned, doubtful and unwilling to believe.

“Of course, he was different. Lord Yun back then had only recently taken command of the army and wasn’t as furious. Or... his heart was more genuine than it is now.” the woman withdrew her gaze and turned to Liu Lanxin’s face. Her smile became increasingly alluring as she spoke, “Don’t rush. Take it slow. You need to make him accept you. If he accepts you, everything else will fall into place.”

"But he doesn't even want to see me!" Liu Lanxin exclaimed in frustration.

"So what? There's always a way to make him moved. Didn't your father send a letter to the capital, subtly mentioning your situation with Lord Yun? A decree should arrive soon." the woman said tenderly, pushing the chess basket towards Liu Lanxin. "Don't be angry. Someone like Lord Yun naturally needs to be approached gently. No one has been able to capture his heart for so many years because they can't go on to the end!"

Liu Lanxin made her move, and the woman casually followed suit. "Softness overcomes strength. It has been known since ancient times. You don't need to rush. This time, follow him to the capital without making any demands. Just be there. During the journey, you'll also have opportunities for private interaction. Prepare yourself well."

Liu Lanxin's eyes lit up, nodding repeatedly before tossing the chess piece aside. "I'll start preparing right away."

"That's good. Prepare thoroughly. The journey to the capital will take some time!" The woman watched Liu Lanxin leave and offered a few more instructions. Liu Lanxin continued nodding, then left decisively with her entourage to make preparations for their journey to the capital.

As the woman watched her depart, a smile adorned her face. She exuded a gentle and captivating charm, the kind most admired in the capital. If they were in the capital, she would likely be bestowed with the title of the first beauty.

Once Liu Lanxin was out of sight, the woman expressed a sense of self-satisfaction and muttered in a voice only she could hear, "Pei Yuanjun is not someone who easily changes his affections, no matter how gentle and persistent one may be."

## Chapter 424 Jealousy, Different Gifts

Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan had already finished their lunch in the side palace before Dowager Consort Qu got up from her sleep.

Dowager Consort Qu seemed much better after this sleep, appearing more refreshed. After being served half a bowl of porridge by a palace maid, she called for Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan to come in.

Qu Moying followed behind Qu Qiuyan as they entered the room. As soon as they entered, her gaze swept over and immediately noticed the incense burner placed there. Though it wasn't lit, the incense had already been inserted, indicating that it had been prepared in advance.

"This sleep was much more restful than before. It seems I truly need to move around more. I haven't been active enough, and it affected my appetite. I didn't even feel like taking medicine, let alone having a proper meal."

Dowager Consort Qu said, reclining on the bed after freshening up. She appeared much better than before.

Observing Dowager Consort Qu's complexion, Qu Moying realized that her lack of vitality wasn't solely due to inactivity. The main reason was that Dowager Consort Qu couldn't see any hope and believed her condition was inevitably worsening. Under such circumstances, it was difficult for her to find the energy to move. However, now she seemed to have a glimmer of hope, and her whole demeanor had changed.

Although it didn't signify a significant improvement, it was crucial to instill confidence in her, to make her believe that her illness wasn't severe and that she only needed gradual treatment. It prevented her from falling apart completely.

After exchanging greetings, Qu Moying gently placed her hand on Dowager Consort Qu's and, after a careful examination, smiled and said, "Your Highness has indeed improved significantly."

"Really? That's wonderful." Dowager Consort Qu exclaimed with delight, clearly placing great trust in Qu Moying.

"Naturally, it's true. However, I cannot give a precise assessment. Your Highness should consult the imperial physicians later; they would be better able to evaluate the progress," Qu Moying replied with a smile.

The Dowager Consort nodded in agreement. Her mood was completely different from her previous encounter with Qu Moying; she now radiated vitality.

Qu Qiuyan sat by the side, feeling frustrated witnessing Dowager Consort Qu's warm and affectionate interaction with Qu Moying. Gripping her handkerchief tightly and clenching her fists, she couldn't help but resent the situation. They were both nieces, yet Dowager Consort Qu completely ignored her when speaking, even turning her back. In contrast, Dowager Consort Qu spoke so intimately with Qu Moying.

Despite her envy and resentment, Qu Qiuyan knew better than to act impulsively. This wasn't the Qu Mansion, after all.

Finally, after Qu Moying and Dowager Consort Qu had conversed for a while, Dowager Consort Qu began to feel tired. Seizing the opportunity, Qu Qiuyan interjected with a smile, "Since Your Highness is feeling weary, Fourth Sister, let us take our leave."

She was desperate to leave as soon as possible.

"No need to rush. Come here, bring the rewards!" Dowager Consort Qu, in high spirits, motioned for a palace maid to enter and issued the command.

A palace maid entered, appearing slightly older than the others, walking with a different demeanor. Qu Moying hadn't seen her before, indicating that she had arrived after her departure. Qu Moying deliberately gave her a few more glances.

"Your Highness, as per your instructions, I have prepared two portions—one for Fourth Lady Qu and another for Third Lady Qu."

The palace maid said, bowing respectfully to Dowager Consort Qu. She then pointed to the two young palace maids following her, each holding a tray with two ornamental boxes on top. The palace maid first gestured to the one in front before indicating the one at the back.

The preceding represented the gift of Qu Moying, and the one behind was the gift of Qu Qiuyan.

It was evident that the two gifts were different.

Despite being the older sister, Qu Qiuyan was left behind by Qu Moying. Dowager Consort Qu was truly biased and lacked courtesy. Qu Qiuyan hadn't even seen her gift yet and was already unhappy.

She took a deep breath and suppressed her anger.

"Both of you are daughters of the Qu Mansion and can be considered my juniors. You should come to the palace often to visit me. I am alone in the palace without any other relatives. When I see you young girls, I am delighted." Dowager Consort Qu sighed. "Being with you improves my mood. I'm no longer feeling dull. As one grows older, the mind tends to wander, especially concerning matters outside the palace."

"Your Highness, you are not old. You are only unwell. In the past, you were in the best health. When the Empress Dowager was still here, she always praised you! Remember that time you had a meal together, and you ate two bowls? The Empress Dowager was astonished!" The palace maid chuckled, teasingly. "Many young ladies can't even compare to you!"

This comment made her laugh. She lightly covered her mouth with a handkerchief and playfully scolded, "You only know how to make me happy! I was truly hungry at that time. After accompanying the Empress Dowager for so long without being served a meal, I finally got to eat. Of course, I had to eat more!"

"I was not merely trying to please you; it's the truth. Apart from that incident, there were other young noblewomen walking with you, but in the end, you won!"

The palace maid continued to amuse.

The laughter put her at ease. She nodded repeatedly and then showed a trace of regret. "There were some incidents, but that was a long time ago."

"It hasn't been that long; it's only been a few months! When Your Highness recover from your illness, you can compete with other young ladies again." The palace maid teased.

These words made her laugh even more. She looked at Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan, affectionately pointed at the palace maid, and said, "This is Han Yu, the senior palace maid by my side. In the future, if you have any matters when entering the palace, you can find her. Usually, she is a lazy person, but she has a good tongue!"

"Greetings, Fourth Lady Qu and Third Lady Qu." Han Yu didn't object and smiled as she approached to bow to the two young ladies from the Qu Mansion.

Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan quickly stood up. "Aunty Han Yu is too kind."

In the palace, the senior palace maids are often referred to as aunty.

"In the future, both of you should come to visit Her Highness more often. Whenever Her Highness talks about both of you, she becomes particularly happy. She always says that both of you are the most intelligent and promising, and you are family," Han Yu said with a smile, demonstrating her conversational skills.

"You are too kind!"

"Alright, alright. Hurry up and present the gifts. If you delay any longer, when will they be delivered?" Dowager Consort Qu said with a smile, observing that she had a special trust in Han Yu.

Han Yu nodded with a smile and didn't say anything more. She instructed a palace maid to come forward and present the gifts to the two young ladies from the Qu Mansion.

The palace maid brought the gifts to them, and both of them expressed their gratitude and instructed their maids to accept them.

When the time was almost up, Qu Moying also stood up and bid farewell to Dowager Consort Qu.

Dowager Consort Qu had originally wanted to engage them in conversation, but at that moment, a eunuch came to report that the imperial physician had come to check her pulse again. After some thought, Dowager Consort Qu sighed helplessly and decided not to keep them any longer.

“Your Highness, in the future, you should walk around more, go to places with better air circulation. Sometimes you should open the windows in the room and not keep it stuffy all the time. If you keep suffocating like this, you might end up getting sick even if you’re not. Look, they put the incense back in again.” Qu Moying pointed with her hand, looked like she suddenly noticed the incense in the incense burner, surprised.

Dowager Consort Qu followed Qu Moying’s hand with her gaze and saw it too. She looked up at Han Yu, her face turned serious. “Did you have someone bring this incense burner in?”

“I entered and noticed that the fragrance was absent. Upon inquiring with a palace maid, it was explained that it had accidentally fallen and a replacement was requested. However, it was not lit. Since Your Highness was sleeping soundly, I thought it wouldn’t be a problem and refrained from lighting it. Is there something wrong with this incense burner?”

Han Yu looked at her in surprise and offered an explanation.

The incense was not lit, so it was reasonable.

Qu Moying’s gaze fell on the ground. She seemed to have noticed Han Yu’s words, but at the same time, she did not seem to have noticed it. She only saw Han Yu’s feet standing firmly on the ground. She did not seem to be at a loss. Her eyes darkened.

“It’s not that there is something wrong, it’s just that the scent from this incense burner is not as pleasant. You can have it removed. From now on, for better air circulation, I will refrain from lighting incense here. Instead, I will occasionally pull the curtains to let the room breathe. I will also follow suit and ventilate.”

Dowager Consort Qu wouldn’t really make things difficult for the palace maid beside her because of the incense.

“Yes, I will have someone remove it now.” Han Yu obediently smiled and gestured for a eunuch to come forward and take the incense burner away.

As they passed by Qu Moying, a faint hint of fragrance floated in the air, offering a soothing sensation. It indeed had a calming effect. However, Qu Moying keenly sensed that this fragrance was slightly different from the previous one. The scent she had imagined seemed to be missing.

Qu Moying's gaze fell upon the incense in the burner. It was the exact same incense, without any discrepancy!

However, it had actually been replaced.

After Han Yu sent off the two sisters of the Qu family at the door, she instructed them to come back and visit Her Highness again in a few days. Previously, the serene atmosphere in this place did not bother her, but now she longed for the presence of the Qu sisters, to have lively conversations here. With age, she had developed a fondness for liveliness.

Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan accepted the instructions with smiles, said their farewells to Han Yu, and boarded the sedan chair prepared by the palace at the palace gate. This palace was quite far from the gate, almost at the furthest and most secluded corner if measured along the central axis of the palace.

In this area, there were hardly any esteemed palace consorts. Some parts of the palace were even empty, creating a desolate ambiance.

However, by going through the other side of Dowager Consort Qu's palace, one could reach the lively areas inside the palace. In order to take a shortcut, a few chamberlains took a different route, although not along the central axis, the road was spacious enough. They made their way towards the palace gate.

Once they arrived at the gate, Yu Dong assisted Qu Moying in descending from the sedan chair, and they followed Qu Qiuyan towards the outer area of the palace gate.

Upon leaving the second gate and stepping outside, they were relieved to find their family's carriage still parked there. Yu Dong finally relaxed, as she had been on edge throughout the journey, fearing that something might go wrong.

They boarded the carriage, and an air of indifference lingered among them. Each closed their eyes to rest, and as the carriage turned a corner, they made their way towards the Qu Mansion.

The journey was uneventful. Upon arriving at the parking area within the Qu Mansion, the carriage came to a stop. The two sisters alighted and proceeded towards the Old Lady's courtyard.

The Old Lady had been waiting for them. Upon their arrival, she inquired about the condition of Dowager Consort Qu and expressed relief upon hearing that her condition had improved. Afterwards, she asked the two of them if they had encountered anything during their time in the palace.

Qu Qiuyan simply replied that they went for a walk and didn't encounter anyone, while Qu Moying stated that she hadn't left the palace, so it was impossible for her to meet anyone.

The Old Lady was satisfied with their answers. Once she clarified the situation, she instructed them to rest. Although they had been riding in sedan chairs and carriages throughout, the constant anxiety made them feel as if it had been a strenuous journey.

When Qu Moying returned to the Qianyu House, Granny Yan had been waiting there. She had left the palace earlier and arrived a while before Qu Moying.

"My lady, a gift has arrived from Duke Qi's Mansion." Granny Yan reported as Qu Moying took her seat. She had received it when she entered and heard that it was meant for the Lady. Granny Yan had brought it in directly from the mansion's entrance.

#### Chapter 425 Strange, First Young Master Qi's Return Gift

"Gift? Why did they send a gift?" Qu Moying exclaimed in surprise. She couldn't believe that the Duke Qi's Mansion would still be sending gifts at this time. The chrysanthemum appreciation party they had mentioned earlier was just around the corner. Why would they send another gift now?

"I find it strange as well. The gift bearer claimed it was a return gift from the Duke of Qi's Mansion. By chance, while talking to the gatekeeper, I overheard the mention of Lady. So, I had the carriage stop in front of the gate and listened to find out what it was about. That's when I learned that the Duke of Qi's Mansion had sent a gift for you." explained Granny Yan.

“Who sent this return gift? And what is it?” Qu Moying asked while looking at the box presented by Granny Yan.

The box was small, indicating that it didn’t contain many items.

“It is said to be from... the First Young Master Qi.” Granny Yan replied, her expression somewhat peculiar.

“Why would he send me a return gift? It was directly sent to me?” Qu Moying paused, her hand hesitating to open the box, as she asked in astonishment.

She and First Young Master Qi were not actually acquainted. At most, they had encountered each other a few times in passing. Later on, he borrowed a music score from her, only to return it afterward. As for the incident when she initially intended to borrow a new score, it was merely another chance. But regardless of whether the First Young Master Qi noticed it or not, she hadn’t explicitly mentioned that it was meant for him.

Moreover, to express the sincerity of the gift, she intentionally changed the style of the original score to a different tone, emphasizing cheerfulness and naturalness. Older people generally prefer cheerful tunes, just like how elderly people enjoy seeing their granddaughters and daughters-in-law dressed in vibrant colors.

The original score was not a cheerful composition, and could even be considered somewhat melancholic. It required transforming the latter half of the piece from a somber melody to a cheerful one, seamlessly and without leaving any traces of the transition. This depended on the skill of the person continuing the performance.

Ji Hanyue’s music skills were exemplary, and she had unique insights into musical scores. She believed it was feasible to change a melancholic and serene piece into a lively one in the latter half.

The choice of this particular fragmented score was also due to its significance. Combined with the transformation from serene to cheerful, it would have a more profound impact compared to a standalone cheerful piece.

Whether Duchess Qi was skilled in playing the instrument didn't matter, as they had a highly skilled son in the household. He could play it for Duchess Qi.

However, the current behavior of him was puzzling. If the gift was not intended for him, why would he give a return gift? Didn't he realize this was an inappropriate gesture? Even if there was a reason, it should not have been sent directly to him. It would have been more appropriate to deliver it to her grandmother, who would then pass it on to her.

One couldn't simply present such a gift themselves.

An unexplained sense of displeasure already began to arise.

Upon opening the box, Qu Moying indeed found a music score. Judging by the worn appearance of the book, it was apparent that this score was not something easily obtained. It might even be a rare and unique copy.

Upon flipping through it, Qu Moying immediately understood. It was indeed a unique copy, and an exceptionally rare one that had managed to survive through times of war. It could be considered the rarest of the rare.

Unlike the previous copy Qu Moying had received, which was incomplete and required her careful continuation based on her own skills, this one was complete and neatly organized. The musical scores inside evoked a sense of fascination.

If Qu Moying were still Ji Hanyue, she would undoubtedly be overjoyed at this point. She wouldn't have cared about anything else and would have immediately taken the instrument to play, verifying its authenticity.

People with exceptional music skills all shared this passion. Ji Hanyue was no exception. In the past, when Pei Luo'an brought her a rare copy, she would play it for several consecutive days, reluctant to put it down. Compared to other valuable possessions like gold, silver, and jewelry, she had a particular fondness for music scores, especially rare and complete ones like this.

Perhaps she wasn't the only one with such preferences. Everyone who loved playing had similar thoughts.

Now, after casually flipping through the score, a subtle wave of emotion flashed through Qu Moying's eyes. She had seen the First Young Master Qi before, and he seemed to be a polite person, resembling a refined gentleman. Although she didn't know him specifically, judging by his character, he didn't seem like someone who would make impulsive moves.

So... what did this mean?

She gently tapped her fingers on the music score, and Qu Moying's long eyelashes fluttered twice. Then she raised her watery eyes, revealing a hint of depth in their shimmering hues.

"What kind of person sent this over?"

"It was a lad servant who claimed it was a return gift from the First Young Master Qi. When I asked about it, the servant at the door mentioned that I was the lady's attendant. Then the lad handed the gift box to me and left!" Granny Yan explained helplessly.

She had just returned from the palace and was concerned about Dowager Consort Qu's well-being, so her reaction was a bit slow. By the time she regained her senses, the lad had already boarded the carriage outside the gate and departed.

"My lady, I took a careful look. It should be a servant from the Duke Qi's Mansion. I had seen the attire worn by people from the Duke's Mansion before, and the carriage also belonged to them." Although Granny Yan was a little slow to react and didn't talk to the lad, she still observed everything quite clearly.

So, was this truly the music score sent by the First Young Master Qi?

But what was his intention behind this?

Qu Moying furrowed her brows, unable to guess his motive for the moment. She decided to let Granny Yan take care of the music score for now.

Yu Chun entered with Granny Miao, and after greeting Qu Moying, Qu Moying turned to look at Yu Dong. Yu Dong understood and carefully took out the incense from her sleeve, presenting it in front of Granny Miao.

A faint fragrance wafted out. Even without lighting the incense, there was still a subtle scent. It wasn't as strong as when it was lit, but the aroma was undeniably present.

Granny Miao took it and sniffed; her expression immediately changed. She looked at Qu Moying and asked, "Miss, did you smell it?"

"I did catch a hint of something, but I couldn't be certain. That's why I wanted Granny Miao to take a look," Qu Moying nodded and spoke frankly, "The scent is very faint, blending in with the fragrance. If Granny Miao hadn't warned me beforehand, I might not have noticed it at all."

Granny Miao had mentioned this medicinal herb before and explained it in detail. However, Qu Moying had thought it unlikely to exist in the capital, so she hadn't paid much attention to it. Now, after catching a whiff, she still couldn't confirm its identity.

"It is indeed very subtle, but if it were lit, it should become much more potent, right?" Granny Miao whispered, her face serious, as she smelled it once again.

"Yes, it becomes quite strong, especially considering Dowager Consort Qu's delicate health. The palace attendants said she shouldn't be exposed to fresh air, and even the windows were partially closed. In such conditions, the scent becomes even stronger," Qu Moying nodded. She had noticed that the environment at that time was almost sealed off, which wouldn't do Dowager Consort Qu any good.

"What did they say her illness was?" Granny Miao inquired further.

"They said it was something like food accumulation, with some damp-heat and so on. Initially, I thought it wasn't a serious ailment, but it dragged on without improvement. When I visited today, the dowager

consort had no spirit left, appearing completely resigned to death. It's evident that the delay has taken a toll." Qu Moying contemplated and replied.

She recounted in detail the condition of Dowager Consort Qu that she had witnessed.

After explaining the sequence of events, Granny Miao was almost certain that someone had schemed against Dowager Consort Qu.

"Is what you're saying... true?" Granny Yan, who had been listening attentively, couldn't help but tremble. With her intellect, she clearly understood the underlying reasons. She spoke with a quivering voice.

"The incense used by Dowager Consort Qu was mixed with something that worsens her condition. It may seem harmless, but it reacts adversely with some of the medicines used to treat this condition. The more she's treated, the more harm it does, worsening her condition, and eventually, it could cost her life." Granny Miao paused briefly and candidly addressed Granny Yan.

Granny Yan trembled all over, her hand pressing against the corner of the table, filled with anger. "Who... who would plot against the dowager consort? She has peacefully coexisted in the palace for so many years, without any conflicts or disputes. Who can't tolerate her?"

Dowager Consort Qu didn't have children or heirs. She was simply an unnoticed old consort, and there was no need for her to vie for power. The only difference was her lack of offspring, but that alone wasn't a reason for others in the palace to be intolerant. After all, having such a senior consort in the palace still benefited their reputation to some extent.

Now that there was no Empress Dowager, this old consort could receive filial piety from the palace concubines and the empress, showcasing their respect for elders and earning a good reputation.

Who wouldn't be willing to do that?

Qu Moying fell silent. From this perspective, it seemed that Dowager Consort Qu had nothing that could attract someone's scheming. However, the presence of this incense in front of the dowager consort was not something that could be explained away.

“Why didn’t the physicians notice? They examine the dowager consort several times a day.” Granny Yan forced herself to restrain her grief and anger as she asked once again.

“This is a method used among the tribes of the North, and it is not accessible to ordinary people.” Granny Miao sighed deeply, appearing much older. There were certain matters she could discuss with the lady, but she didn’t want to share them with Granny Yan. Those were her own heartbreaks. Although both of them were trusted confidantes of the young lady now, Granny Miao preferred not to dwell on the subject.

“Is there any hope for a cure then?” Granny Yan asked anxiously. She genuinely worried about Dowager Consort Qu. Although she initially served under the Empress Dowager, she didn’t receive much recognition in the Empress Dowager’s palace. On the other hand, after she began serving Dowager Consort Qu, it was a considerable improvement compared to being with the Empress Dowager, who had a peculiar temper and a consistently overbearing demeanor.

“The incense should no longer be burned. Once the incense is removed, the dowager consort’s health should improve. The imperial physicians can handle it well. According to the lady’s observations, Dowager Consort Qu’s overall condition is still manageable.” Granny Miao explained.

If it were an ordinary elderly woman, she would likely be experiencing constant dizziness and difficulty recognizing people by now. In that case, it would truly be a hopeless situation.

“Should I inform Her Highness about this immediately?” Granny Yan asked, feeling restless.

“Granny Yan, don’t go now. It would startle the guards unnecessarily. What we need to do at this moment is to gradually investigate the matter thoroughly. Rest assured; Consort Dowager’s health is stable for now. Furthermore, I have already cautioned her to refrain from burning incense, lighting it, or keeping the windows closed. The situation isn’t as dire as it seems.” Granny Miao reassured her.

Qu Moying interrupted Granny Yan and gave her additional instructions. Then, he turned to Granny Miao and said, “Please prepare some medicinal powder with several different ingredients. Next time Granny Yan enters the palace, she can bring it to Dowager Consort Qu.”

Preparing the necessary medicines by grinding them into powder would make them more convenient to consume. This was a method of medicinal administration commonly used in the North.

“Very well. I’ll make the preparations now.” Granny Miao nodded and left.

Granny Yan wanted to gain more knowledge about these matters and was about to follow, but Qu Moying stopped her and said, “Granny Yan, can you tell me about the palace maid named Han Yu who serves the Dowager Consort Qu?”

#### Chapter 426 Did Paramount Empress Leave an Heir?

“Han Yu? Does she have a problem?” Granny Yan’s eyes widened in surprise, then shook her head repeatedly. “No, it can’t be true. How is that possible?”

“I’m not saying she has a problem. I just think she is an extremely important person by the Dowager Consort’s side. If there’s any suspicion, she would be involved as well.” Qu Moying explained softly with a faint smile.

Seeing her reaction, Granny Yan relaxed and nodded, revealing the matter concerning Han Yu.

Initially, Han Yu didn’t serve under Dowager Consort Qu. When she made a small mistake and was almost beaten to death by another consort, Dowager Consort Qu happened to pass by and saved her. Since then, she had been following Dowager Consort Qu faithfully. Han Yu was clever and intelligent, and gradually became Dowager Consort Qu’s trusted aide.

She remained loyal to Dowager Consort Qu, and due to her lack of relatives, she chose to stay by Dowager Consort Qu’s side even when a group of palace maids were being released from the palace as they grew older. Dowager Consort Qu couldn’t bear to let Han Yu go, as she had no one else. So, Han Yu stayed with her. Their bond was extraordinary.

In this palace, Dowager Consort Qu maintained a low profile and rarely interacted with others. She only had a few close confidantes within the palace, with whom she occasionally conversed and shared

moments of joy. Their relationship was much stronger than the relationships between the other consorts and their attendants.

“So, it’s impossible for Han Yu to harm the Dowager Consort Qu?” Qu Moying pondered for a moment after hearing Granny Yan’s account, and then asked thoughtfully.

“Indeed, it’s highly unlikely. Han Yu doesn’t have any other family, and she wouldn’t harm Her Highness for the sake of others. The Dowager Consort Qu is her only mistress, and if anything happens to her, Han Yu wouldn’t be well either.” Granny Yan sighed and replied. She had also served faithfully by her side, and her relationship with Dowager Consort Qu was also exceptional.

However, even though the Dowager Consort Qu was discreet, the attendants were even more low-profile. Granny Yan used to serve the Empress Dowager, and later, although she followed Dowager Consort Qu, it was in a semi-hidden state. She rarely left Dowager Consort Qu’s palace, and many people even thought she had left the harem.

“Granny Yan, were you also asked by the Dowager Consort Qu?” Qu Moying suddenly asked with a curious smile.

“No, I wasn’t. I was ordered by the emperor to go there. The Empress Dowager was no longer there, and several others were also ordered by the emperor. Some went to the Empress, while others, like Eunuch De Fu, went directly to keep vigil beside the coffin. Of course, some were sent elsewhere.”

Granny Yan explained.

The Empress Dowager’s health wasn’t good. She fell ill from time to time, and sometimes her condition was critical. People in the palace had their own thoughts and sought suitable patrons. When the Empress Dowager’s health deteriorated, they already had their connections and plans in place. They were just waiting for the Empress Dowager’s passing to swiftly change their patrons. At that time, who would care about a few palace attendants’ whereabouts!

Only a few loyal individuals had no ulterior motives.

"I heard that the Empress Dowager and the Dowager Consort Qu had an extremely close relationship during her lifetime?" Qu Moying's eyes shimmered with curiosity, and her long eyelashes fluttered like butterfly wings, displaying a hint of girlish inquisitiveness.

"That's what they say, but in reality... the two had different personalities, so their relationship wasn't as good as rumored. The relationship between them wasn't as strong as that of several other consorts. However, when these consorts left the palace to be with their children, or went to the Xinning Monastery when they had no children, only Dowager Consort Qu remained. If the Empress Dowager wanted to talk to someone, she only had Dowager Consort Qu."

Granny Yan sighed.

So, the relationship between Dowager Consort Qu and the Empress Dowager wasn't as favorable as people claimed. It couldn't be that the Empress Dowager had interceded for Dowager Consort Qu to stay.

An old consort without children but able to remain in the palace was indeed an extraordinary circumstance.

"I heard that Dowager Consort Qu stayed in the palace because of... Paramount Empress?" Now that the topic had reached this point, the words naturally flowed out.

Paramount Empress was a taboo in the palace, and no one could casually mention her name. But this was Qu Moying's residence, and some things could still be discussed.

"Paramount Empress..." Granny Yan's expression changed drastically, and she appeared frightened and panicked.

"Granny Yan, is it forbidden to mention Paramount Empress?" Qu Moying raised her small face, her jade-like features filled with surprise. She was just a young girl who had recently returned from the countryside. Even though she was aware of certain taboos, she didn't have extensive knowledge. The innocent expression on her face was evident.

“My lady, in the future, while in the palace, remember never to casually mention her... The emperor dislikes it the most when people mention the Paramount Empress.” Granny Yan’s face turned serious as she spoke. After a moment of thought, she emphasized to Qu Moying, “Once, when the Empress Dowager was still alive, she mentioned the Paramount Empress, and the emperor became angry. He smashed things and left, leaving the Empress Dowager in tears for a whole day. But afterwards, the emperor didn’t come for several days.”

If even the Empress Dowager couldn’t mention it, how much more did the emperor care about this woman? Qu Moying was astonished. She had considered that the emperor valued Paramount Empress, but she never expected it to be to this extent.

“The emperor truly cares so much about the Paramount Empress. Then why is it said that the Paramount Empress... died in the cold palace, and even until her death, the charges against her were not cleared?” There were no outsiders present, so Qu Moying, with her innocent eyes, asked.

Seeing her like this, Granny Yan sighed. Although the young lady was intelligent, she didn’t know what was going on in the palace. Her question was too naive.

“Sometimes, even the emperor is powerless. Even if the Emperor cares deeply about the Paramount Empress... there are times when circumstances are beyond his control. Just like... just like the Crown Prince, he is also powerless now! Human effort has its limits, and some things are beyond our control!”

This revelation first shocked Qu Moying, but then she found it somewhat ridiculous. Isn’t that the exact situation with Pei Luo’an now? In front of others, he appeared deeply in love, as if Ji Hanyue’s death took his heart away. He has been sick for some time, pale and weak. But in reality?

It truly was laughable. This illusion was indeed passed down through generations.

Looking at the behavior of the Crown Prince, one can imagine that many years later, if he were to ascend the throne, he might even honor Ji Hanyue as the Empress and express wholehearted devotion to her. Even if Ji Hanyue were to die, he would still hold her in his heart, showing the utmost care for her.

After all, she was a deceased person, posing no danger. Expressing deep concern for her would make people believe in his love and devotion, thinking that he was a faithful person.

But in reality, Paramount Empress died in the cold palace. If the emperor truly had the power to protect her or had the wholehearted intention to do so, how could she have passed away so early? Not to mention the favored Noble Consort He, who gave birth to Lord Jing and seems to have a closer connection to Ji Youran.

Indeed, like father, like son!

Who could have imagined that Ji Hanyue died at the hands of Pei Luo'an? So, can't it be presumed that the death of the Paramount Empress is also related to the emperor? Even if there was no direct connection, it was because the emperor didn't make an effort to protect the Paramount Empress that she died prematurely, while he showed concern for her but favored Noble Consort He.

It seems like he transferred his guilt for the Paramount Empress to Noble Consort He because she was Paramount Empress's sister.

But in reality, her true bloodline was long gone. The members of the He family now were all Noble Consort He's own siblings, and besides sharing the same surname with Paramount Empress, they had no relation at all.

The so-called deep love and devotion appeared more like a joke. A hint of coldness and sadness flashed in Qu Moying's eyes. She forcefully bit her lip, the taste of blood strong on her lips.

She empathized deeply.

"Did Paramount Empress leave behind heirs?" It took Qu Moying a while to calm down before her voice turned cold.

Although there were rumors in secret that Paramount Empress had no heirs, Qu Moying still asked the question. She had heard that during the period Paramount Empress was in the palace, other concubines gave birth to children, but she remained childless until the end.

It was said that even when she was the Empress, she had no children, which was quite unexpected.

"I... I cannot say for sure," Granny Yan hesitated for a moment, her voice unintentionally lowering.

"What do you mean?" Qu Moying looked at Granny Yan in surprise.

"I heard that Paramount Empress was pregnant, but... later had a miscarriage, and then got involved in such matters, and eventually ended up in the cold palace. During that time, it seemed... it seemed that the empress was also pregnant." Granny Yan couldn't continue, she swallowed a mouthful of saliva, and then lowered her voice even more, "It seems that at that time, Paramount Empress might have been pregnant."

"Paramount Empress was pregnant in the cold palace?" Qu Moying was stunned for a moment, raising her head in astonishment. She hadn't considered that possibility before.

"I don't know if it's true or not. At that time, the relationship between the emperor and the empress dowager was very bad, they often argued. Once, when I was waiting outside, I overheard them mentioning Paramount Empress and talking about her being pregnant. I don't know if they were referring to Paramount Empress, and I couldn't hear clearly from such a distance. I didn't dare to move closer."

These were secrets of the palace, and Granny Yan had originally intended to keep them to herself. She didn't want to speak about them to anyone, as it could bring trouble. But considering Qu Moying's identity and her future interactions with the noble ladies in the palace, it was better to address these matters early on, even though they were taboo.

It was also to prevent her from falling into someone else's trap!

Qu Moying was silent for a moment, gently pursing her lips. Her cherry lips were pale white, her long eyelashes cast uneven shadows under her eyes, making her skin look even more like jade, almost like transparent jade. Her exquisite facial features met this jade-like skin, making her look even more beautiful.

Granny Yan sighed once again, realizing how far her young lady's appearance differed from those rumors.

She did not dare to interrupt Qu Moying's thoughts. She stood quietly at the side and waited for Qu Moying to speak.

Finally, Qu Moying raised his head, the corners of her lips curved into a clear smile as she nodded, "Granny Yan, don't worry, I won't casually talk about her."

Granny Yan's words were meant to warn Qu Moying. Qu Moying naturally understood. She couldn't help but smile. Compared to those young ladies from prestigious families, Granny Yan genuinely believed that her young lady was the one who had been carefully cultivated.

She was perceptive and could draw inferences from what was said. Granny Yan had been subtly giving her these hints during their conversation, but she hadn't been very explicit.

Qu Moying raised her gaze again and suddenly spoke resolutely, "Granny Yan, I want to find out about the Crown Princess's affairs!"

#### Chapter 427 Panic After Clear Words

"My lady!" Granny Yan was so shocked that she could barely find words to speak. She thought her previous words had dispelled any such thoughts from the young lady's mind, but now the young lady brought up an even more alarming topic.

"The Crown Princess was my cousin, but she died shortly after the marriage. When she was critically injured, the prince's side princess entered the mansion. Everything in the Eastern Palace was controlled by this princess. And when the uncle got into trouble, all the benefits went to the second branch, Princess Ji. If it wasn't for the subsequent birth of the Crown Prince, who belongs to the main branch, the position of Crown Prince would have gone to Princess Ji's family. Doesn't Granny Yan find it strange?"

For the first time, Qu Moying openly revealed all the events to Granny Yan in a logical manner. When Granny Yan appeared by her side, she had planned for this day. Granny Yan was the best piece sent by fate, her most trusted assistant in the future. Compared to the people around her, Granny Yan had

experienced and knew the most, including the affairs of the Paramount Empress and the inner workings of the palace. Qu Moying needed Granny Yan's guidance more than ever.

Some things were apparent, but not everyone would consider them. After all, Pei Luoan still wore a disguise of profound love!

But she would gradually peel away that disguise. One day, everything would be revealed to the world.

Even if it meant her own demise.

"My lady!" Granny Yan was stunned by the implications of these words, and she could hardly speak.

"Granny Yan, do you think it was all just a series of accidents? If so, these accidents were truly extraordinary. All the benefits fell into the hands of the second branch of the Earl Ling'an's Mansion, while the first branch had to bear all the hardships. The uncle fell seriously ill and passed away, the cousin died from her injuries, and the cousin's sister vanished without a trace. They claimed she eloped with someone, but then said she died and hastily buried her."

Qu Moying lifted her face, her eyes shining with a dazzling brilliance. The sharp, icy light in her eyes made Granny Yan unable to meet her gaze. It was hard to believe that such a harsh and bloodthirsty gaze could come from a gentle and delicate woman of a noble family.

Facing Qu Moying's gaze, Granny Yan trembled slightly. She couldn't discern the reason behind the cold, bloodthirsty look in her eyes. Those beautiful eyes were supposed to be enchanting and tender, but in this moment, they seemed to carry all the dark and negative emotions in the world, making it impossible to directly look into them.

"My lady, but the Crown Prince didn't want this either. It is said that when the Crown Princess passed away, His Royal Highness was gravely ill. The physicians rushed to the Eastern Palace to save the Crown Prince just in time." Gathering her thoughts, Granny Yan lowered her head and mumbled hesitantly, avoiding looking directly into Qu Moying's unsettling eyes.

“Acting requires a complete performance.” Qu Moying sneered. Her graceful lips curled slightly, and the dark color receded from her eyes. Although her gaze turned colder, it also became deeper. “If it weren’t for this performance, do you think anyone would suspect him?”

Granny Yan’s heart thumped heavily. She tightly clenched the lines on her palm, thinking carefully. After a moment, she gritted her teeth and nodded, speaking frankly, “If the Crown Prince weren’t so seriously ill and in pain, perhaps someone would have noticed the affairs of the Earl Ling’an’s Mansion. But the side princess entered the palace to take care of the Crown Princess, at least that’s what I heard.”

“The Crown Princess’s intentions? Did anyone witness them or was it just hearsay? Perhaps at that time, the Crown Princess was already unable to speak. All of this might have been nothing more than a self-directed performance by the Crown Prince.” Qu Moying disdainfully refuted. In fact, she had one more thing to say, something she hadn’t mentioned yet. There was no one in this world who knew better than her.

Ji Hanyue had long been dead at that time.

She died at the hands of Prince Pei Luoan and Ji Youran’s schemes.

“Well...” Granny Yan hesitated. These words were bordering on treasonous, causing an inexplicable panic. She truly couldn’t think of any arguments to refute them. Indeed, everything about the Eastern Palace came from the Crown Prince’s mansion, but if it was intentionally spread, it was also possible.

“Do you think Princess Ji resembles Noble Consort He?” Seeing Granny Yan’s half-believing and half-doubtful expression, Qu Moying added fuel to the fire. Granny Yan played an important role in uncovering the truth about Ji Hanyue, and Qu Moying needed to be more explicit and help Granny Yan see things more clearly.

With reference to past events, she believed Granny Yan would understand the implications of her words.

Sure enough, Granny Yan was shocked and took two steps back, almost stumbling and falling. She reached out and grabbed the edge of the table beside her to steady herself, looking at Qu Moying in astonishment. The sunlight from outside streamed in through the window, casting a shadow on Qu

Moying's profile. It made her slender figure seem as if half of it was hidden in darkness, emitting an indescribable sense of mystery that left Granny Yan unable to put it into words.

Granny Yan opened her mouth but found that she couldn't utter a word, her lips paled in shock.

After a while, she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. Then she gathered her thoughts and slowly said, "Yes!"

It was very much alike. One was to take care of the severely injured Crown Princess, and the other was to attend to the critically ill Paramount Empress. But they never returned. It's just that no one ever dared to consider this possibility before, let alone think in this direction.

In fact, there was a striking similarity between the two situations.

Granny Yan had witnessed numerous strange incidents in the palace and had become more inclined to believe in such things. Almost instantly, she accepted Qu Moying's perspective.

Before considering this possibility, it seemed impossible and unimaginable. However, once she started to think about it seriously, she realized that there were indeed many suspicious aspects to the situation. It was suspicious to the point that one couldn't believe it, with so many unexpected twists and turns.

If it weren't for the Crown Prince's deep affection, many people might have already entertained these thoughts.

"My lady, what can I do for you?" Granny Yan, having suppressed her initial shock, let out a deep sigh. Her throat felt hot and dry, and her words came out almost unconsciously.

If this was truly the case, there must be more to the Crown Princess's situation. Could it be that she was as unfortunate as Paramount Empress? Considering her young lady's action, it was evident that she would be involved. Although Granny Yan was afraid and uneasy, she had already made up her mind to accompany Qu Moying in this matter.

“Granny Yan, from now on, whether it’s accompanying me to the palace or elsewhere, please make every effort to gather information about the Eastern Palace and the Crown Princess. Anything you can find out would be valuable. Among those around me, only you are best suited for this task.” Qu Moying smiled slightly, knowing that Granny Yan had accepted her proposal.

Some things needed to be approached slowly, and the path ahead would undoubtedly be fraught with obstacles and dangers. After all, she would have to confront the Crown Prince Pei Luoan of the Eastern Palace, as well as Ji Youran, who was said to have great potential to become Princess Ji in the future.

“I will, my lady!” Granny Yan replied softly, her throat still dry from the lingering shock.

“Granny Yan, I heard that the Crown Prince intends to marry County Lady Jingyu.” Qu Moying said, changing the topic with a slight smile. Since the matter had been brought up, she wouldn’t press further. It wasn’t the right time. “What do you think would be the best course of action?”

Qu Moying relied on Granny Yan’s experience in this matter.

“My lady, would you be willing to establish a good relationship with side Princess Ji?” After giving it some thought, Granny Yan proposed the most favorable idea. From Granny Yan’s perspective, it was the best choice. The County Lady Jingyu clearly held a grudge against her young lady and couldn’t stand beside her. On the other hand, Princess Ji seemed to want to get closer to her young lady.

“I don’t want to.” Qu Moying responded candidly, her eyes firm and without hesitation.

Although her voice wasn’t loud, Granny Yan could sense the determination in her words. Reflecting on what she had said earlier, Granny Yan understood the reasons behind her decision.

While Granny Yan sighed at her young lady’s stubbornness, she refrained from offering further persuasion.

“If you’re unwilling to befriend Princess Ji, then let’s consider this: If the Crown Prince favors County Lady Jingyu, and if Princess Ji is truly as you described, she won’t be easy to deal with. Even if County Lady Jingyu has a powerful background, it doesn’t necessarily guarantee a smooth relationship. And if she’s not as you described...”

Granny Yan instinctively swallowed as she reached this point, feeling a sense of apprehension. If it was indeed as her young lady described, it would be a colossal matter—no, not just colossal, it would be earth-shattering. Granny Yan began to panic, her face turning pale. She didn't dare to entertain further thoughts.

This was not something an ordinary palace granny and a young lady from an ordinary noble family should discuss.

"Granny Yan, don't worry. I just want to investigate. If it becomes impossible to proceed, I won't pursue it further. I simply don't want our cousins to lose their lives in vain. I don't want Princess Ji to gain any advantages or a good reputation by stepping on the blood of our cousins."

Upon seeing Granny Yan, Qu Moying immediately understood her concerns. She gently reassured her in a soft voice.

There were certain things that she didn't have the power to do at the moment, and perhaps she didn't even have the power to speak about them. This path she was taking may even be a dead end. But despite that, she would continue forward.

However, it was inconvenient to share the details with Granny Yan at this moment. To her and others, the Crown Prince was like the heavens, a secret that couldn't be revealed.

Upon hearing Qu Moying's words, Granny Yan felt relieved, knowing that the matter she dealt with was only Princess Ji. Though it would still be challenging, it wasn't the Crown Prince himself. Perhaps there was still some room for negotiation, especially since the lady didn't always need to personally intervene. Wasn't there also County Lady Jingyu?

"My lady, I understand. You can rest assured that whenever an opportunity arises, I will gather more information about the Crown Princess." After a brief pause, Granny Yan added, "Regarding the matters of the Eastern Palace!"

"Thank you, Granny." Qu Moying expressed her gratitude with a slight bow.

Granny Yan's words indicated her genuine support and loyalty towards Qu Moying. Otherwise, as a mere side princess of the Eastern Palace, she would have been dismissed without hesitation. After all, her position in the Eastern Palace was prestigious and powerful.

Qu Moying clearly understood the underlying message and knew she had to keep an eye on the Eastern Palace. However, she couldn't openly discuss it with those around her. Revealing such matters would be seen as peculiar and even sinister. Therefore, she needed a valid reason, and the present moment happened to provide one.

The topic was brought up naturally, and the conversation flowed smoothly.

As Granny Yan left, Qu Moying's gaze turned cold, her face filled with seriousness. She sat down in her chair, letting out a deep sigh. She bit her lip, remaining silent as a trace of sorrow and pain flickered in her eyes. The similarities between Ji Hanyue and the former Empress, who had been banished to the Cold Palace, were striking.

It felt as though history was repeating itself. More than twenty years ago, it was like this, and now, it seemed to be happening all over again. It was truly ironic and laughable.

The room fell into silence, but the atmosphere remained far from calm.

The two maids, Yu Chun and Yu Dong, exchanged glances before quietly retreating. They understood their young lady's thoughts very well. The young lady held deep gratitude towards the Crown Princess and the Old Lady, who had shown her great kindness back at the estate.

That's why she wholeheartedly supported the main branch of the Earl Ling'an's Mansion. Now, inquiring about the Crown Princess was another manifestation of her gratitude.

At this moment, the young lady clearly desired some peace and quiet. Yu Chun and Yu Dong were clever and knew it was time to withdraw.

The room grew increasingly quiet...

But Qu Moying's tranquility didn't last long as Yu Dong had to knock on the door and enter to deliver news, disrupting the peaceful atmosphere. "My lady, there is a lad servant at the door. It seems the matter concerning Yue's Gold Pavilion has been resolved."

Qu Moying raised her head, suppressing the sorrow in her heart with determination. "Let him in."

#### Chapter 428 The Chrysanthemum Appreciation Banquet of the Duke Qi's Mansion

The lad servant who arrived was from Yue's Gold Pavilion, and he brought this news from Mr. Zhao. He stated that he was willing to sit down and negotiate for peace.

This signified a compromise, which was good news. It allowed for the time needed for the subsequent peace talks. After the lad left, Yu Dong reported to Qu Moying about the discovery of closely monitoring the Earl Ling'an's Mansion for a few days.

"A manager named Shaw?" Qu Moying raised her eyebrows after hearing this. "A relative of Madam Shaw?"

It was also surnamed Shaw, and it left her with no choice but to contemplate further.

"Yes, I heard he is a distant relative of Madam Shaw, responsible for managing the procurement in the backyard. When you consider it, he is not really a servant of Earl Ling'an's Mansion." Yu Dong nodded. "He is the one who had contact with Young Master Zhao. Although he had some financial constraints in the past due to his responsibilities in procurement, recently he seems to have become more affluent. Suddenly, he had a substantial amount of money and even purchased an additional house."

"During this period?" Qu Moying pondered for a moment before asking.

"Yes, during this period. It should be within a few days after Young Master Zhao arrived in the capital," replied Yu Dong. She had previously gathered information and took the time to organize it.

Finding Yue's Gold Pavilion within a few days and succeeding in one strike, even with Manager Shaw's assistance, was extremely impressive. The speed of the operation was quite swift and urgent.

This Young Master Zhao was indeed extraordinary. He didn't seem like an ordinary person.

"My lady, do you still want to keep an eye on Manager Shaw?" Yu Dong asked, concerned that their young lady might inadvertently face risks. After considering it for a while, she posed the question again.

"No need. Let's put this matter aside for now. If Young Master Zhao is easy to deal with, we can consider it settled. As for Young Master Zhao's specific intentions, it's unrelated to us." Qu Moying lightly pressed her hand in the air.

Since this Young Master Zhao wasn't sent by Madam Shaw but approached on his own initiative, it became less significant. If Young Master Zhao remained agreeable during the upcoming negotiations, it wouldn't affect them in the future.

Qu Moying was already occupied with her own affairs and couldn't be too concerned about others.

She just hoped that Young Master Zhao had no connection to her future plans!

"Yes, I will arrange it." Yu Dong turned to leave.

"Wait." Qu Moying called out, stopping Yu Dong. "Where is the location of the house Manager Shaw recently purchased?"

"It's not far from Earl Ling'an's Mansion. The property prices in that area are quite high. Previously, it wasn't something someone like Manager Shaw could afford. However, all of a sudden, he became wealthy and bought a house in that vicinity." Yu Dong explained.

Qu Moying contemplated and nodded. She had only vaguely heard about Manager Shaw's matters before. The procurement responsibilities had long been managed by the Shaw family since Qu Moying, as Lady Ji Hanyue, was still an unmarried lady. Some matters were not convenient for her to inquire about, so the Shaw family took care of most of them.

After hearing Yu Dong's words, she suddenly recalled something related to Manager Shaw's family. She carefully considered it and made a decision.

"Yu Dong, please investigate an incident that happened six months ago concerning Manager Shaw. I heard that his son was involved in injuring someone."

Qu Moying instructed.

She had only caught a snippet of this matter when she overheard Shaw and Old Lady Ji's conversation. But once she entered, Shaw didn't mention it again.

Later, she casually inquired a bit. It seemed that someone related to Manager Shaw had caused harm, but at that time, it didn't concern her, and since she learned that it was Shaw's maternal family, she didn't pursue it further. If there was any need for inquiry, it would be handled by the Shaw family.

"Six months ago?" Yu Dong nodded.

"Yes, approximately half a year ago. I don't have the specific details. Please gather more information." Qu Moying's eyes flickered as she spoke.

"In that case, I'll dispatch someone to investigate immediately." Yu Dong said, her mind already processing the plan. She then retreated.

Qu Moying watched Yu Dong's figure thoughtfully. After considering her options, she concluded that she needed to start investigating from Earl Ling'an's Mansion. The Prince's East Palace was too significant of a target, and the revelation would be too shocking. Therefore, she needed to dig deeper into the Shaw family's side.

Manager Shaw. As a distant relative of the Shaw family, he must be one of their trusted confidants to be involved in the Yue's Gold Pavilion matter again!

Being exposed by someone close certainly added an interesting twist to the situation!

Though she wondered if the information was truly reliable...

On the day of the Duke Qi's chrysanthemum banquet, Qu Moying woke up early. Her two maids had already prepared a set of light, pale yellow attire for her. The shade of yellow was extremely subtle, worn over a white gown and topped with a delicate yellow veil, giving her a refreshing and ethereal appearance.

Qu Moying herself had always been slender, and despite her growing figure, she remained thin enough to elicit sympathy. As the breeze caught the billowing veil, she emanated an otherworldly charm.

The wide eight-layered skirt was adorned with delicate chrysanthemum embroidery, perfectly fitting the occasion. Cinching her slim waist further accentuated her slender figure.

As the long and voluminous eye veil was fastened, it concealed her breathtaking beauty while adding a touch of vulnerability.

Among all the people in the capital, no one appeared as delicate and fragile as she did.

Of course, her two maids were aware that this was all a facade. Only those who truly knew their mistress could understand her true nature beyond the surface.

After getting ready, Qu Moying went to see the Old Lady. Qu Qiuyan had arrived early and was already waiting. Upon catching sight of Qu Moying, a fleeting trace of jealousy flickered in her eyes. She couldn't help but feel that even with the eye veil, Qu Moying remained captivating. Qu Qiuyan wished she could tear off the veil and reveal her own repugnant eyes, eliminating any romantic notions others might have.

Unaware of Qu Qiuyan's momentary reaction, the Old Lady quietly instructed them on a few matters before dismissing them.

The two of them boarded the Qu family's carriage one after the other, maintaining the appearance of sisters from the same mansion, as perceived by outsiders.

The carriage advanced steadily, and inside, both Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan remained silent, each lost in their own thoughts. It had become their customary behavior when they found themselves alone together.

The masters' silence was met with the same from the maids. Yu Dong and Qing Ju exchanged a brief glance before averting their eyes.

The carriage journey was peaceful. As it moved forward, it eventually arrived at the Duke Qi's Mansion.

They were greeted by a smiling servant woman standing by the parking area.

"Third and Forth Lady Qu."

Recognizing the servant as their guide from the Qi Mansion, Qu Qiuyan nodded with indifference and instructed, "Lead the way."

The servant nodded in response and cheerfully led the way, prompting Qu Qiuyan to quicken her pace.

Qu Moying disembarked more slowly, only standing still. Qu Qiuyan had already followed the servant, leaving behind only her receding figure.

"Lady..." Yu Dong expressed her annoyance, realizing that the third young lady intentionally left their own young lady behind.

Qu Moying smiled faintly and shook her head. "It's fine."

Just as she was about to take a step forward, she noticed a young lad servant peering cautiously from around the corner. She furrowed her brow, perplexed by his intentions.

At the same time, Yu Dong also spotted the lad and glared at him disapprovingly, causing the lad to hastily retreat.

They didn't pay further attention to the lad. They followed closely behind Qu Qiuyan, quietly trailing after her.

After a while, the lad cautiously extended his head once more. However, this time he didn't see the fourth young lady; instead, he spotted County Lady Jingyu alighting from a carriage further behind. Seeing him, she waved her hand in greeting.

Initially reluctant to approach, the lad felt compelled to comply with her gesture, reluctantly making his way over.

"County Lady." the lad bowed.

"Are you one of the first cousin's servants?" Liu Jingyu examined the lad up and down and asked.

When she entered, she had witnessed Qu Moying noticing the lad. The lad had retreated upon catching sight of her, and with a single glance, she recognized him as one of the servants by her eldest cousin's side. She deliberately waited until Qu Moying was far away before summoning the lad.

"Yes." the lad reluctantly admitted.

"Why did you sneak in here? Could it be that you intended to pry into something?" Liu Jingyu's expression darkened, her voice cold.

The words were rather harsh, and the lad became frightened, hastily responding, "My lady, I was sent by the Eldest Young Master to simply come and see..."

Realizing his words were faltering, he hurriedly stopped himself, his face filled with embarrassment.

"See what?" Liu Jingyu asked, her tone chilly.

“Just to see how many guests have arrived... The master wanted to make preparations!” The lad stuttered, giving the impression that he was not speaking the truth.

“Since when did such matters become the responsibility of the eldest cousin?” Liu Jingyu sneered.

“Well... that’s what the master said. My lady, if you don’t believe me, you can go ask him.” The lad hastily suggested, appearing increasingly guilty, avoiding eye contact with Liu Jingyu.

This manner made it evident that something was amiss, and that it was related to Qi Xiuran. However, if the lad remained resolute in not speaking, there was little Liu Jingyu could do.

With a cold snort, she retorted, “Wouldn’t he want to lay eyes on the two young ladies from the Qu Mansion?”

The moment those words were spoken, Liu Jingyu’s heart raced, her eyes suddenly brightening.

The lad’s complexion grew flustered at the question, further betraying his guilt. “How... how could that be, my lady? If you don’t believe me, you can go ask Eldest Young Master.”

Those were the only words he could muster, leaving the impression that there was indeed something going on, and his face displayed considerable embarrassment.

Liu Jingyu scrutinized the lad’s expression once more, her voice turning cold. “You may leave now!”

“Yes, yes, I will return immediately!” The lad felt as though he had been granted a reprieve, repeatedly assuring her, bowing to Liu Jingyu, and then swiftly turning to run off.

Liu Jingyu’s gaze remained fixed on the lad’s retreating figure, her eyes turning dark and cold. What did her cousin mean? Could it be that he had taken an interest in Qu Moying?

As for why Liu Jingyu didn't think it was Qu Qiuyan, the answer was simple. Qu Qiuyan and Lord Jing were both figures well-known among noble families. Liu Jingyu had previously considered Lord Jing as a potential match, but had yet to confirm the news, partly because of Qu Qiuyan.

Now, if someone else had caught the cousin's attention, it had to be Qu Moying.

The mere thought of Qu Moying caused Liu Jingyu's gaze to darken immediately.

Qu Moying had once again caused trouble for her. She had gone through great efforts to place Qing Mei, the maid, by Qu Mingcheng's side, only for Qu Moying to ruin everything.

Perhaps this was another opportunity.

After considering her options, Liu Jingyu called for a maid from the Duke Qi's Mansion, instructing her with a few words before the maid turned and left.

## Chapter 429 The Flowers of Face-Scratching Beauties

Qu Moying had no idea that the carriage coming in was Liu Jingyu's. She followed behind Qu Qiuyan as they walked inside.

They reached a beautiful flower hall, where Qu Qiuyan stopped and waited for Qu Moying. Together, they entered the hall, adding grace to the Qu Mansion.

The design of the flower hall was exquisite. One side was adjacent to the water, while the other faced a garden. Large windows adorned both sides, creating a seamless connection.

The windows facing the lake were closed, shielding the gentle breeze. On the side facing the garden, the windows were open, revealing several pots of chrysanthemums. It was a rare sight to behold the blossoming chrysanthemums during this time of year. Two young ladies approached the flower hall with excitement, using a door that bypassed the group.

The flower hall had only a few guests, including three elderly ladies and a few young ladies.

Upon seeing the arrival of the Qu sisters, the Duchess Qi was delighted. She warmly invited them to sit down and asked about Old Lady Qu's well-being. After exchanging pleasantries, she instructed them to join the other young ladies for entertainment.

"Forth Lady Qu, it's a pleasure to see you." greeted Qi Xiangyu as she approached Qu Moying with a beaming smile. The two of them had developed a rapport before.

"Lady Qi!" Qu Moying politely curtsied.

"Come, let's go over there. Those flowers were brought from the palace by my grandfather. They are not the usual variety found in the capital and are quite rare. It's remarkable to see them blooming so beautifully during this season." Qi Xiangyu invited Qu Moying enthusiastically, glancing at Qu Qiuyan, and added, "Third Lady Qu, please join us too."

With that, she took Qu Moying's hand and led her towards the entrance.

Qu Qiuyan reluctantly followed, concealing her frustration with a smile. She clenched her handkerchief tightly, fuming inside. She had always been treated as the superior one, while Qu Moying was the subordinate. Never had she imagined that she would become Qu Moying's appendage today!

As the three of them stepped outside, they entered the garden adorned with chrysanthemums. Upon closer inspection, the flowers displayed vibrant colors. One of the pots contained large, bowl-like chrysanthemums in a striking shade of red. The flowers' petals curved delicately at the stem, adding a touch of allure. Several nearby young ladies marveled at the sight.

Qu Moying approached the potted flower and admired its exceptional beauty.

"What kind of chrysanthemum is this?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't seen it before."

"I heard it's from the palace or some other place as an offering."

"It's truly stunning, so beautiful."

The young ladies chattered excitedly. Meanwhile, the elderly ladies sat in the flower hall, a little farther away. Since no one was monitoring them, and they were among close acquaintances, they disregarded strict etiquette and engaged in lively conversation.

Qu Moying's gaze remained fixated on the captivating flower. Even in her previous life, she had never witnessed such a splendid blooming of chrysanthemums during this time of year. At first glance, they appeared to be ordinary chrysanthemums, but upon closer examination, they seemed slightly different. She stood aside, observing and appreciating the flowers.

Qi Xiangyu stood next to her and introduced with a smile, "These were obtained by my aunt from the palace and brought here."

"Madam Liu? Wasn't it said that the Duke went to the palace to request them?" Qu Moying asked, surprised.

"Not this particular pot. My aunt obtained this one from the empress's palace. Unfortunately, she accidentally knocked over the previous pot and had to replace it with a new one. She transferred some soil into it. Fortunately, the new pot is equally beautiful; otherwise, it would have diminished the colors," Qi Xiangyu explained, sighing.

Qu Moying's gaze shifted to the pot. It was exquisitely crafted, more appealing than an ordinary flower pot. It resembled a decorative porcelain piece rather than a container for flowers. Inside, the cultivated soil seemed somewhat wasted.

Within the newly cultivated soil, two small flowers and some grass grew. The tiny blossoms complemented the grass, creating a charming and natural composition. It enhanced the brilliance of the vibrant red chrysanthemums.

Originally, these two small flowers were inconspicuous, akin to wildflowers found along the roadside. They featured small five-petaled blossoms with pointed ends. Upon closer inspection, they appeared fuzzy, and a touch of bright red adorned the tips of their petals, resembling scratches on a beautiful face. Were these flowers not from here but the ones Granny Miao mentioned?

Granny Miao had described them differently, piquing her interest. She had paid attention at the time, and now, seeing them, they seemed strangely familiar.

Qu Moying's heart skipped a beat as she carefully observed the flowers. Her gaze, originally wandering casually, returned to them with renewed focus. After a few moments of careful examination, she took a couple of steps forward and joined the other ladies in admiring the flowers.

The faint floral fragrance was that of chrysanthemums, but amidst the scent, there was another subtle aroma, evoking a sense of tranquility and serenity.

Qu Moying sniffed delicately, then lifted her head, confirming that the small flowers before her were the same ones mixed into Dowager Consort Qu's fragrance earlier.

However, while those had been crushed and blended into the perfume, what she saw now was the flower itself.

These flowers had a peculiar and sinister name—Face-Scratching Beauties.

They were not highly toxic, but if a person was in a weakened state or had caught a chill, these flowers could easily make them feel drowsy and worsen their condition. Even a minor illness could become life-threatening, leaving no trace behind and leading people to believe it was a missed opportunity that claimed a life over a seemingly small ailment.

How could such a malicious flower appear in the Duke Qi's Mansion?

Was it a genuine mistake or a deliberate act by someone with ill intentions?

People who consume various grains and cereals were not immune to illnesses, especially the elderly and the frail. For instance, Dowager Consort Qu's health was considered good, but she still experienced bodily discomfort and fell ill with minor ailments like catching a cold. However, it almost claimed her life!

"Did Madam Liu bring these flowers from the empress?" Qu Moying straightened up and asked Qi Xiangyu, glancing deeply at the flowers once again.

"Yes, my aunt brought them as a gift for my grandmother. Grandfather said they would be placed in her room after the flower-viewing event. Grandmother loves flowers, but during this time of the year, most chrysanthemums are either just budding or not even visible. There aren't many that bloom as magnificently as these."

Qi Xiangyu explained with a smile.

"How has the Duchess Qi's health been lately?" Qu Moying paused for a moment before inquiring.

"Grandmother hasn't been in the best health recently. The rapid changes in seasons and a persistent cough have taken a toll on her," Qi Xiangyu sighed, her brow furrowing. "The doctor advised caution, as older people are prone to illness. In previous years around this time, if grandmother wasn't careful, she would catch a chill."

Qu Moying's heart pounded, as if she had grasped something, yet also felt like she had missed something crucial. There was a sense of ambiguity.

"Is the Duchess Qi in poor health?"

"Grandmother's health isn't terribly bad; it's just that she's getting older. During this seasonal transition, it's easy for her health to suffer." Qi Xiangyu replied, shaking her head.

Qu Moying pondered for a moment and smiled. "Those with fragile health can't tolerate such strong floral fragrances; proper air circulation is crucial."

"Is that so?" Qi Xiangyu exclaimed, surprised.

"Indeed. Lady Qi must have heard of allergies, right? Some people have severe allergic reactions, struggling to breathe properly and encountering serious problems. Spring often triggers these reactions, as there are many allergenic substances in the flowers of that season. We can never be sure how it affects individuals."

Qu Moying explained, pointing at the blooming chrysanthemums. "These chrysanthemums are quite large, and their full bloom is extraordinary. We are unfamiliar with their pollen and its potential harm to the human body. It's better to be cautious; it could be extremely harmful to someone's health. After all, these flowers are different from the chrysanthemums we usually have here."

Upon hearing Qu Moying's words, Qi Xiangyu nodded in agreement.

"In that case, let's leave the flowers here. If grandmother wishes to see them, she can come here. It's not suitable to keep them indoors."

"It's such a shame to not place such a beautiful flower inside the house." Qu Qiuyan heard nearby, mocking as she curled her lips. Although she also thought Qu Moying had a point, she disliked everything Qu Moying said, no matter how reasonable. And she especially disliked seeing Qu Moying being valued by the Duke Qi's Mansion.

She sounded jealous.

"What's the point of being a pity? Wasn't Third Sister allergic before? That feeling isn't pleasant, is it?" Qu Moying replied nonchalantly. "The Duchess Qi is getting older, so it's more appropriate for her to prioritize rest and recovery. We can't jeopardize her health for the sake of enjoying flowers. It would be just like what happened to Third Sister back then, and that would truly be unfortunate!"

This incident was also Qu Qiuyan's embarrassing matter, the one thing she cared about the most. During her "allergic" episode, Qu Qiuyan didn't dare to show her face for several days. Now that Qu Moying brought it up again, her face turned red with anger and frustration. She clenched her teeth in resentment, but couldn't do anything about Qu Moying.

“Fourth Sister, I’m only reminding you out of goodwill. If you don’t want to listen, then forget it. There’s no need to bring up such matters.” Qu Qiuyan suppressed her venomous hatred and spoke in a cold tone. After finishing her words, she swung her sleeves and walked away.

Qu Moying glanced at Qu Qiuyan, her smile still faint, and she continued to appreciate the flowers with Qi Xiangyu, completely ignoring Qu Qiuyan.

Qu Qiuyan originally thought that in front of everyone, Qu Moying would at least exchange a few polite words with her and invite her to stay. But she didn’t expect that Qu Moying wouldn’t say a single word. How could she stay in this situation? Stomping her foot in anger, Qu Qiuyan turned and left, heading out of this garden.

She didn’t return to the flower hall.

This was a garden full of flowers. Once outside the gate, there was a winding path. Qu Qiuyan was extremely annoyed and walked forward aimlessly with Qing Ju. After walking for a while, she finally stopped and realized that she had arrived at a place she had never been before. Along the way, she had passed several intersections, all chosen at random.

Now she couldn’t recognize the way back.

Looking around, a servant happened to pass by. Qing Ju hurriedly waved her hand, and the servant stopped and approached, bowing to Qu Qiuyan.

“Where is the flower hall where you were receiving guests?”

“It’s in this direction. Keep going straight ahead, then turn right at the intersection. It’s not far from there.” the servant replied with a friendly smile.

“You are today’s guest. Did you happen to see Forth Lady Qu?” the servant asked with a smile.

"Yes, I did see her. Who in your mansion is looking for her?" Qu Qiuyan became alert upon hearing about Qu Moying, carefully examining the servant's eyes. The servant was holding a fruit tray in her hand, filled with fresh and clean fruits that looked particularly refreshing.

"This is for Lady Qu. I was planning to deliver it to her, but I was afraid she wasn't there, so I asked you." the servant replied with a smile.

"Who ordered you to deliver it?" Qu Qiuyan questioned, her thoughts spinning.

The servant smiled for a moment, seeming reluctant to say, but finally replied vaguely, "It was on our master's orders to deliver the fruit tray to Fourth Lady Qu!"

"Who is your master?" Qu Moying followed up with a question.

The servant became increasingly unable to answer, appearing unsure of how to respond. She awkwardly smiled and then, after bowing to Qu Qiuyan, said, "I won't accompany your ladyship any longer. I still have my master's orders to fulfill. I'll go back then!"

#### Chapter 430 Butterfly Dance Among Flowers

Qu Qiuyan's eyes watched intently as the servant hurriedly walked away, as if someone were chasing after her. In her haste, she nearly twisted her ankle and almost dropped the fruits in her hand. She instinctively reached out to protect them. Qu Qiuyan grew more suspicious by the moment. Who in this mansion had such a close relationship with Qu Moying to send a granny specifically to deliver food?

Especially someone who seemed so discreet and secretive.

It couldn't be the Duke Qi or his wife, who had both been present moments ago. Furthermore, considering the servant's behavior, it seemed highly suspicious. This led Qu Qiuyan to believe that the person behind it all must be a man.

Perhaps First Young Master Qi?

A figure suddenly flashed in her mind. She had heard that Qu Moying had lent him some incomplete music scores before. Among all those who had connections with Qu Moying, he was the most likely candidate.

The thought startled her, causing Qu Qiuyan to turn her head and glance behind her, as if expecting to see First Young Master Qi.

No! She couldn't allow Qu Moying to marry into the Duke Qi's Mansion.

Even though Duke Qi was no longer involved in political affairs and had essentially retired, the fact remained that he still held influence. Duke Qi, who had once turned the tides of events, had deep-rooted connections.

If it weren't for his significant achievements, he wouldn't have been rewarded anymore, and his granddaughter wouldn't have become a County Lady. Such an honor was reserved for those with royal blood, and it wouldn't be right to let Liu Jingyu easily rise to the same status as Ji Hanyue, thus becoming a noblewoman.

In addition to the several princesses and county ladies of the royal family, among those of different surnames, she also held a prominent position.

If Qu Moying were to marry into Duke Qi's Mansion, it would provide her with a powerful support. Even if Qu Qiuyan were to enter the Lord Jing Mansion herself, she might not surpass Qu Moying.

Qu Qiuyan now understood her situation and no longer dared to entertain futile illusions as she did in the past. She strived to secure a position as a side concubine for herself. However, even if she confronted the Duke Qi's Mansion, Lord Jing would still let her retreat. How could she then humiliate Qu Moying?

She still hoped for the day when she would enter the Lord Jing Mansion, the day she could see Qu Moying crushed and degraded.

Even if her father and grandmother protect that little wench, what of it? Qu Qiuyan would find a fabricated charge to crush that wretched girl to death. Not only would she take her life, but she would also ensure she dies in disgrace.

At that time, with her status, she wouldn't even be suppressed by the Old Lady, and no one would care about a lowly wench who was abandoned since childhood.

So, recently, Qu Qiuyan has been relatively calm, trying not to do anything, fearing the occurrence of further unfavorable events. But now, what was happening? When did Qu Moying establish a connection with First Young Master Qi?

No, this was absolutely unacceptable!

Even if Qu Moying was connected to the Duke Qi's Mansion, she could only be a concubine. Yes, just a concubine. A mere concubine was not worth fearing.

She tightly clenched the handkerchief in her hand, a hint of bloody resentment flickered in her eyes. She bit down hard on her teeth, struggling to calm herself.

"My lady!" Qing Ju notices her unsettling expression and whispered softly.

"Let's go!" Qu Qiuyan regained her composure, already contemplating her next move. She turned around and headed back. She needed to return and verify if it's true.

Observing Qu Qiuyan's grim expression, Qing Ju refrained from saying anything and followed her back.

As they make their way back, returning to the entrance of the garden they had left earlier, they find that Qu Moying was no longer there. Looking through one of the window panes, Qu Qiuyan saw Qu Moying and Qi Xiangyu together, returning to the previous flower hall.

From Qu Qiuyan's position, she caught sight of a plate of fruits on Qu Moying's table—the same plate she saw earlier, which was brought by that old servant?

Her heart received a heavy blow, and her face immediately turned pale. Their previous speculations had proven to be true. How could this be?

She would not allow Qu Moying to have such a good opportunity...

Her hand clenched tightly within her sleeve, her gaze sweeping over Qu Moying's surroundings. Qu Moying and Qi Xiangyu were sitting closer to the side, near the entrance. The central position was reserved for the older ladies, including the Duchess Qi and a few others who were engaged in lively conversation, completely oblivious to the others.

Qu Moying and Qi Xiangyu seemed to be in harmony, laughing and talking together. They had become acquainted at some point, and their interaction appeared warm and lively.

Sensing the gaze directed towards them, Yu Dong, who was standing behind Qu Moying, noticed Qu Qiuyan's ominous presence in the garden near the flower hall. She observed her gloomy expression from a distance and became more alert.

Recently, the third lady had appeared quite stable, with no evidence to implicate her in any misdeeds. The previous incident was also orchestrated by the second young master, making her seem quite innocent.

However, the third lady was far from virtuous. She harbored a malicious heart! When the young lady first entered the mansion, she nearly met her end at the hands of the third lady. The audacity to instruct a maid to set fire openly, underestimating the young lady's perceptiveness and the lack of useful connections by her side.

The lady's malicious and malevolent expression was clearly not a good sign. Yu Dong became cautious and alert. Seeing Qu Qiuyan leave the garden, her eyes darted around before whispering something in Qu Moying's ear. Qu Moying nodded without changing his expression, prompting Yu Dong to walk out of the flower hall.

Once Qu Qiuyan stepped out of the garden gate, she stopped and pondered for a moment. She retrieved a sachet from her sleeve, which bore a striking resemblance to the ones she had previously embroidered.

It featured delicate butterfly and floral motifs, her signature embroidery technique.

However, this particular sachet wasn't embroidered by Qu Moying; it had been obtained from Qu Xuexin. When Qu Xuexin accompanied Qu Moying in her embroidery endeavors, some of the patterns were given to her by Qu Moying. This created the appearance that this was embroidered by Qu Moying herself. Furthermore, there was an embroidered character "ying" beneath the design. It almost sealed the deal, making it seem like Qu Moying had embroidered the sachet herself.

"Besides the guests in the flower hall, are there any other visitors today?" Qing Ju called out to a passing maid and inquired.

"All the ladies are here, but there are other guests outside in the outer courtyard." the maid replied.

That meant there were also men visiting the Duke Qi's Mansion.

"Our second young master said he would come too. I wonder how to reach the outer courtyard. I need to find our second young master." Qing Ju said with a smile, following Qu Qiuyan's instructions.

"The young masters' whereabouts are unknown to me, but there is a resting area for them. It's not far from the floral-pendant gate. The number of people is not significant. When the banquet starts, the Duchess ordered to open the flower hall across from here. It will be more convenient for flower appreciation. These guests are from close mansions, so there's no need for excessive formalities."

The maid explained, pointing towards the opposite side of the garden. Qu Qiuyan, only now, noticed another door on the other side. When she entered the garden, she had only focused on the flower hall on this side and hadn't noticed that there were actually two flower halls, with the garden nestled between them.

The layout of the flower hall over there should be similar to this one. The windows on this side facing the garden were large and could be opened to directly view the flowers and plants inside the garden. One could also easily turn around to see this side.

"The banquet will be arranged here?" Qing Ju asked once again.

“Yes, it will be set up soon. However, the young masters haven’t arrived yet. They might only come when the banquet is about to begin,” the maid replied. She then bowed to Qu Qiuyan and extended the key at her waist. “I’m going to open the door and prepare to find someone to set up the banquet.”

Qu Qiuyan waved her hand, and the maid headed towards the flower hall on the other side.

She entered and opened the door before quickly coming back out, seeming to search for something.

Observing her departure, Qu Qiuyan handed the sachet to Qing Ju and said, “Find a corner and discard it there!”

“Lady...” Qing Ju received the sachet, feeling uneasy. “There’s no guarantee that someone will find it.”

It wasn’t easy to find a corner that was both inconspicuous and eye-catching.

“That’s why we need to find a place that appears like a corner but is still noticeable. With so many people around, it’s uncertain who will pick it up. Even if First Young Master Qi finds it, Qu Moying, who doesn’t abide by the rules of the women’s quarters, at most, she’ll be regarded as a concubine at most.”

Qu Qiuyan coldly remarked.

Regardless of who found it, the fact remained that it was a man. Just based on that, Qu Moying’s reputation couldn’t possibly remain intact.

“My lady...”

“What are you waiting for? Go quickly!” Qu Qiuyan scolded her sternly, taking advantage of the opportune moment. The maid departed.

Qu Xuexin had given her this sachet, and Qu Qiuyan had been carrying it all this time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to frame Qu Moying. Now, the timing was just right.

Not daring to hesitate any longer, Qing Ju took the sachet and hurriedly entered the flower hall on the other side. After a brief look around, she placed it in a partially concealed corner behind a sheer curtain. The bright red satin fabric stood out against the light and ethereal drapes, making it easily noticeable.

Once she finished, Qing Ju hastily emerged from the room, her face turning pale.

“Go!” Qu Qiuyan said decisively. She couldn’t stay here any longer. If something happened later, it would be easy for people to suspect her involvement.

Moreover, this plan was not enough. She had another trick up her sleeve. She would make someone willingly take responsibility for this matter. But even if she didn’t, it didn’t matter. All she needed to do was to claim that the sachet belonged to Qu Moying.

Qu Qiuyan hurriedly left with Qing Ju, still wandering aimlessly as if nothing had happened. As long as someone found the sachet, she would make sure that person admitted it was a gift from the owner of the sachet, not something they found.

Yu Dong stood far away, unable to see clearly. She could only vaguely make out Qing Ju entering the opposite flower hall with an item. That flower hall had just opened its doors, and the maid who opened it left. At this moment, Qing Ju sneaked inside. Yu Dong was too far to hear the conversation between Qu Qiuyan and Qing Ju, but he could tell from their hurried departure that something was not right!

Seeing the two of them move away, Yu Dong planned to take advantage of the absence of the Qi Gong Mansion’s maids and check what Qing Ju had left inside. However, another maid arrived from outside. After glancing around, she also stealthily entered the flower hall.

Yu Dong immediately halted her steps. She recognized this maid; she had seen her before. Her gaze followed her path, hidden behind a large tree. Qu Qiuyan had left with Qing Ju just before she appeared. It indicated that she had been hiding there, patiently waiting for any commotion in this area.

So, there was someone else involved in this matter?

Yu Dong wanted to find out who was behind all this. Even though the third young lady had questionable intentions, this was still Duke Qi's Mansion. It wouldn't be so easy for her to succeed without external assistance. Besides, this didn't seem like something the third young lady would do.

What gave her the audacity to act like this at such a time...