

Noble Wife 431

Chapter 431 Counterplot

When Yu Dong returned behind Qu Moying, her expression had calmed down, appearing nonchalant. However, as she positioned herself behind Qu Moying, her restless feet moved twice.

Qu Moying smiled and asked Qi Xiangyu, "Lady Qi, may I go outside for a walk?"

"Of course, that's fine, but I..." Qi Xiangyu hesitated. She had just formed a rapport with Qu Moying and genuinely wanted to befriend her. Glancing at her own grandmother, she found herself in a dilemma. "I might not be able to accompany you."

As the hostess of the event and the only young lady of the family, she couldn't simply leave. She had to stay behind and entertain the other young ladies. Talking to Qu Moying on the side had already been quite impolite. If she were to leave with Qu Moying, her grandmother would be angered.

Qi Xiangyu knew she wasn't the Duchess's biological descendant, so she wasn't as favored as Liu Jingyu. Any misstep on her part would undoubtedly lead to blame.

Qu Moying understood Qi Xiangyu's predicament and smiled, taking the initiative to explain, "Lady Qi, as the hostess, you certainly can't leave. I'll just take a casual stroll outside. I've been inside for a while and I'm starting to feel a bit suffocated. I won't go too far and will return soon."

Hearing Qu Moying's words, Qi Xiangyu smiled knowingly and silently nodded. She was pleased with Qu Moying's considerate nature. If Qu Moying truly had a connection with her family, she was willing to accept it and even liked the idea.

The reason she spent time conversing with Qu Moying was twofold. On one hand, she realized that Qu Moying was indeed a good person. She had previously been skeptical, believing that rumors always had some basis, but now she discovered that these rumors had no credibility at all. Qu Moying's intelligence and wit were evident; if she was considered dull, then true intelligence didn't exist in the world.

Qu Moying was not only exceptionally clever but also knowledgeable. Regardless of the topic, she could handle it with ease. Her sincerity and understanding made her an excellent confidante.

As for the other reason, it stemmed from the ancient zither named “Feng Yuqin”!

Just a moment ago, Qi Xiangyu repeatedly inquired about the origin of this ancient instrument, and Qu Moying provided an answer. However, it was just a vague response, stating that it was part of her mother’s dowry from the Yue family.

Of course, it was not convenient to make a fuss and ask further questions, as this matter didn’t seem so significant.

Qu Moying and Qi Xiangyu bid their farewells. As Qi Xiangyu smiled and watched them leave, they walked towards a nearby pathway with Yu Dong following closely.

Once they reached the pathway, Yu Dong glanced around to ensure no one was nearby and promptly retrieved a sachet from her pocket. Her face displayed a hint of nervousness as she succinctly said, “Lady, I found this in the other flower hall on the opposite side.”

She turned and gestured, “There’s another flower hall over there, prepared for a banquet. It seems that there will be a feast arranged in that hall as well.”

During their conversation earlier, Qi Xiangyu had briefly mentioned the banquet, stating that it would take place in the opposite flower hall.

“Then that must be the flower hall designated for men!” Qu Moying pondered for a moment and immediately understood the arrangement made by the Mansion.

The flower hall on their side was not small and had fewer female guests. It could easily accommodate them. If there was a banquet in the other hall, it wouldn’t be intended for the women.

The two flower halls were separated by a flower garden, clearly distinguishing them. One side would host the women’s banquet while the other side would be reserved for the men. It was the ideal arrangement.

Yu Dong handed the sachet to Qu Moying, who took it and examined the colors of the flowers embroidered on it. The colors were familiar, triggering her memories.

“Qu Xuexin embroidered this, but I designed the pattern. It truly resembles my embroidery.” Qu Moying commented as she glanced at the sachet. The smile on her lips faded, and she spoke with certainty.

There was a word in her name that couldn’t be ignored, confirming that she was the one who indeed embroidered this sachet herself.

“Lady, I believe there is something inside.” Yu Dong reminded her.

When Qu Moying had pinched the sachet earlier, she sensed that there was something within it. She examined the thread on the sachet, carefully pulled it open, and retrieved a folded note from inside. Surprisingly, it was made of “Chengxin paper.”

This type of paper was not commonly used by ordinary households.

As she unfolded the note, she discovered it was written in neat regular script, with well-executed strokes and horizontal lines. However, beyond that, she couldn’t discern any other details. In other words, such handwriting could be produced by anyone who had practiced for a few years, making it impossible to determine the author.

Qu Moying sneered at the words written on the note. It contained a highly ambiguous poem, expressing a woman’s longing, filled with alluring implications that portrayed the woman as affectionate and sentimental.

Although the verses were beautifully crafted, a closer analysis revealed the woman’s frivolous nature, disregarding the teachings of proper behavior for women.

Thus, this became undeniable evidence of her defiance against traditional female virtues. Regardless of who had found it, this would be proof of her involvement with another man. If that man insisted on their relationship, her only option would be to become his concubine.

Alternatively, there was a possibility to prove her innocence through death.

Of course, it was also possible for the man who found it to claim it was a coincidence and had no connection to him. However, even if it had nothing to do with him, there would still be someone associated with her, and she would be equally unable to defend herself when the time came.

It could be said that this sachet was concrete evidence of her disregard for the teachings of a proper lady, even if the identity of the man involved remained uncertain, her own involvement was certain!

After listening to Yu Dong's words, Qu Moying could confirm that both Liu Jingyu and Qu Qiuyan were involved in this matter. One of them had thrown the sachet there, while the other had stuffed a poem inside.

Qu Qiuyan's actions seemed more accidental. Even though she had prepared the sachet, she hadn't planned to include such an ambiguous poem. This prompted Liu Jingyu's response to ensure her own demise. Even Qu Moying's people had to take action to secure her fate.

"Remove a hairpin for me." Qu Moying instructed Yu Dong.

Yu Dong immediately understood Qu Moying's intention and carefully plucked a sharp hairpin from Qu Moying's head.

Qu Moying took it, pondered for a moment, and then picked a few threads from the inscription on the sachet. However, despite the picking, the faint traces were still discernible, including the character "Ying".

After some thought, Qu Moying created several similar marks on the picked traces.

Satisfied with the result, Qu Moying handed the hairpin to Yu Dong, who delicately secured it back in place.

"Throw this sachet back!" Qu Moying commanded, placing the note back inside and tightly fastening the sachet.

Yu Dong took it, turned around, and hurriedly ran back. She had to seize the opportunity when the maid wasn't paying attention to throw the sachet back into that corner.

Qu Moying continued walking nonchalantly. However, to Qu Moying's surprise, upon turning a corner, she caught sight of Qu Qiuyan's figure in the distance and halted her steps.

Qu Qiuyan was conversing with the rarely seen Young Master Yongning, Xu Lipeng?

Qu Qiuyan had her back turned, so she couldn't see Qu Moying. However, Xu Lipeng spotted Qu Moying from afar, hesitated for a moment, bid farewell to Qu Qiuyan, and actually headed towards Qu Moying.

Qu Qiuyan was in the midst of a conversation with Xu Lipeng when he suddenly bid her farewell and walked away. After a brief pause, she turned around and saw Qu Moying approaching with measured steps, unaccompanied by any maids. Where did Yu Dong go?

A flicker of delight flashed in Qu Qiuyan's eyes. She glanced at Qing Ju, then turned and walked away as if she hadn't noticed Qu Moying approaching.

She had already hinted to Xu Lipeng earlier. Xu Lipeng wasn't stupid; he must have understood her intentions. Initially, Qu Qiuyan had merely sought a disreputable young man, preferably one who was already married, to insinuate that Qu Moying had lost the sachet. By emphasizing Qu Moying's extraordinary beauty, she could easily capture the attention of such a wayward playboy. Once he found the sachet, he would undoubtedly claim it was a gift from Qu Moying.

These kinds of playboys were the easiest to handle.

Qu Qiuyan intended to stroll outside, hoping to encounter a suitable person near the gate. However, before she reached the gate, she unexpectedly encountered Xu Lipeng. This was truly an unexpected surprise.

If anyone hated Qu Moying, it would be Xu Lipeng.

It was said that Xu Lipeng was currently in an unfavorable situation. If the sachet fell into Xu Lipeng's hands, he would surely not let Qu Moying off the hook. She would face a tarnished reputation.

For now, Qu Moying and Xu Lipeng were left alone in this situation. When the time came, Qu Moying would find it even harder to explain herself. What did it matter to send a sachet at this moment?

Qu Qiuyan felt as if the heavens were on her side, and a self-satisfied smile appeared on her face...

Indeed, Xu Lipeng was going through a rough patch, or rather, everything was going against him!

Since the cancellation of the engagement with the Qu family, he had hardly experienced any favorable situations. The position he was supposed to take was only a matter of time before he could start his career, but in the end, it was taken away. Rumor had it that someone from the Duke Qi's Mansion had persuaded the decision-makers. Xu Lipeng had no idea how he had offended the people from the Duke Qi's Mansion.

First Young Master Qi had a good temper. Whenever they met, he praised Xu Lipeng excessively. The two sons of the mansion had a good relationship with him, so it was unlikely they would hinder him. As for the esteemed Duke Qi, he was not easy to meet, and Xu Lipeng couldn't think of any reason to offend him either.

However, it was the someone from the mansion that decided to intervene and obstruct the matter.

To Xu Lipeng's surprise, even the Crown Prince, who had previously shown him kindness, did not respond at all. It seemed as if he had misunderstood the prince's intention to nurture him.

But how could he have misunderstood? The Crown Prince had clearly wanted to recruit him, so why was he now disregarding him?

The incidents involving Yu Qingmeng, Second Lady Duan, and various other matters had tarnished his reputation. He was no longer the pure and flawless Young Master Yongning, known for his deep sense of loyalty. Many of his genuine friendships had also fallen apart. Even Second Master Yan, who used to be his closest ally, had started to distance himself from Xu Lipeng. They hadn't been in contact for a long time now.

Whenever he thought about all of this, Xu Lipeng couldn't help but blame Qu Moying for everything. How could a woman be so disregardful of societal norms? Even if she wanted to take a concubine, what harm would it do? Even if he had some private affair with Yu Qingmeng, so what? At most, it would be just a concubine. How could she not even tolerate that?

If it weren't for Qu Moying insisting on breaking off the engagement, Xu Lipeng might have already entered official service. He could have even secured a favorable position and perhaps even been recruited by the Crown Prince. He wouldn't have lost the Crown Prince's favor just because he hadn't joined the court. The Crown Prince now considered him incapable and useless.

Xu Lipeng felt an unexplained sense of anger and resentment towards Qu Moying. He felt suffocated and unfairly treated.

He couldn't understand why his downfall had happened so inexplicably, with no other way out. All his pent-up frustration was directed towards Qu Moying. When he saw Qu Moying approaching, he couldn't hold back anymore. He approached Qu Moying and decided that he would confront her. He had never taken the initiative to break off the engagement, which was already fair to Qu Moying. Why did Qu Moying treat him like this?

Since they had encountered each other, he had to clarify things...

Chapter 432 Young Master Yongning who Thought He had Style

When Qu Moying saw Qu Qiuyan, she hesitated for a moment. However, when Xu Lipeng approached her, she confidently walked up to him.

In Xu Lipeng's presence, she felt neither ashamed nor fearful!

Then, after catching Qu Qiuyan glancing in her direction, Qu Moying turned and walked away as if she hadn't noticed her.

She stood still, no longer moving forward, patiently awaiting Xu Lipeng's approach. Observing his determined demeanor, she couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation, as if he was about to interrogate her.

Her lips curved slightly, considering Xu Lipeng and Liu Jingyu as potential choices... They were indeed suitable candidates.

"Forth Lady Qu!" Xu Lipeng strode over and stood in front of Qu Moying, speaking in a cold voice. His gloomy gaze fixed on her face.

It had been a while since they last met, and the young lady before him seemed almost like a different person. If it weren't for the familiar eye veil, Xu Lipeng might have mistaken her for someone else.

Her stature had also grown taller, exuding a more graceful and delicate aura. Standing there, she appeared fragile yet dignified, with her head slightly raised. After giving him a brief glance, she gracefully placed her hand to the side and performed a courteous side bow, exhibiting poise and confidence, devoid of any unease.

"Young Master Yongning."

Compared to Qu Qiuyan from earlier, Qu Moying possessed an even more refined temperament. It was as if she, not the Third Lady Qu who had been meticulously groomed by the family, embodied the true essence of the Fourth Lady.

Although her facial features remained concealed, no one could deny her captivating beauty. Standing in the wind, her sleeves fluttered gently, her waist slender and delicate—barely a handful. She emanated an ethereal charm.

Even with the veil obscuring her face, this woman was truly a stunning beauty.

"Lady Qu, I must admit that I have always held a favorable opinion of you. Over the years, I never once considered withdrawing our betrothal, and I have been wholeheartedly determined to marry you. Even though your circumstances have been unfavorable, I never expected that upon your return, you would insist on canceling our engagement just because of Yu Qingmeng's scheming. Can't you tolerate this

marriage and forget the fact that our household has been eagerly awaiting your return for all these years?"

Xu Lipeng regained his composure, suppressing his other thoughts, and spoke angrily.

"Master Xu, I don't quite understand what you're saying." Qu Moying took a step back, increasing the distance between herself and Xu Lipeng.

"You don't understand? Fourth Lady Qu, do you think I am unaware that it was you who orchestrated the cancellation of our betrothal?" Xu Lipeng's anger escalated as he spoke. Hatred appeared on his handsome face, and he attempted to reach out and grab Qu Moying, his expression contorted with rage.

Qu Moying quickly retreated two steps, evading Xu Lipeng's grasp. She raised her eyes, gazing coldly at him. "Master Xu, please have a little self-control."

"Control myself? How can I? I have shown kindness and loyalty to your Qu family and to you, but how have you treated me? You have brought me to this point. Are you happy now?" Xu Lipeng vented his anger. Seeing Qu Moying's calm demeanor in the face of his rage, an evil flame surged within him.

Initially, he intended to question her calmly, but at this moment, he couldn't contain his rising anger. He found himself unable to control his emotions.

"That was funny. Miss Yu and you have had a secret relationship for a long time. Should I pretend to be ignorant and marry you, allowing you to trample on me? Are you planning to make Miss Yu your concubine, just like what happened to Madam Yu in the past? Is your intention to bring about my demise?" Qu Moying mocked, curling her lips and speaking calmly.

Within her calm words, there was a chilling tone that made Xu Lipeng, who was about to step forward, freeze in his tracks.

The situations involving Yu and Qu Zhizhen, as well as Little Yue, were information Xu Lipeng had inquired about afterwards. The reality seemed to align with what he had suspected.

“Master Xu, I am not my mother. I would rather not marry anyone than marry someone like you, someone resembling my father.” Qu Moying continued in a light, ethereal tone, her eyes slightly raised. She stared at Xu Lipeng with an exceedingly calm gaze, exuding a rebellious and cold aura that defied conventions.

She was referring to Qu Zhizhen, her own father, yet she spoke of him in such a manner.

Such words and actions were not befitting of a delicate young woman confined to her family. It took audacity to utter them.

Qu Zhizhen was her biological father, and even if he had done something wrong, it was not her place to speak of it. But here she was, speaking so callously, with disdain, as if it were a matter of course. Her face, concealed beneath the veil, remained calm and unperturbed.

In that moment, Xu Lipeng was stunned. He realized he had nothing to say, and as he opened his mouth, he looked at Qu Moying, unsure whether to rebuke her or say something else entirely.

“Master Xu, we have no connection now. The past is in the past. Although you once intended to scheme against me, your current situation is a result of your own actions. I am not willing to be manipulated by you. Is it my fault? Or have you become so domineering that anyone you wish to manipulate must obediently comply?” Seeing his silence, Qu Moying continued in a nonchalant tone.

After speaking, she cast a cold glance at Xu Lipeng and turned to leave.

Instinctively, Xu Lipeng took two steps forward and reached out to grab Qu Moying’s arm. “Fourth Lady Qu, is it all my fault that we find ourselves in this situation? Isn’t it your fault as well? If you can’t tolerate Yu Qingmeng, you could have told me. Was it necessary to create such a commotion?”

This time, Xu Lipeng steeled his heart. His grasp missed its mark, and he hurriedly took two more steps, attempting to reach out once again.

But the next moment, his hand was forcefully slapped away. “Master Xu, please behave yourself!”

Someone said sternly.

Xu Lipeng felt a stinging pain in his hand. After regaining his footing, he stared at Qi Xiuran, the eldest son of Duke Qi, who stood before him with an unpleasant expression on his face.

Qi Xiuran happened to pass by and noticed a dispute from afar. What bothered him the most was seeing Xu Lipeng repeatedly reaching out to grab Qu Moying. It was a disrespectful act. The people in the capital were well aware of the broken engagement and the relationship between Xu and a niece of the Yu family. It was obvious that he showed no enthusiasm to this engagement.

The only reason for not officially breaking off the engagement was to preserve Xu Lipeng's reputation.

However, his current behavior was crossing the line.

Qi Xiuran took bold strides forward and firmly slapped Xu Lipeng's hand away, refusing to let him touch Qu Moying again.

"First Young Master Qi." Qu Moying inclined her body in a polite gesture as if nothing was happening.

Even in this situation, she remained composed in her actions, impressing Qi Xiuran. Young Master Yongning was truly undeserving of Qu Moying's presence.

"Young Master Qi, please step aside. I have something to discuss with Lady Qu." Xu Lipeng glared at Qu Moying, his expression unfriendly. He was feeling increasingly frustrated and couldn't care less if he offended Qi Xiuran.

At this moment, Yu Dong also arrived and stood behind Qu Moying, her eyes carrying a concealed hostility towards Xu Lipeng. Though she had been standing far away earlier, she had witnessed Xu Lipeng's actions. The Young Master Yongning had shown audacity by daring to grab the young lady's hand.

He had malicious intentions, seeking to tarnish her reputation.

“Young Master Xu, you have already withdrawn your engagement to Lady Qu. Is there anything else to discuss?” Qi Xiuran spoke calmly, refusing to allow such misconduct where a man took advantage of a woman.

This argument was ruining the young lady’s reputation and revealed Xu Lipeng’s true character, far from the well-regarded noble son of Marquis Yongning.

“Young Master Qi, this is a matter between Lady Qu and me. I kindly request that you refrain from interfering.” Xu Lipeng’s voice carried a displeased tone as he glared at Qu Moying. His anger grew, and his eyes narrowed, his face turning increasingly unsightly.

“Young Master Xu, I don’t believe there is anything left for us to discuss. If there are any matters concerning your mansion, please have your mother go to the Qu Mansion and inform my grandmother. There is no need for further communication between us.” Qu Moying calmly addressed Xu Lipeng.

With her composed and poised demeanor, Qu Moying’s air of dignity surpassed Xu Lipeng’s irritated state, elevating her overall presence.

Xu Lipeng’s face turned livid with anger. He pointed his finger at Qu Moying and then at Qi Xiuran, sneered, and expressed his displeasure. Initially, he had no intention of heeding Qu Qiuyan’s words. While he understood her meaning, he was not willing to engage in actions that compromised his character. He believed he had his own style.

However, at this moment, he cast aside those thoughts. Qu Moying, who had been determined to distance herself from him, seemed to be connected to Qi Xiuran, the first young master of Duke Qi’s Mansion. Otherwise, why would Qi Xiuran protect her so fiercely? If she didn’t want to be his lawful wife, then she would become his concubine!

His Marquis Yongning’s Mansion could have another concubine!

Furiously shaking his sleeve, Xu Lipeng left in a fit of anger and headed towards the flower hall. Qu Qiuyan had hinted that Qu Moying had dropped a sachet in that location.

As Qi Xiuran watched Xu Lipeng storm off, his expression soured. Initially, he was not supposed to be among today's guests. Qi Xiuran was unaware of who had invited him. The current situation had become quite unsightly.

Previously, Qi Xiuran had held a favorable opinion of him, but recent events had caused him to look down on Xu Lipeng. If he had no interest in the marriage, he should have broken it off earlier. There was no need to reach such a disgraceful state where he pursued reputation on one hand while engaging in ambiguous relationships with other women on the other.

It truly revealed the lack of noble character in this so-called privileged son of a prestigious family!

"Thank you very much, first young master." Qu Moying said as she saw Xu Lipeng had already left, bowing to Qi Xiuran.

"No need to be like this, Fourth Lady Qu." Qi Xiuran said sternly, his gaze sweeping in the direction Xu Lipeng had departed. "If he bothers you again later, you can inform the people in our mansion. We can't let him act recklessly here!"

This indicated that the Duke Qi's Mansion would support Qu Moying.

"Much obliged." Qu Moying expressed her gratitude and looked at Qi Xiuran thoughtfully. Since they had met, there were some things that needed to be said, right?

"You're too kind, Fourth Lady Qu." Qi Xiuran nodded. Seeing that Qu Moying had no further business, he turned and headed towards the exit. He had originally been in the inner courtyard, about to move to the outer courtyard as per his father's instructions to bring guests to the flower hall. It was almost time.

"Thank you for the gift you previously sent, first young master. The music score was excellent!" Qu Moying suddenly spoke as she watched Qi Xiuran about to leave without any intention of explaining anything.

"What gift?" Qi Xiuran was caught off guard by her words. He stopped in his tracks and asked, "Sending you a music score? When did that happen? How come I don't know about it?"

Chapter 433 Third Lady did not See Our Lady

Yu Dong stood in surprise, staring at the young master Qi in disbelief.

“Just two days ago!” Qu Moying gazed calmly at Qi Xiuran. “On that day, when I returned from the palace, at the doorstep, Granny Yan received it from a servant lad. She said the lad was from your mansion, and the carriage he used belonged to your household. She claimed that the music score was sent by your order.”

Qu Moying spoke candidly, turning to Yu Dong and nodding.

Yu Dong stepped forward and presented the prepared music score. Initially, she thought her young lady’s action was inappropriate. After all, it wasn’t common to receive a gift and then return it in person.

Now she realized that the young lady was indeed clever. She had sensed something was amiss with the music score and had prepared for it beforehand.

Qi Xiuran also noticed that something was off. He took a quick glance at the score, then raised his head and said sternly, “Lady Qu, I did not send this music score.”

Observing Qi Xiuran’s expression, Qu Moying smiled faintly. “If that’s the case, could I leave the music score to you?”

“Sure.” Qi Xiuran nodded, passing the music score to the servant lad standing behind him, signifying that he would take responsibility for this matter.

The fact that they used a carriage from Duke Qi’s Mansion and that the servant lad was dressed like any servant in the mansion indicated a connection to someone within his family. Otherwise, outsiders wouldn’t have access to these resources.

For Qi Xiuran, investigating this matter was more feasible, as Qu Moying was an outsider and many things couldn’t be easily looked into.

“Master Qi, I heard that Duke Qi once fought in the North against the Imperial Court for several years?” Qu Moying didn’t immediately leave after resolving the issue.

“My grandfather indeed fought in the North, a long time ago. At that time, the North suffered a crushing defeat, and my grandfather pursued them to their imperial court. All members of their royal family fled, and the North was nearly annihilated.” Qi Xiuran explained with a smile. This was a matter that Duke Qi was most proud of, as he often shared the story with his grandson.

There were some minor details related to this matter, but Qu Moying didn’t inquire further, and Qi Xiuran didn’t elaborate much either. If Qu Moying were to ask again, he planned to share the story wholeheartedly. After all, as the grandson, he also took great pride in this event.

Qu Moying didn’t respond this time. It seemed that she had already said everything she needed to. With a slight bow, she turned with Yu Dong and walked back. Initially, she was merely taking a casual stroll, but seeing Xu Lipeng approach and realizing that Qi Xiuran intended to head in the same direction, she concluded that it must be the outer courtyard. Going there would be less suitable for her.

Qi Xiuran inexplicably felt a sense of melancholy. He had originally planned to discuss the matter further, but when he realized that Qu Moying’s comment was just a passing remark, he smiled awkwardly, shook his head, and headed towards the outer courtyard.

“Lady, I have placed everything as instructed, and no one has come there yet.” Yu Dong caught up with her and reported in a low voice, making sure no one was around.

No one? Even after such a long time?

It seemed as if the maid had come specifically to open the door for Qu Qiuyan.

Even if they were out searching for something for an extended period, what about the other servants? Weren’t they supposed to be arranging the banquet? It wouldn’t be appropriate to leave the task of preparation solely to a maid.

“It’s fine, let’s leave it at that and go back.” Qu Moying nodded, now understanding the situation.

"Lady, why would County Lady Jingyu act this way?" Yu Dong asked in a hushed tone.

There were only the two of them on the path, so there was no need to worry about others overhearing.

"Perhaps it's due to conflicting interests." Qu Moying lightly smiled, casually dismissing the matter, but her eyes betrayed a hint of coldness.

This County Lady Jingyu was quite persistent. Although Qu Moying still hadn't fully grasped the exact reasons why Liu Jingyu wanted to harm her, she was not the type to be beaten without fighting back. If Liu Jingyu could play dirty tricks, then Qu Moying could do the same.

"Lady, could it be her behind the incident with the music scores?" Yu Dong suddenly remembered the issue and made an insightful remark.

Qu Moying paused for a moment and then shook her head, saying, "It's hard to say for sure."

"Why would it be hard to say? Besides County Lady Jingyu, who else could use the Qi Mansion's carriage and command their servants? Yu Dong asked anxiously.

"It seems like there is no one else." Qu Moying chuckled at her urgency, her lips curling slightly. "It appears as though there is no one, but that doesn't mean there isn't. Perhaps this target is not me, but rather first young master Qi. After all, he is not yet a Duke."

It seemed that the issue with the music score may not necessarily be directly related to her. Qu Moying was not well-acquainted with the situation at this mansion, but she had made a guess based on her intuition.

Yu Dong fell silent for a moment after hearing her words and then cautiously asked, "Do you think it's possible that you are being implicated due to the title dispute?"

"It's a possibility." Qu Moying nodded. In truth, she had another direction in mind, but no matter how she thought about it, it seemed highly unlikely.

So, she didn't bring it up again.

The battle for titles was never as simple as it appeared on the surface. It involved backstabbing and ruthless tactics. The so-called brotherhood often ended up being less reliable than a stranger.

Her father's situation was a perfect example.

"Some people will disregard all moral values for the sake of titles." Qu Moying sighed, speaking from personal experience. After finishing her statement, she felt a pang in her heart. She forcefully exhaled a breath, suppressing the surging and repressed hatred within her.

Yu Dong remained silent. She agreed with the young lady's words, as she had witnessed many battles for titles where bloodshed ensued herself.

If a title fell into the hands of a good family, it would promote unity and closeness. However, if it fell into the hands of a malicious family, it would become a source of trouble. Even during the many years of the Great Zhou, which prominent family hadn't experienced internal conflicts and bloodshed? It was far from unexpected.

Not only among these prominent families, even during the previous rebellion, the cause was the pursuit of the throne.

The current Crown Prince and Lord Jing were no different in their ambitions.

Yu Dong refrained from asking further questions, and Qu Moying remained silent as well. She walked back slowly, biting her lip tightly. Unpleasant memories from the depths of her mind gradually resurfaced, and at this moment, she had no intention of speaking any further.

"Fourth sister?" Suddenly, a voice came from ahead on the road, calling out to her.

Qu Moying raised her head and saw Qu Qiuyan and several other young ladies approaching. Upon seeing her, Qu Qiuyan gently and gracefully called out to her.

Suppressing all the emotions in her heart, Qu Moying took two steps forward and bowed to Qu Qiuyan. In the eyes of outsiders, despite their strained relationship, one was an elder sister and the other a younger sister.

The dignity of the entire Qu Mansion had to be taken into consideration when it was necessary. Of course, when this consideration crossed Qu Moying's bottom line, she would no longer care about feelings.

"Where did you come from?" Qu Qiuyan looked perplexed, as if she hadn't seen Qu Moying just now, as if she had left Qu Moying behind and walked ahead on her own.

She had left them behind under the awkward situation, leaving Qu Moying and Xu Lipeng behind. And at that time, Qu Moying didn't have any maids by her side, and Xu Lipeng harbored ill intentions towards Qu Moying.

"Didn't Third Lady see our young lady just now? When I came over, I saw both Third Lady and our young lady ahead." Yu Dong interjected with surprise, appearing straightforward.

Speaking out of turn as a maid was improper, but it also indicated that it was a fact. Otherwise, a maid wouldn't dare to be so impulsive in joining the conversation.

Qu Moying cast an unhappy look at Yu Dong.

Yu Dong understood and quickly apologized to Qu Qiuyan: "Third Lady, I was too surprised and lost my composure. I hope Third Lady will reprimand me!"

"Third sister, Yu Dong was rude!" Qu Moying said calmly.

As for Yu Dong's words, she didn't affirm or deny them!

Their conversation drew the attention of the other young ladies, who glanced at the two of them. Qu Moying seemed calm, and although Qu Qiuyan appeared calm as well, there was a hint of annoyance, as

if she had other intentions. Could there be something going on between them? The perceptive young ladies sensed it.

It was well known that the two sisters in the Qu Mansion didn't get along. The current situation made it difficult to determine who was right and who was wrong.

Qu Qiuyan said she hadn't seen Qu Moying when she first arrived, and she didn't know where Qu Moying had come from. However, Qu Moying's maid claimed that Qu Moying had been with her.

If it was true, it seemed that Qu Moying had some ulterior motives, and it all seemed too pretentious.

The young ladies weren't fools; they wouldn't serve as puppets without reason.

Qu Qiuyan was truly irritated. If Qu Moying had said those words, she would have had a response. In fact, she particularly hoped that Qu Moying would question her, as she could naturally bring up Xu Lipeng and explain that he had come to ask Qu Moying something.

That would provide the groundwork for Xu Lipeng later, no matter what he said.

But unfortunately, it was Yu Dong who had spoken. Qu Moying remained silent, not asking anything. Even if Qu Qiuyan wanted to bring it up, it wouldn't be natural. Moreover, Yu Dong immediately apologized, and Qu Moying's words were there to support her. Qu Qiuyan couldn't really punish Yu Dong at this moment.

Yu Dong was Qu Moying's attendant, and even when beating a dog, one still needed to consider the master. Moreover, during their journey, the young ladies had been subtly probing their relationship, hinting at whether their relationship was truly poor or if it had something to do with Qu Moying's birth mother.

There was even one who was more aggressive, hinting that Qu Qiuyan was involved in harming Qu Moying along with Yu.

These remarks infuriated Qu Qiuyan, but she had to suppress her anger. Now Yu Dong had caused her minor discomfort, and she couldn't even vent her frustration. It left her with a burning anger inside.

Luckily, she still remembered clearly that this wasn't the Qu Mansion.

"I just took a walk outside. Did you see me? But I didn't see you. We might have missed each other!" Qu Qiuyan had to explain, prompted by the words of a young maid. She waved her hand, suppressing her anger, and forced a smile as she motioned for Yu Dong to rise. She didn't want to confront the maid accompanying Qu Moying, as it wouldn't be fitting for her status.

In preparation for the upcoming scene, she couldn't afford to have a conflict with Qu Moying. The better she presented herself now, the less likely others would misunderstand or suspect her when the incident came to light.

Qu Qiuyan's tactful and graceful words had a significant effect, dispelling the doubts of the young ladies.

Being born into a noble family, Qu Qiuyan couldn't openly display her dislike for her sister. Especially not within the Duke Qi's Mansion.

It was common for sisters to have their differences, yet when they were outside, they always maintained a pleasant and harmonious atmosphere.

Rumors? Weren't they always unreliable?

"Fourth sister, since you saw me, why didn't you call out to me? Were there others present?" Qu Qiuyan swallowed her anger and tried to redirect the conversation towards Xu Lipeng.

"I didn't see you. Maybe I was further behind you. When Yu Dong looked over, it seemed as if we were together." Qu Moying replied casually. She gave a slight side bow to Qu Qiuyan, acknowledging her manner. However, she had no intention of showcasing sisterly affection towards Qu Qiuyan. "I won't disturb third sister and the other ladies any longer. Lady Qi is still waiting for me."

Upon hearing her words, the other ladies smiled and also offered their bows. Although Qi Xiangyu, from the Qi family, was not a county lady, as the only legitimate granddaughter of the Duke, her status was exceptional despite her father being a concubine's son.

Qu Qiuyan wanted to call out to Qu Moying, as she hadn't yet shifted the conversation towards Xu Lipeng. How could Qu Moying leave now?

She only needed to say a few more words to steer the discussion in the right direction.

But the words remained unspoken, and she could only watch as Qu Moying departed.

Everyone was aware of their strained relationship. If she were to display affection now, it would only raise suspicion among others...

Chapter 434 The Abnormal Duke Qi

Qu Moying returned to the garden adorned with flowers. The garden was now mostly empty, with some ladies strolling outside and others still lingering in the flower hall. They had already admired the flowers earlier, so now it was a time for sitting down, conversing, or taking a walk.

Qu Moying stood before the pot of chrysanthemum; her gaze fixed on it. However, her true focus was on the two flowers beneath it.

After a while, she exchanged a glance with Yu Dong, who understood the signal. Seizing the moment when Qu Moying turned away, Yu Dong obstructed the view of the people in the flower hall. Taking two quick steps forward, she swiftly plucked the small flowers and concealed them in her sleeves. Nonchalantly, she followed Qu Moying as they made their way to the flower hall.

Once inside, Yu Dong stayed close behind Qu Moying. Meanwhile, Qi Xiangyu was busy attending to the guests, so Qu Moying didn't disturb her. Finding a secluded spot in a corner, she sat by a window and admired the scenery outside.

Qu Moying leaned against the window, facing the lake of the mansion. The window was slightly ajar, offering a view of the outside without too much breeze. Being in the corner, the wind wouldn't bother the other guests even if it blew in.

Leaning thoughtfully in front of the window, Qu Moying wore a long eye veil that covered half her face. The exposed portion revealed a complexion with a milky white luster akin to jade. As the veil descended, a hint of weariness emerged. Her hands rested gracefully on her knees, even when she slightly angled her body. She exuded elegance, despite her petite figure tucked away in the corner.

When Duke Qi entered the room, his gaze immediately fell upon the scene before him.

It was a small figure, just a young girl, and she appeared so delicate and fragile that it struck a heavy blow to his heart.

If he had only heard about it without seeing it for himself, he might not have been so concerned. Previously, he had heard that the child was doing well, though her father didn't like her. Nevertheless, as Old Lady Qu's precious, anything related to her would always be of concern to the Qu Mansion, and they would send everything she wanted to her.

He thought the reason she didn't want to return to the estate was that she didn't want to live with Qu Zhizhen's newly-wedded wife. The people in Qu Mansion had to accommodate her temperament.

However, recently he discovered that the child wasn't living well at all; her life was completely different from what he had imagined.

It wasn't that she insisted on leaving; she simply couldn't stay there. Qu Zhizhen, Yu, and their two children were the true family to themselves, so how could Qu Moying possibly fit in?

Before, Duke Qi hadn't paid much attention to Yu, viewing her as an extremely ordinary woman.

But now he realized just how malicious she truly was.

Such a woman deserved to die a hundred times!

Because of this, he had even personally called for Qu Zhizhen to come over, scolding him as an elder in Little Yue's family.

A heavy feeling weighed on Duke Qi's heart, making it difficult for him to catch his breath. Even his strong physique as a military general seemed to slump in front of this petite girl.

He felt unable to stand straight, unable to stand at all, and he didn't even have the face to do so!

Upon seeing Duke Qi's arrival, all the ladies stood up and bowed respectfully. Duke Qi took his seat in the designated position, his face clouded with gloom.

Duchess Qi, wearing a cheerful smile, invited everyone to take their seats and then looked at Duke Qi with a smile, asking, "Why do you have time to come now?"

Regardless of the circumstances, it didn't seem appropriate for Duke Qi to be here at this moment. Could something have happened?

"I came to see if there was anything you needed here." Duke Qi replied in a low voice.

"We don't need anything here; everything has already been arranged." Duchess Qi laughed and glanced around. "Why hasn't Jingyu come? It's getting late. Could it be that she's not planning to come?"

"Jingyu already came earlier. She was just in my study. Her mother fell ill, so she couldn't come today." Duke Qi explained.

"Sick? What did the imperial physician say?" Duchess Qi asked. "She was fine before. How did she get sick?"

Although she didn't like this daughter very much, she was still her only daughter, so Duchess Qi still cared a lot about her.

"The imperial physician said that it's nothing serious. She just needs to recuperate properly. Just now, I sent someone to the storeroom to find some medicinal herbs for Jingyu. I told her to bring them over." said Duke Qi.

"I hope it's nothing serious. My health hasn't been great lately. It's easy to fall ill during the change of seasons. She should take care of herself too." Duchess Qi expressed her concern. "Has Jingyu not returned yet?"

"I had her go back first to deliver the medicinal herbs. She should be returning soon." Duke Qi replied, his gaze sweeping towards the corner. Qu Moying had already taken her seat again, her head lowered as she quietly listened to their conversation.

She appeared both gentle and graceful, but also thin and weak, eliciting a sense of pity.

As she sat there, Duke Qi couldn't help but feel a tinge of loneliness and solitude of her, as if something had tugged forcefully at his heart.

"All the young ladies have been waiting here for a long time, all waiting for Jingyu. They say she's become even more elegant and dignified." Duchess Qi cheerfully remarked, eager to hear others praise her beloved granddaughter

Even the other ladies and madams in the estate couldn't help but heap praises on Jingyu.

The betrothal between Liu Jingyu and the crown prince was practically a done deal, and at this stage, there was nothing but praise for her.

Duchess Qi had always had a fondness for Liu Jingyu, and her smile could blossom like a flower.

In the past, Duke Qi would have agreed with her sentiments, although he wasn't as concerned about Liu Jingyu, his own granddaughter. However, he couldn't possibly ignore her presence, especially considering Liu Jingyu's exceptional qualities. She showed respect to the elders of the mansion and handled matters with utmost diligence.

She had an air of elegance.

In the past, Duke Qi even considered Liu Jingyu a source of pride for their family. Though he didn't have many granddaughters, having one who outshone the rest was a matter of prestige.

But now, as he caught a glimpse of the small Qu Moying in the corner, Duke Qi felt a pang in his heart. The pride he once felt had completely dissipated, replaced by a sense of guilt and an unusual remorse.

Was it really there?

Perhaps it was, but he didn't want it to be this way. He couldn't help himself.

In the past, when he couldn't see or hear about such matters, he could choose not to inquire or ask questions. He could casually ask and believe whatever the people around him said, striving to forget about it.

However, now, when Duchess Qi proudly mentioned Liu Jingyu in front of Qu Moying, Duke Qi felt as though his tail had been stepped on. His expression turned somber, "Jingyu is Jingyu, but Xiangyu is the young lady of the mansion. Please don't constantly mention Jingyu as if Xiangyu is not here."

Duchess Qi's face stiffened. Being called out like this in front of so many people made her feel uneasy, and her expression darkened, "What do you mean, my lord? Are you implying that I mistreat Xiangyu?"

Qi Xiangyu was the legitimate daughter of a concubine, and Duchess Qi had never held her in high regard.

"I didn't mean that. It's just that Jingyu's surname is Liu after all. Today's banquet is hosted by Xiangyu." Duke Qi expressed his dissatisfaction. Seeing the increasingly unpleasant expression on Duchess Qi's face, he promptly stood up, trying to ease the tension, "It's almost time to start the banquet. If Jingyu hasn't arrived yet, so be it. After all, this is the Qi's Mansion's banquet."

Did this mean that he no longer cared about Liu Jingyu?

The several elderly ladies, who were observing the situation, couldn't understand why Duke Qi would say such things. Did Liu Jingyu offend Duke Qi, causing him to lose his temper? However, when Duke Qi spoke about Liu Jingyu just now, he did so with a smile.

After finishing his words, Duke Qi turned and left without giving Duchess Qi a chance to inquire. This infuriated her, but she couldn't say anything in front of the full audience.

Lately, Duke Qi's temper had become increasingly peculiar. Not only did he inexplicably decide to hold a chrysanthemum appreciation banquet, but he also frequently flew into fits of anger. Duchess Qi was keeping a lot of anger inside as well.

Her exceptional granddaughter, who was her own flesh and blood, what was wrong with saying a few more words? How did it lead to the situation like this?

Whenever she thought of this, Duchess Qi felt uncomfortable in her chest.

She believed she had treated her well. Even though she was the daughter of a concubine, she had always been kind to her. But of course, she couldn't compare her to her own biological granddaughter. Did this mean that the Duke of Qi felt sour about it?

Or did Qi Xiangyu say something to Duke Qi?

Duchess Qi glanced suspiciously at Qi Xiangyu, who was sitting quietly beside her. But she dismissed the thought. She knew that her granddaughter was afraid of the Duke Qi and would never approach him without a reason.

So, what was the reason behind his recent behavior? The Duke Qi had become increasingly unpredictable. Not only did he arrange a chrysanthemum banquet out of the blue, but he also went to the palace to request a few pots of chrysanthemums from the emperor. Moreover, he had brought two pots that their daughter had obtained from the empress to display at the banquet.

Just thinking about it. Duke Qi, a renowned military general who had emerged victorious on the battlefield, rarely visited the palace. But now, he was going to the palace for a few chrysanthemum

plants. It seemed he was solely focused on hosting the flower-viewing banquet at home. It was truly embarrassing.

What on earth is happening with him lately? The Duchess suspected that there must be something going on that she was unaware of. Her eyes glanced thoughtfully at Qi Xiangyu, wondering if the matter is related to her, or perhaps to Jingyu?

She didn't know how Jingyu had offended this old man.

The Duchess Qi couldn't figure it out for a moment, so she decided not to dwell on it. She composed her emotions, briefly explained the situation to the other ladies, successfully dispelling the somber atmosphere brought by the Duck, and then instructed her staff to prepare the banquet.

At this moment, the opposite flower hall also opened its doors. The windows of both sides faced each other, wide open, allowing a clear view of the people on either side.

Separated by a courtyard adorned with chrysanthemums, several young gentlemen emerged from the opposite flower hall and stood in the garden, admiring the flowers. The young ladies who were about to leave halted their steps and sat properly in the flower hall.

The old ladies from each mansion were present, and the young ladies appeared quite demure. However, their eyes occasionally wandered outside. On the other hand, the gentlemen across the street were more forward in their glances, occasionally directing their gaze towards the ladies in the flower hall.

The windows directly facing each other were large and wide open, with the curtains pulled high, providing a clear view on both sides.

It was unusual to see so many young ladies gathered in one place, and the young gentlemen couldn't resist stealing a few more glances.

"Young Master Yongning, is this sachet yours?" Suddenly, someone called out from the flower hall across, drawing the attention of the young ladies on this side as well.

Chapter 435 Jingyu or Ying

“Where’s it?” Xu Lipeng calmly asked a young master standing beside him.

“It’s right at your feet, and it’s bright red. Master Xu, which fair maiden bestowed this upon you?” the young gentleman joked.

As he spoke, he stooped down to pick up the fallen sachet from the ground.

The red sachet, contrasting against the dark veil, was quite conspicuous. Xu Lipeng spotted it instantly, along with Xu Lipeng himself standing nearby. There was no doubt that the sachet belonged to Xu Lipeng.

Reacting swiftly, Xu Lipeng snatched it and held it in his palm, his smile turning awkward. “It’s mine, made by a maid at home. Please excuse the jest.”

“A maid? The material doesn’t seem like something a maid would use.” another young gentleman teased.

“How could it be from a maid? It must be a gift from one of the fair ladies!” another gentleman playfully remarked. Everyone knew that Xu Lipeng was engaged to Second Lady Duan, who was known to be fierce and had an average appearance. It wouldn’t be surprising if Xu Lipeng had another woman he admired—a secret confidante.

“It really was made by a maid in the estate.” Xu Lipeng shifted his hand back slightly, speaking the words but with a hint of fluster on his face. His gaze wandered for a moment, and he tried to leave, giving off an air of guilt.

Someone approached from behind and snatched the sachet from Xu Lipeng’s hand, jesting, “Let’s all have a look at the craftsmanship of the maid!”

In the past, Xu Lipeng wouldn't have faced such ridicule. He was considered a righteous gentleman with good character and reputation. But now, many aristocratic young men regarded him with skepticism, no longer treating him with courtesy. They were ready to expose his pretense of righteousness.

Caught off guard by someone approaching from behind, Xu Lipeng's attempt to reclaim the sachet was thwarted by others.

The gentleman who snatched the sachet examined it, realizing that something was inside. He promptly opened it and handed the sachet to another young lady, casually reciting a few lines.

The voice was neither loud nor soft, but it happened to be just right. The people in the opposite flower hall all heard it, and for a moment, the ladies there looked over with curiosity.

Xu Lipeng's face turned red as he rushed forward and snatched the note, saying, "Stop talking nonsense!"

"Who's talking nonsense, Master Xu? This is not something a maid can write. And it's even written on Chengxin Paper, with proper handwriting."

Another young man teased.

In the past, Xu Lipeng always appeared serious, but now he had a rare opportunity, and no one intended to let it pass.

"Whose is it? Let's see, let's see. There are words on it!" someone exclaimed, raising the scented pouch high.

The embroidery on it was clearly well done, despite some signs of tampering. Nevertheless, based on the handwriting, one could make out some details. Several heads gathered together, carefully trying to decipher it.

Xu Lipeng looked annoyed, seemingly wanting to grab it back, but he was pushed away by the young men.

Everyone jovially discussed the embroidered pattern on it—flowers and butterflies, truly unique and elegant.

“Fourth sister, are you the best at embroidering this kind of design?” Qu Qiuyan, who had somehow appeared by Qu Moying’s side, overheard the conversation and whispered to her, her voice deliberately lowered.

Although her words were soft, they were clear enough for the surrounding ladies to hear. Immediately, they all turned their heads and looked at Qu Moying.

It’s not that they hadn’t thought of it, but once someone mentioned it, they all remembered—this fourth Lady Qu was once engaged to Yong Master Yongning. However, because he saved the second Lady Duan, he was compelled to break off the engagement with Qu Moying and instead would marry the second Lady Duan.

Despite Lady Qu’s eye ailment, the ladies thought she was still preferable to the bold and fierce second Lady Duan. At least Lady Qu had always displayed elegance and composure.

And when it came to her appearance, no matter how you looked at it, she couldn’t be considered ugly; in fact, she might even be exceptionally beautiful. Even with her eyes veiled, she looked more attractive than the second Lady Duan.

So, is this fourth Lady Qu still entangled with the young master?

Could it be that Lady Qu is not willing to let go?

When they thought about it, it seemed possible. Young Master Yongning had been engaged to Lady Qu for so long, and there had been no news of him calling off the marriage. Perhaps he had already taken a liking to Lady Qu, and the involvement with Yu’s niece could have been an accident—a result of her trying to entice Xu Lipeng.

Perhaps Lady Qu had been upset before, but now that her marriage had been snatched away, she was still unwilling. Was that why she sent the sachet?

Someone sighed, she was a child who lost her mother after all. She didn't realize that even if she had sent it when she and Xu Lipeng were still engaged, it wouldn't have been a big deal. But now that both families have called off the marriage, if she sent a sachet, it would be a sign of a clandestine affair. If someone found out, Lady Qu would have to become Xu Lipeng's concubine.

The position of the legitimate wife had become that of a concubine. It was truly pitiful.

Someone shook their head in secret.

"Third sister, I don't understand what you mean." Qu Moying raised her gaze and looked at her sister Qu Qiuyan, her tone neither warm nor cold.

"Did I ask the wrong question? I just heard people in the mansion saying that you are skilled at embroidering this kind of butterfly and flower pattern." Qu Qiuyan replied with an apologetic look, lowering her head and speaking softly.

Qu Moying let out a cold smile and straightforwardly said, "So, sister, do you think this thing belongs to me?"

Qu Qiuyan found it difficult to respond. She didn't expect that at this moment, Qu Moying would remain composed, even appearing assertive.

Remaining silent only made her seem more guilty.

Raising her head and composing herself, she wore a guilty expression and said, "If I'm mistaken, please forgive me, fourth sister. I was also worried..."

"What are you worried about? Worried that this sachet is related to me? Well, thank you, third sister, for taking the blame for me. While others didn't say much, you jumped in and made it seem like you were concerned about me. Those who know will say that you are worried about me, caring about me, but those who don't know might think you said it intentionally."

Qu Moying responded nonchalantly.

Some young ladies looked at Qu Qiuyan skeptically. Qu Qiuyan's behavior did seem somewhat deliberate. Moreover, everyone knew that the relationship between the two sisters of the Qu family was not good. They had heard about it before, and they had never seen them together. It was evident that their relationship was not good.

"You..." Qu Qiuyan's face turned red, almost on the verge of tears. She looked as if she wanted to say something but hesitated. "I am just worried about our Qu family!"

This statement indicated that she was not concerned about Qu Moying but rather worried that Qu Moying would tarnish the reputation of the Qu family.

"Third sister, why are you so anxious? Let's just listen to the whole story. We can't just take the blame ourselves when no one else has said anything. Lady Yu is even your cousin, and you would know what he is like the most." Qu Moying sneered, not hiding the disdain on her face.

As they heard her words, more gazes fell upon Qu Qiuyan. They recalled the previous incident involving Xu Lipeng and the concubine from the Qu family, who was rumored to have gotten involved with him at the Qu mansion.

With these thoughts in mind, it seemed that this Master Xu wasn't such a good person. And Qu Qiuyan seemed to be well aware of this fact.

Just as someone was about to speak, Qu Qiuyan immediately interjected, secretly gesturing towards Qu Moying. Was it really unintentional?

"Ah, I found it, I found it! What character is this?"

"The embroidery on top was picked off. Master Xu is really meticulous."

“This is to prevent people from discovering it! What kind of confidante does Master Xu have that he’s so careful? Take a look, take a look.” The young gentlemen on the other side were quite lively, engrossed in their discussion, forgetting that there were ladies in the flower hall.

“It’s the character ‘Jing.’”

“Let me see, it really is the character ‘Jing.’”

“No, there’s another character behind it, it is...” As the person spoke, they hesitated and passed the incense sachet to another person.

It wasn’t quite clear to them.

But they didn’t dare to continue.

It looked like “Jingyu” or “Lord Jing”. What could it be?

Regardless of which one it was, they didn’t dare to utter it aloud. County Lady Jingyu or Lord Jing? The sachet ended up in Xu Lipeng’s hands, and he had that kind of appearance. It seemed impossible for him to be Lord Jing, so it must be County Lady Jingyu. But how could she give Xu Lipeng a sachet?

County Lady Jingyu was the future Princess Crown!

Moreover, they couldn’t see that particular detail clearly. It seemed to be there, but also seemed like it wasn’t. Perhaps it was just a floral pattern, and the characters behind it might not even be characters at all.

Only the front character was clearly visible, and it was unmistakably “Jing.”

The young gentlemen who saw the sachet exchanged glances, realizing the gravity of the situation. Especially in this setting, they knew better than to speak recklessly. One person forced a smile and

threw the sachet back to Xu Lipeng, saying, "It's just a 'Jing' character, there's no other character behind it."

"Right, it's just a 'Jing' character. We don't know which Lady Jing is Master Xu's confidante." Another person caught on and joined in to defuse the tension.

"Master Xu, since it was given to you by a lady, you should keep it properly. How can you casually discard it!" Another person pretended as if they hadn't said anything and spoke with a smile.

Xu Lipeng's expression truly changed as he took the sachet and examined it carefully. The more he looked, the more his hand trembled. Qu Qiuyan had clearly implied that it belonged to Qu Moying. There was a shape resembling the character "Jing" instead of "Ying" and some of the subsequent characters faintly resembled the character "Yu."

County Lady Jingyu? How could it be County Lady Jingyu? Shouldn't it have been the character "Ying"?

No, that's not right. It must be the character "Ying." Xu Lipeng's face grew anxious as he examined it carefully. Even if he tried to relate those two characters to "Ying", he couldn't explain it. The characters were quite distinct. The distance between the two was slightly larger, and the three horizontal strokes at the back were longer. No matter how he tried to force them together, it seemed impossible.

"A 'Jing' character? Who could it be?" The ladies in the opposite flower hall had also heard it. Although they hadn't seen it directly, they looked at each other with suspicion, wondering which lady's name contained the character "Jing." They had also heard the recited poem earlier, and it didn't sound like something a maid could have composed. The writing was quite impressive, evoking a blush and a racing heart.

This kind of private item couldn't possibly be carried around by Young Master Yongning when he was outside the mansion. It seemed more like something recently obtained, especially considering it had just fallen to the ground.

Who could it be?

“Duchess, County Lady Jingyu has arrived!” A granny crossed through the guests in the flower hall and approached to inform Duchess Qi.

In an instant, everyone’s eyes lifted up.

The Duchess Qi’s face turned green...

Chapter 436 Jing Yu, Where did You Get this Sachet?

“Grandmother!” Liu Jingyu entered and gracefully bowed to Duchess Qi.

“Is everything alright with your mother?” Although the expression on the Duchess Qi’s face was not pleasant, she managed to calm herself down. It was impossible for her granddaughter to be involved in this matter. Considering Liu Jingyu’s identity, how could she have encountered someone like Young Master Yongning? The Duchess’s heart gradually eased.

“My mother is fine. She asked me to inquire about your health. The weather has been unfavorable lately, and she wants you to take care and avoid falling ill. She mentioned visiting you in a few days.” Liu Jingyu spoke softly, taking a seat beside the Duchess Qi. Her gaze instinctively fell on Qu Moying, even though Qu Moying was sitting in the corner. Their eyes met, piercing through the crowd.

Liu Jingyu smiled lightly, displaying a composed and graceful demeanor.

She deliberately chose this time to come, in order to avoid suspicion.

Considering the timing, it was just right. Not only could she enjoy the performance, but it also wouldn’t raise any suspicions. Liu Jingyu had calculated the timing of her arrival.

However, she couldn’t shake off the strange atmosphere in the room. Every now and then, she noticed a few peculiar glances from the young ladies, as if something had happened that she was unaware of, and somehow, it seemed to be related to her.

Of course, that couldn't be possible. If there was something going on, it must involve Qu Moying. However, Qu Moying appeared as if nothing had occurred. Could it be that the situation hadn't yet unfolded, and she had arrived a bit too early?

"I'm fine. It's good as long as she's okay!" Duchess Qi forced a smile. Just by observing the expressions of the ladies and young women around her, she could tell that they were paying close attention to her conversation with her granddaughter.

A sense of frustration began to well up inside her.

How could someone like the Young Master Yongning be someone her granddaughter would be interested in? These people's thoughts were truly inexplicable.

She coughed softly, about to speak, when suddenly she saw a young lady not far away gasp in a low voice. She then noticed the young lady hastily covering her mouth, but her hand pointed towards Liu Jingyu. As the lady looked at the direction indicated by the young lady, the Duchess Qi's face turned pale with anger.

Liu Jingyu also wore a sachet, and from the perspective of the Duchess Qi, she could see that it was embroidered with the character "Jing."

More people noticed the sachet, and their expressions became peculiar, but no one dared to speak openly.

"Jingyu, where did you get this sachet?" the Duchess Qi had no choice but to ask.

"I embroidered it myself. If Grandma likes it, I can make a few for her next time." Liu Jingyu said softly, reaching for the sachet hanging from her waist. After she had imitated Qu Moying's fan pendant, Liu Jingyu realized it was better to blend in with everyone else and avoid being compared to Qu Moying.

As she took it off, more eyes turned towards her, allowing them to see the "Jing" character.

“Jingyu, is this your favorite embroidery pattern?” Duchess Qi took the sachet, pointing to the embroidered orchids. She breathed a sigh of relief and asked anxiously.

“Yes, Grandma knows that orchids are my favorite. They possess a delicate elegance. Although they may not be the most beautiful, they have the highest character. I have always enjoyed embroidering orchids.” Liu Jingyu replied gently.

Duchess Qi’s heart relaxed upon hearing this. “I naturally knows that. However, I was worried that people might misinterpret and assume you had embroidered the butterfly and flowers pattern.”

“Me? How could that be? My favorite is orchids. Butterflies are too glamorous and short-lived. I don’t like them.” Liu Jingyu felt uneasy inside, her heart pounding, but she maintained a composed expression on her face.

Qu Moying glanced at her, sneering inwardly. Liu Jingyu was indeed not easy to deal with; she should have become alert by now.

But it didn’t matter.

Qu Moying knew that it was impossible to accuse Liu Jingyu solely based on this sachet. After all, Liu Jingyu’s status was much higher than Xu Lipeng’s, and it was unimaginable for Liu Jingyu to be interested in Xu Lipeng.

However, the problem was that the character “Jing” on the sachet was not exclusive to Liu Jingyu. Even if she wanted to argue, she couldn’t make it clear.

Sometimes, rumors were more effective than direct accusations.

If the characters on the bag clearly spelled out “Jingyu”, Liu Jingyu would have found a way to defend herself. However, the suspicion was not directly pointed at her, yet everyone doubted her, and that was enough.

No defense was possible, which was exactly what Qu Moying needed right now.

When Qu Moying had received the sachet, she had removed the threads on top and used other needle holes to divide her own character “Ying” into two parts.

On the sachet Qu Qiuyan had provided, there was an embroidered “Ying” character. When the “Ying” character was pulled apart, it revealed a “Jing” character, and behind it, three additional strokes. These three strokes were elongated and straightened, appearing slightly skewed but forming two distinct characters. As for the dot in the corner, it looked like a trace left after removing a flower thread.

It wasn’t obvious.

You could believe it, or not, depending on how you perceived it. After all, it was subjective.

In this particular situation, rumors were more discomforting than direct accusations.

Furthermore, there was something that others were unaware of. Qu Xuexin’s previous sachet had fallen into Pei Luo’an’s hands, as did Qu Moying’s previous one. And now, Liu Jingyu had embroidered a similar one. Did this imply that Liu Jingyu was aware of this fact, leading her to change her preferred orchid embroidery into a pattern of butterflies and flowers?

Taking it a step further, did Liu Jingyu arrange someone to be around Pei Luo’an?

People like Pei Luo’an detested being observed, even if it was just a tiny bit!

Even if Pei Luo’an believed that there was nothing between Liu Jingyu and Xu Lipeng, he would undoubtedly pay attention to this matter. Pei Luo’an was highly suspicious, and when he grew suspicious, he wouldn’t ask but rather keep it in mind, bit by bit.

Some things might not exist, but they could still give rise to ideas in his mind!

Pei Luo’an had previously mentioned this mindset to Ji Hanyue, explaining that when he was young, he was framed in the palace, making it difficult for him to trust people. Ji Hanyue felt sorry for him and now realized that Pei Luo’an was testing her when he spoke about these matters.

Pei Luo'an was the kind of person who wouldn't trust anyone and hold anyone close to his heart. He always believed in himself, considering his own thoughts and observations superior to what others say.

Of course, deceased people could be trusted since they could no longer speak.

"It's better not to like it. I recall you have never embroidered the butterfly and flower pattern. In the past, you never liked embroidered patterns and are absolutely not someone who embroiders." Duchess Qi showed a faint smile, as if casually commenting.

"Grandmother, is there something wrong?" Liu Jingyu couldn't help but notice the abnormality and anxiously asked, fearing that her plans had gone awry.

"It's nothing. Well! This matter has nothing to do with you. I don't know which lady disregarded her own family traditions." Duchess Qi couldn't say that the sachet belonged to her granddaughter. She smiled and patted Liu Jingyu's hand, changing the subject.

That's enough for now. She ordered the banquet to begin.

The tables have been set, and the flower hall was spacious enough. There weren't many tables, and everyone took their seats.

Qu Moying and Qu Qiuyan enter the seating area together. Their seats were not in the front, but in a corner. After all, their status is lower compared to many of the other ladies and Qu Moying preferred to keep a low profile. She gracefully took a seat in the corner.

Qu Qiuyan wanted to move forward, but seeing that Qu Moying remained seated, she also refrained from moving forward. She sat next to Qu Moying, nervously clutching her handkerchief, her face turning pale.

The situation has taken a drastic turn, something she never expected.

It was she who had instructed Qing Ju to drop the sachet. Why had it become unrecognizable, even to herself?

Where did the note inside the sachet come from? And why did the embroidered character “Ying” on the outside of the sachet change to “Jing”?

Could it be that what was found inside was not the sachet she had dropped? Then, where did her discarded sachet go?

Qu Qiuyan felt restless, frequently glancing at Qu Moying. She noticed that Qu Moying remained composed, with a calm expression. This only increased her anxiety, as she had a growing sense that something was not right.

With the appearance of the character “Jing”, coinciding with the arrival of Liu Jingyu, does this “Jing” refer to County Lady Jingyu? Qu Qiuyan was now too preoccupied to engage in conversation, constantly observing the movements in the flower hall across from her, afraid of getting caught up in an unexpected topic and putting herself at risk. She remained unsettled.

“Are you the Third Lady from the Qu Minister’s Mansion?” A maid approached with a smiling face and greeted Qu Qiuyan.

“This is indeed the Third Lady from the Qu Minister’s Mansion.” Qing Ju replied with a distracted mind.

“Lady Qu, please come with me. I have something to ask you.” the maid said with a smile.

“Who sent you here?” Qu Qiuyan’s face turned pale and she couldn’t help but ask.

“Lady Qu will know who my master is once you see her. I have an important matter to ask you. Lady Qu, please follow me!” The maid’s smile becomes even gentler, catching Qu Qiuyan’s attention, making her even more uneasy.

Biting her lip, she glanced behind Duchess Qi and confirmed that County Lady Jingyu was no longer there.

She didn't want to meet County Lady Jingyu, but she had no choice. Gritting her teeth, she stood up, ready to leave.

"Who sent you here and why do you want to see my third sister at this time?" Qu Moying turned around, her voice cold as she looked at the maid, suddenly speaking up loudly.

The commotion caught the attention of several young ladies who were engaged in conversation, causing them to turn their heads to see what was happening.

Caught off guard by Qu Moying's question, the maid stammered, unable to find words to respond.

If it were Qu Qiuyan, she would certainly speak in a plausible manner. However, this Fourth Lady Qu, County Lady Jingyu had warned her to be cautious and not draw the attention of her. It was a message that County Lady Jingyu had repeatedly emphasized, and the maid dared not disobey. She certainly wouldn't reveal that she was sent by County Lady Jingyu.

"Fourth sister, I know who it is, you don't have to worry. I will handle it carefully." Qu Qiuyan said anxiously, standing up and taking the initiative to resolve the situation for the maid.

"I don't worry about you. It's just that when we go out, Grandma tells us to be together as much as possible." Qu Moying said in a disinterested tone.

Their relationship was like this, known to everyone, so there was no need to pretend to care.

"There won't be any issues." Qu Qiuyan said impatiently, lifting her skirt and standing up, following the maid to leave. She didn't want to go, but she knew she had no choice. She could only face it head-on, hoping that this County Lady Jingyu wouldn't suspect her.

At this moment, Qu Qiuyan still had no idea that the matter was related to Liu Jingyu. She only felt immense regret. She wished she didn't do it...

Was the sachet that Xu Lipeng found earlier the same one? If it wasn't, where was it now? She felt uncertain and uneasy.

What could County Lady Jingyu want with her? Did she discover the connection between her and the sachet? Was she going to interrogate her?

It was impossible. Liu Jingyu couldn't possibly know that it was related to her...

Chapter 437 Dog Bites Dog Leaving a Mouthful of Hair

Qu Qiuyan hurriedly followed the maid as they left. Qu Moying glanced at her retreating figure and signaled for Yu Dong to come closer. She whispered a few words in Yu Dong's ear.

Yu Dong promptly went to the nearby tables to find Qi Xiangyu.

Qu Qiuyan continued along with the maid, taking several turns until they reached a small courtyard. The courtyard gate was slightly ajar. Pushing it open, they discovered a graceful lady standing in the middle. The wind gently lifted the hem of her skirt, adorned with delicate golden orchid embroidery, giving her an air of elegance and nobility.

It was none other than Liu Jinyu, who had left the table earlier on a pretext.

Her head was tilted slightly upward, exuding an air of arrogance. Her gaze fell upon Qu Qiuyan, faintly tinged with mockery.

Qu Qiuyan's heart skipped a beat, but she composed herself and approached slowly. She bowed to Liu Jinyu and said, "County Lady Jingyu."

Though she felt somewhat aggrieved inside, believing herself to be on par with Liu Jinyu in terms of status, her humble background was indeed a disadvantage. Liu Jinyu held the position of County Lady, while Qu Qiuyan held nothing.

If only she had the same status as Liu Jinyu, she would naturally be the esteemed Princess Crown. Liu Jinyu's superiority was merely in terms of status.

"Lady Qu, aren't you going to say something?" Liu Jinyu's gaze passed over Qu Qiuyan's face before she asked in a measured tone.

"What do you mean, County Lady Jinyu? I'm afraid I don't understand." Qu Qiuyan stood upright, raising her head with a look of bewilderment.

Although her heart was in turmoil, she needed to regain her composure at this moment. She couldn't allow Liu Jinyu to discover anything.

"The matter concerning the sachet." Liu Jinyu didn't have the inclination to beat around the bush with Qu Qiuyan. If it were Qu Moying in front of her, she might have used some tricks. However, Qu Qiuyan didn't impress her much.

With no other bystanders around, Liu Jinyu wasn't in the mood for pretenses.

She had already inquired about the incident and, upon learning the truth, it infuriated her to the point of almost spitting blood. What was originally a well-planned scheme to frame Qu Moying had unexpectedly devolved into this. Even without anyone pointing fingers at her, people now had reason to suspect her.

Liu Jinyu keenly sensed that this was even worse than pointing a finger at her and asking, as she couldn't even defend herself and could only watch as the other ladies looked at her with peculiar glances. And she couldn't even bring it up herself.

Liu Jinyu had never felt so humiliated before, hating herself for almost losing control and wanting to slap Qu Qiuyan right then and there.

How could this matter be related to her? Was it intentional on Qu Qiuyan's part, or was it orchestrated by Lord Jing?

She had initially intended to strike a blow against Qu Moying by using Qu Qiuyan's hand. But unexpectedly, the tables turned, and she ended up getting punched in the face.

And it was so painful that she couldn't even speak.

"What do you mean, County Lady? I don't understand." Qu Qiuyan insisted, trying to hold her ground.

"What do I mean? Lady Qu, do you really not understand? Wasn't it you who prepared the sachet? How come you don't know about it now?" Liu Jingyu said coldly, revealing Qu Qiuyan's involvement.

Qu Qiuyan grew anxious. How could Liu Jingyu know about this? But she still maintained a strong front and said, "What are you implying, County Lady? I still don't understand!"

"Don't you understand? Should I bring that maid here? It was you who sent your maid into the flower hall earlier. At that time, the maid from Duke Qi's Mansion, who was about to return, saw the scene and got scared. She reported it to me." Liu Jingyu explained, emphasizing each word as she looked at Qu Qiuyan.

Qu Qiuyan took two steps back, her face turning pale. She never expected that Qing Ju's actions had been witnessed by the maid. And that maid hadn't even shown up, but had gone straight to report it to Liu Jingyu! If it weren't for Liu Jingyu's revelation, she would still be in the dark.

"Are you scheming against me, County Lady?" Qu Qiuyan wasn't foolish; she quickly grasped the underlying meaning, including the maid who happened to be present. If it weren't for what that maid said, she wouldn't have known that the adjacent flower hall was meant for a men's banquet, let alone enter it.

She had thought it was all a coincidence, but she never imagined that it had fallen into Liu Jingyu's scheme long ago.

"Lady Qu, you're hilarious. How could I scheme against you? I merely learned about this matter, but I was afraid it would tarnish Qu's reputation, so I made that maid keep quiet. How did it end up as me scheming against you? Third Lady Qu, what I want to know is why my name is on your sachet. Could it be that Lord Jing is behind this?"

Liu Jingyu's expression softened as she saw Qu Qiuyan's panic, with even a hint of a mocking smile on her face.

In her eyes, Qu Qiuyan would never dare to actively plot against her unless Lord Jing was involved.

Everyone knew that Lord Jing and the Crown Prince were at odds. Although they appeared to get along on the surface, secretly they both wished to take a bite out of each other. Moreover, at that time, she had the impression that Lord Jing was actually interested in her, but she had hesitated and didn't give him a clear answer, causing them to miss their chance.

Now, her relationship with Qu Qiuyan, as well as her connection to these two individuals, represented her future position and would be different for each.

Previously, she had only considered Qu Qiuyan as Qu Moying's sister, but she had overlooked the past relationship between Qu Qiuyan and Lord Jing.

The Crown Prince and Lord Jing not only vied for the throne but also had their personal conflicts. Both sides tried their best to tarnish each other's reputation, which made sense.

"What do you mean by that, County Lady? I don't understand. Are we discussing the matter of the sachet or the note? You said the sachet was mine, but what about the note? I heard that there was also a note inside the sachet. Who prepared that?" Qu Qiuyan bit her lip and persisted, "And as for the topic of Lord Jing, I'm even more confused. How did we end up involving Lord Jing? What are you implying, County Lady?"

Qu Qiuyan had her reasons for gaining Lord Jing's favor.

There were some things that she had figured out now. Although the sachet was prepared by her, the note inside it was not. The contents written on it were not her doing. If she hadn't figured out where the note came from earlier, what else was there to not understand now?

She was just a pawn, and County Lady Jingyu had left a contingency plan.

Besides County Lady Jingyu, who else knew that she made Qing Ju drop the sachet?

“Lady Qu, why don’t you talk about the words on the sachet? Do you think I would frame myself?” Seeing Qu Qiuyan’s reaction, Liu Jingyu furrowed her brows. She realized that she had inadvertently implicated Lord Jing earlier. She became slightly annoyed, as Qu Qiuyan had steered the conversation off track.

She had to keep Lord Jing’s suspicions to herself and not expose them.

“I still don’t understand.” Qu Qiuyan continued to feign confusion. However, deep down, she became more frantic because of these words. With this piece of information, nobody would suspect Liu Jingyu. After all, who would use their own reputation as a raft? Women, especially those from prestigious families, knew how crucial their reputation was.

They always presented themselves with utmost grace, fearing even the slightest blemish on their reputation.

Liu Jingyu didn’t dare, and she didn’t dare either. Could it be that she wasn’t the one behind all this? But besides her, who else knew about her actions? Did her actions catch the attention of many?

“Lady Qu, don’t you understand yet? May I ask what you and the young master Yongning conspired? I heard that you even stopped him for talking. Then, when your sister appeared, you ignored him and left, leaving her alone. If it wasn’t for my cousin, perhaps other people would have seen a secret meeting between your sister and the young master Yongning.” Liu Jingyu spoke sternly.

Just now, Liu Jingyu had already found out about Qu Moying’s encounter with her cousin.

Connecting the cause and effect, Qu Qiuyan’s plan became clearer.

“Lady Qu, I really don’t understand. Since you planned to plot against your sister, why did you drag me into the trap? Or did you think that harming one wasn’t enough and wanted to harm one more?” Liu Jingyu took the upper hand and slowly walked forward with an astonishing aura.

Qu Qiuyan stepped back involuntarily. At this moment, she was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

How did Liu Jingyu know about this matter? Considering that she should not have been at the mansion at that time, how did she know everything? How was she so clear about it, even explaining the details explicitly?

If it weren't for the unexpected turn of events, all of this would have been straightforward. But where did it go wrong? Why was it in the current state? Shouldn't Qu Moying's reputation have been completely ruined by now?

"Lady Qu, please tell me what was really going on." Liu Jingyu said, stopping a couple of steps away from Qu Qiuyan, her voice filled with mockery.

"County Lord Jingyu, are you truly innocent?" Qu Qiuyan, cornered, had retreated to the entrance of the courtyard. Finally managing to stand her ground, she clenched her teeth and questioned in return.

"Whether I'm innocent or not, you know the best, do you?" Although Liu Jingyu's face still wore a smile, her gaze turned icy, accentuating the mockery.

"I don't understand what you mean." Qu Qiuyan replied cautiously.

"Are you trying to force me to reveal the truth to everyone, or are there others involved in this matter? Do you know but choose not to disclose it?" Liu Jingyu's voice grew stern.

In fact, she also suspected another possibility. Someone else might have intervened and tampered with Qu Qiuyan's satchel. But she needed to ask Qu Qiuyan about it.

Suddenly, something flashed in Qu Qiuyan's mind. She covered her mouth with her handkerchief and let out a scream, "Qu Moying..."

Yes, there was another person, Qu Moying! There weren't so many inexplicable turnarounds in the world. After battling with Qu Moying for so long, Qu Qiuyan would no longer underestimate her. She hadn't considered it before because she thought the most likely suspect was Liu Jingyu. This was the Duke Qi's Mansion, and Qu Moying was unfamiliar with it.

But what if Liu Jingyu herself was also implicated? Other than Qu Moying, Qu Qiuyan could not guess who else it was.

Wasn't Qu Moying the one who would benefit the most from this situation?

The voice was suddenly interrupted as the courtyard door behind them was forcefully pushed open. The Duchess Qi, accompanied by Qi Xiangyu and Qu Moying, stood behind the door. Several maids and servants from the mansion stood closely beside them.

Both inside and outside the courtyard, everything suddenly became quiet. It felt as if only the wind was blowing, carrying a slight chill. Autumn had arrived, and indeed, it was cold.

"Grandmother." Liu Jingyu was the first to react. She took two steps forward, her face softened with concern. "Why have you come here? Has someone said something to you? I just wanted to investigate the matter that implicated me today. I apologize if I have disturbed you, Grandmother. It's entirely my fault!"

Her attitude was impeccable, and her face carried a hint of guilt. It seemed as though she genuinely felt remorseful.

Observing her exaggerated behavior and seeing Duchess Qi's facial expression ease slightly, Qu Moying sneered inwardly. This County Lady Jingyu really knew how to play her cards right. Even if Duchess Qi overheard some of the previous conversation, by coaxing her like this, she immediately became more friendly.

Indeed, a biological granddaughter was different from an outsider like herself.

Chapter 438 Who to Blame

“Jingyu, what on earth is going on?” Although Duchess Qi expression had softened somewhat, her voice still carried a hint of coldness.

When she arrived, she initially didn’t believe it, but upon hearing her own granddaughter silencing the third Lady Qu of the Qu Mansion, rendering her speechless, she faintly grasped the implications. Was her granddaughter truly innocent in this matter?

Why did she know about this incident but failed to report it or have it removed? Why did she allow the sachet to remain there?

Even if she wasn’t the one responsible for this matter, it seemed inevitable that she had some involvement.

Even though Duchess Qi wanted to protect her granddaughter, she couldn’t confidently assert Liu Jingyu’s complete innocence.

“Grandmother, when I first learned about this matter, I didn’t think much of it. But now that the events have unfolded and I’ve connected all the clues, I began to suspect Third Lady Qu. So, I deliberately called her over for questioning, and it turned out that she was indeed responsible.”

Liu Jingyu explained in a gentle voice. She supported Duchess Qi and led her into the courtyard, taking a seat on a nearby stone bench.

“Do you really not know?” Duchess Qi looked at Liu Jingyu skeptically.

“Grandmother, I truly didn’t know before. It was only my assumption. I just wanted to frighten this Lady Qu into confessing.” Liu Jingyu said with a serious expression, raising her hand as if making an oath.

Qi Xiangyu observed Liu Jingyu’s demeanor but remained silent. She was merely the granddaughter of Duke Qi and had no blood relation to Duchess Qi. She had never been favored in the past and now understood that it was not the time to speak more.

If Qu Moying hadn't repeatedly assured her, Qi Xiangyu would have undoubtedly witnessed Liu Jingyu and Qu Qiuyan together and discovered the truth about the sachet, she wouldn't have dared to take the initiative to find Duchess Qi, nor persuaded her to follow and locate this place.

Liu Jingyu's courtyard was not far from the flower hall. Many maids had seen her coming and, with a few inquiries, everything became clear.

Glancing at Qi Xiangyu by her side and noticing her expression, Qu Moying knew it was not appropriate for her to speak at this moment.

"County Lady Jingyu, are you truly unaware of this? Where did that note come from? According to what my third sister just mentioned, she threw a sachet and later encountered Young Master Yongning. But what about the subsequent note? The guests who came today wouldn't have carried pen and paper, right? It's unlikely that they saw my third sister throwing the sachet and then deliberately wrote on it, correct?"

Qu Moying took a step forward and smiled as she looked at Liu Jingyu, asking.

If it was a victim, Qu Moying was the biggest victim. Compared to Qu Moying, Liu Jingyu was at most an accidental victim. Since it was an accidental victim, she might have accidentally injured herself.

When it came to the matter of the paper and pen, since it was impossible for the guests, it can only be the host of this place.

Among all the people in the mansion, Liu Jingyu was the most suspicious one, especially considering her previous words. It was hard not to suspect her.

Duchess Qi looked at Liu Jingyu with a hint of suspicion in her eyes, and her displeasure was evident on her face.

"Lady Qu, today's incident was indeed a negligence on our part. On behalf of our mansion, I apologize to you." Liu Jingyu smiled slightly at Qu Moying, exuding an air of grace and composure. It seemed quite noble of her to even bow to Qu Moying.

She was a county lady, her bow was not something Qu Moying could bear, so she stepped aside to avoid the gesture.

Liu Jingyu straightened herself and slowly withdrew her smile. "However, if Lady Qu thinks that the people from the Qi's Mansion are responsible for this matter, then you are gravely mistaken. Although guests are not allowed to bring paper and pen, today's guests are all relatives and close friends. It is possible for anyone, regardless of whose study they borrowed, to secretly write those few strokes."

This implied it had nothing to do with them.

Although these words may sound forced, the Duchess Qi remained silent with a stern expression.

Qu Moying smiled faintly and countered, "So, County Lady Jingyu, are you implying that my Third Sister wanted to harm me, but the note could have been written by one of the guests, intentionally trying to harm me? I rarely leave my home and do not know anyone other than my own family."

Apart from Qu Qiuyan's lineage, it was difficult to find anyone else who could harm Qu Moying. Moreover, to refute the claim, suitable evidence was required, making it easier to verify if an outsider was involved.

Liu Jingyu dared not directly accuse anyone and could only find other reasons to evade the situation. It was important for her to observe where this disaster was shifting. Fully explaining the situation to her was simply impossible.

"Not only did they want to harm you, but they also intended to harm me using the hands of Third Lady Qu. I have heard that my name was written on the sachet." Liu Jingyu spoke slowly, compelled to mention the words written on the sachet.

Duchess Qi nodded, as it made sense.

"Lady Qu, this is an oversight on our part. I will definitely give an explanation to your mansion. As for Jingyu, she is also a victim. It seems that someone used the opportunity of Third Lady Qu to try to harm Jingyu, and you happened to be caught up in it."

Duchess Qi concluded slowly, avoiding discussing the matter further.

The words were too biased, making even Qi Xiangyu feel uncomfortable. She glanced at her grandmother but ultimately did not dare to say anything. After all, Liu Jingyu was her grandmother's favorite, while she herself was just a small existence. It was better not to say anything than to say something wrong.

Qu Qiuyan stood aside, seemingly forgotten. She also tried her best to diminish her presence, hoping that Qu Moying and Liu Jingyu would directly confront each other, completely forgetting about her small existence. However, upon hearing the words of Duchess Qi, she instantly knew that there was no hope. She felt a chilling sensation throughout her body.

Regardless of how Liu Jingyu acted, it was certain that Qu Qiuyan would not end well. The intention of Duchess Qi was to prove that Qu Qiuyan had intentionally harmed Qu Moying. With the testimony of Duchess Qi and Liu Jingyu, what defense did she have? Moreover, with the pressure from the Duke Qi's Mansion, Qu Qiuyan almost knew what awaited her next!

It was over, truly over. This time, they were not in the Qu Mansion, her father would not be able to protect her. This was the Duke Qi's Mansion; this was Duchess Qi.

She appeared as if standing there in thin clothing, as if it was winter. All around her was an icy landscape, so cold it sent shivers down her spine. Her entire body felt frozen, unable to move, and the figure in front of her blurred, making it impossible to see who it was. She leaned on Qing Ju's hand for support, struggling to get a clear view of the face of Duchess Qi, but no matter how she looked, everything seemed unclear.

Suddenly, everything turned black, and she fell backward. In her ears, she heard Qing Ju's panicked and screaming voice...

In a sharp pang of pain, Qu Qiuyan woke up to see the cold face of Qu Zhizhen, who was staring coldly at her lying in bed.

A doctor slowly stepped back, holding a sharp, long needle. It was the needle that had just awakened Qu Qiuyan, its tip still gleaming with a chilling light, causing Qu Qiuyan to tremble involuntarily.

Indeed, she was trembling uncontrollably, her face as pale as snow. Struggling to sit up, she looked at Qu Zhizhen and timidly called out, "Father!"

"Do you know what you have done?" Qu Zhizhen's face was filled with anger and gloom as he spoke sternly.

"Father... I... I didn't mean to. I didn't know things would turn out like this. It was... County Lady Jingyu who set me up. She... she wanted to harm the fourth sister. She used me. She's the one behind all this. But Duke Qi is protecting her, and I..."

Qu Qiuyan cried, her voice choked with sobs, tears streaming down her face, looking utterly pitiful.

"Used?" Qu Zhizhen coldly laughed. "Since you knew County Lady Jingyu was unkind, why did you get involved with her?"

"Father, I didn't want to. I... I don't know how she could do such a thing... I... I don't know..."

Qu Qiuyan wailed, feeling increasingly aggrieved. Previously, Duchess Qi had shown favor to County Lady Jingyu, directly pushing Qu Qiuyan aside. At this moment, she could only seek her father's help.

"Duchess Qi wants to bring this matter to light and clear County Lady Jingyu's suspicion." Qu Zhizhen stated.

"Father, no, if that happens... if that happens, my life would truly be over." Qu Qiuyan trembled and suddenly lunged from the bed, falling to the ground. She didn't feel the pain. After taking a few steps on her knees, she threw herself heavily in front of Qu Zhizhen, clutching his legs and crying bitterly.

If the Duke Qi's Mansion was to spread this matter, her life would be ruined. Even as a concubine, Lord Jing would never accept her.

While rumors about the imperial family might affect the concubines, if there were solid evidence, especially evidence presented by the Duke Qi's Mansion, Qu Qiuyan would never be able to enter the Lord Jing's Mansion. She would end up in a situation similar to Qu Zhirui's.

Her life would truly be over.

“You don’t want that?” Qu Zhizhen’s gaze fell heavily on his daughter, his intentions unclear.

“I don’t want it. I’d rather die. Father, save me, please, Father, save me!” Qu Qiuyan cried out loudly, holding onto Qu Zhizhen’s legs tightly.

“But... I am just a Vice Minister, not like County Lady Jingyu’s father, let alone the Duke Qi’s Mansion.” Qu Zhizhen said with a cold and distant tone.

“What should I do then? What should I do? Father, should I just let myself die? It’s Lady Liu Jingyu, it’s Liu Jingyu who wanted to harm the fourth sister. It’s her, she is the mastermind behind all this. Father, I will expose her. I will expose her right now!” Qu Qiuyan’s hair was disheveled, and she seemed somewhat mad.

Qu Zhizhen remained silent, his face showing a mix of emotions. After a while, he looked at Qu Qiuyan and said, “If that’s truly what you want, there is still a chance. But...”

As he spoke, his brow furrowed deeply, veins pulsing on his forehead, revealing his hesitation. This matter seemed to be quite difficult to handle.

“Father, say it, I will listen to whatever you say. It’s Liu Jingyu, she’s the one plotting against our mansion. She must be the one trying to marry the Crown Prince, deliberately harming me to gain favor with him.” Qu Qiuyan pleaded, her mind suddenly becoming clear, clutching onto Qu Zhizhen’s robe.

Tears streaked through her powdered face.

At this moment, she was willing to try anything. No matter what, her father would always support her. What she longed for now was the affection Qu Zhizhen had shown her throughout the years.

“Lord Jing will arrive soon. I have already sent someone to inform him that you were set up by County Lady Jingyu. The next steps will depend on you.” Qu Zhizhen sighed, pulling Qu Qiuyan up and revealing a plan.

In her haste to get off the bed earlier, Qu Qiuyan had collided with something, injuring her foot. As she stood up now, she limped and struggled to maintain her balance.

“You must stay unconscious!” Qu Zhizhen stared at his daughter, his eyes shadowed and unreadable. Though she couldn’t discern his exact thoughts, she could hear the chill in his voice, sending shivers down Qu Qiuyan’s spine...

Chapter 439 Compromise is a Kind of Aggression

“Father!” Qu Moying bowed to Qu Zhizhen and spoke softly.

They had already returned to the Qu Mansion. Qu Qiuyan was carried back, but Qu Moying walked back. Alongside them was Granny Zhu, who was sent by the Duchess Qi. She was the Duchess’ trusted steward, always standing by her side. Even Qi Xiangyu and Liu Jingyu treated her with respect, indicating her close relationship with Duchess Qi.

Granny Zhu was efficient and explained the situation in a few words. However, she shifted the blame entirely onto Qu Qiuyan. Then she expressed her sympathy towards Qu Moying, saying that as long as Qu Zhizhen knew the truth, Duchess Qi and even County Lady Jingyu could testify in Qu Moying’s favor.

After Granny Zhu left, Qu Zhizhen took Qu Qiuyan to Furong House. Considering the time it took for them to arrive, Qu Qiuyan should have already awakened.

The situation was handled in such a way that all the blame fell on the members of the Qu Mansion. It had nothing to do with the Qi Mansion. Moreover, Liu Jingyu seemed to have become a victim in the process.

Qu Moying was not satisfied with this outcome. If it were only about dealing with Qu Qiuyan, there would be no need to put in so much effort. However, even if the Duke Qi’s Mansion managed to suppress the matter, there would still be consequences. Pei Luo’an would likely have this matter on his desk.

It wouldn't be easy for Liu Jingyu to escape unscathed.

Now, with Qu Zhizhen's arrival at this time, it seemed that something was amiss.

"Ying, how are you feeling? Is everything okay?" Qu Zhizhen sat down on a chair and signaled for her to sit as well, showing his concern.

"Father, I'm fine!" Qu Moying shook her head, her face displaying a hint of confusion. "I just don't understand why things turned out this way."

"Ying, I know that your third sister is at fault, but this is an internal matter of our mansion. I can handle any punishment for your sister within the mansion, but it shouldn't involve allowing others to criticize and tarnish the reputation of our Qu family." Qu Zhizhen looked deeply at Qu Moying and spoke with conviction.

"Father, I understand." Qu Moying lowered her head, gazing at her own toes.

"You and your sisters are my daughters, and you are the only two daughters I have. Your strained relationship is partly my fault. I failed to take care of you properly, and I did something wrong to your mother. I also failed to provide your sister with proper guidance. All of this was caused by Yu, but the root of the problem lies with me."

Qu Zhizhen sighed, pressing his brow with his hand, causing three wrinkles to form. He didn't intend to evade responsibility.

"Father..." Qu Moying began to speak.

Qu Zhizhen raised his hand weakly, silencing Qu Moying, and sighed again. "I know that I owe you. After this matter is resolved, I will ensure that your grandmother compensates you. But for now, we must unite and face this together. The Duke Qi's Mansion is too dominant and ruthless."

His words were filled with anger and helplessness.

Qu Moying silently pursed her lips, choosing not to respond. Since her father had spoken this way, there must be more to his plan.

"I have thought it through. Our top priority right now is our own family. If your third sister causes a scandal, your own involvement will be revealed. It may even bring up past events, including your relationship with Xu Lipeng. It won't bode well for a woman to be associated with a broken engagement, not to mention..."

Qu Zhizhen didn't continue, as Lord Yun was currently not in the capital. However, any man wouldn't be pleased with such a situation.

He wondered what actions the lord might take. Just the thought of that possibility made Qu Zhizhen's expression even darker.

He had always thought that his talent was not bad and was not inferior to Minister Liu. However, after so many years, he had not made any progress. He was also very unwilling.

"I know you are my daughter, but you are also a daughter of the Qu family. This is a crisis for our mansion." Qu Zhizhen collected his myriad thoughts and looked at Qu Moying with a solemn expression.

Qu Moying lifted her face slightly, gently biting her lip. "Father, what do you want me to do?"

At this moment, Qu Moying was undoubtedly a victim. As for Liu Jingyu, she seemed to be a victim compared to Qu Qiuyan, but she still had her suspicions compared to Qu Moying.

"If anyone asks, you will claim to be a victim, but you don't know who framed you. As for the matter of the sachet, you are unaware of it as well. The only reason you suspect your third sister is because of what County Lady Jingyu and your sister said at the time. However, it seems that your sister was also framed."

Qu Zhizhen looked at Qu Moying and spoke in a deep voice.

Qu Moying's heart filled with a cold smile. Her father's visit clearly had a reason behind it, and it turned out to be for Qu Qiuyan. Of course, some of it was for his own sake as well.

However, she didn't oppose this suggestion.

If Liu Jingyu wanted to break free completely, she would never agree. Since her father wanted to go after Liu Jingyu fiercely, it suited her plans perfectly. She would go along with it.

"Yes, I will do whatever you say, Father." Qu Moying said softly.

Relieved that she agreed, Qu Zhizhen let out a breath and looked deeply at his daughter. She was small and thin, with long eyelashes and soft, gentle eyes. Her appearance seemed pitiful and vulnerable, yet her actions made Qu Zhizhen feel that she was magnanimous and composed. Even after such an incident, she returned to the mansion with composure.

Now, upon hearing his words, she even acknowledged the situation completely.

This showed her understanding of the overall perspective of the Qu family, and her face revealed no trace of reluctance. It was a sign of her acceptance of her own identity.

He was genuinely afraid that Qu Moying would strongly disagree, which would make things difficult. After all, Qu Moying had the backing of Pei Yuanjun, who was known to be the most formidable.

At present, this was the best situation. If Qu Moying sincerely agreed with his viewpoint, the entire Qu family would unite against outsiders, making things much simpler.

Qu Zhizhen even thought to himself that it would have been better if this daughter were a son.

Qu Mingcheng's actions had left Qu Zhizhen dissatisfied to some extent.

"That's for the best. No matter who asks, say it was arranged by the Duke Qi's Mansion, that you heard it from County Lady Jingyu and your third sister. As for whether it's true or not, we're not entirely sure.

One thing is certain: County Lady Jingyu definitely knows about this matter.” Qu Zhizhen cautioned, fearing that Qu Moying might forget and reiterated his instructions.

Qu Moying nodded. “Father, I’ve taken note of it.”

She wanted to see how Qu Zhizhen would make Liu Jingyu suffer this time. Judging from Qu Zhizhen’s actions, she had a feeling that Liu Jingyu would face trouble.

A person like Qu Zhizhen was not to be taken lightly once he made a move.

As expected, not long after, Qu Moying learned that Lord Jing had arrived. He came alone but brought the imperial physicians with him. The imperial physicians were busy at the Furong House, and Granny Miao had been keeping an eye on them. She returned with the news that Qu Qiuyan still hadn’t woken up. The imperial physicians sent by Lord Jing were at their wits’ end. They had reportedly tried everything, including using needles, but she remained unconscious.

Qu Qiuyan lay there unconscious and motionless. The imperial physicians couldn’t diagnose what had happened. Moreover, they said that Qu Qiuyan’s legs and feet were injured. They didn’t know if they had bumped into something.

For a moment, the atmosphere in the entire mansion was not peaceful.

Qu Moying heard this news and smiled faintly. She continued playing the strings in front of her, producing a melancholic tune.

“Your Highness, this is the situation. However, we don’t know if Yan will be alright.” Qu Zhizhen said with a pained expression. He looked at Qu Qiuyan, who lay on the bed with his head lowered. A trace of bitterness could be seen in his eyes. “Your Highness, if you don’t believe me, you can ask my little daughter to come and explain.”

The chain of events made it clear that Liu Jingyu had targeted Qu Qiuyan intentionally, wanting to establish her dominance and show Prince Pei Luo’an that she had no connection with him. The past rumors were just that—rumors.

Pei Yusheng slammed his hand on the table with a stern expression on his face.

Initially, he had considered marrying Liu Jingyu at Noble Consort He's suggestion. He wasn't fixated on marrying anyone in particular, and he didn't have strong feelings for Liu Jingyu. In fact, he was even more interested in Liu Lanxin, the daughter of General Liu, whom he had later taken a liking to. At least with her, he felt a slight attraction.

Although her family's power was the main factor, it couldn't erase the positive impression he had when he saw her.

Compared to Liu Jingyu, Pei Yusheng preferred this Lady Liu.

For Pei Yusheng, it was actually a good thing that Liu Jingyu was going to marry the Crown Prince. Otherwise, the Duke Qi's Mansion and Minister Liu's House would continue pressuring him to marry Liu Jingyu, and he would have to give them an answer eventually, considering the status of the Duke Qi's Mansion.

The current situation worked out well, as everyone could part on good terms.

However, what did Liu Jingyu mean by trampling on his dignity to please Pei Luo'an?

This was something Pei Yusheng couldn't tolerate.

"Your Highness, please don't get angry. The truth of the matter might be more complicated than we know. I only know these details. Currently, I don't know why she hasn't woken up yet. As long as she remains unconscious, I can't rest easy... Her mother is in this state, and now she..."

Qu Zhizhen's voice trailed off as he wiped away tears, feeling the pain in his heart.

Turning around once more, there still stood the steadfast vice minister.

“Let the physicians treat Qiuyan here. I will pay a visit to Duke Qi’s Mansion.” said Lord Jing as he stood up, his expression icy. He wondered what Liu Jinyu would say for all of this.

“But Your Highness, it may not be appropriate for you to intervene in Qiuyan’s matter, is it?” Qu Zhizhen cautiously suggested, though everyone understood the unspoken truth, there had been no official decree yet.

“Minister Qu, originally, I intended to marry Qiuyan. However, her reputation has been tarnished beyond repair. In her current state, I cannot marry her. Instead, let us give her a proper status by bringing her directly into my mansion. This way, I will have a valid reason to get involved. After some time has passed, I will appoint her as a side concubine. What do you think, Minister Qu?”

Pei Yusheng gazed at Qu Zhizhen with a calm demeanor.

Qu Zhizhen’s heart trembled, and he lowered his head in reluctant acceptance. He had placed great hopes on this eldest daughter, but now he had no choice but to acknowledge the situation.

Chapter 440 Your Daughter Stole Little Yue’s Marriage Back Then

“What? Blaming everything on the Qu Mansion?” Duke Qi angrily kicked the table in front of him, his face turning pale.

Duchess Qi was taken aback, her eyes welling up with tears. In all these years, Duke Qi had never shouted at her like this. Although he had a volatile temper, it was always directed at others. Duchess Qi had been living a good life all these years, except for the early days when there was another concubine, there were no other concubines in the mansion.

She never expected Duke Qi to yell at her like this now.

“I... What can I do? Jinyu is about to marry into the Eastern Palace. We can’t afford any flaws at this time. Besides, she brought up this matter to me herself. She truly dislikes that Third Lady Qu, so she wanted to see what kind of tricks she’s up to. She never expected her to be so malicious. It’s all because of Third Lady Qu’s bad character. Others shouldn’t be blamed.”

Duchess Qi said, wiping away her tears.

“But you can’t solely blame the Qu Mansion. This matter has nothing to do with Forth Lady Qu, does it? She is innocent. Why should she be implicated? If this continues, it might even bring up her broken engagement from before.”

Duke Qi angrily interjected.

“Forth Lady Qu is a good person. I mentioned it before. But we need to clarify the matter involving Third Lady Qu. We must ensure Jingyu’s innocence. If it means temporarily mistreating Forth Lady Qu, I will apologize to her later. In fact, it was their sisters’ feud. Their family matters shouldn’t have been brought to our mansion, causing harm to Jingyu.”

Duchess Qi responded unhappily.

Although she felt a connection with Qu Moying, it was only a connection. Compared to her beloved granddaughter, Qu Moying was still a outsider.

Even if it meant slightly mistreating Forth Lady Qu, Duchess Qi didn’t think it was a big issue.

Her granddaughter was about to become the Crown Princess. Whether it was her or her granddaughter compensating Forth Lady Qu, arranging a good marriage for her, it could be resolved easily. Even if her reputation was slightly tarnished now, what difference would it make?

“You... How dare you...” Duke Qi was speechless with anger, pointing his finger at Duchess Qi.

“My lord, I understand that this situation is inappropriate, but what can we do now? We have to acknowledge Third Lady Qu’s involvement. Jingyu cannot have any blemishes on her reputation.” Duchess Qi continued to explain.

But Duke Qi couldn’t bear to listen any longer. His voice trembled with an indescribable emotion. “In the past, your daughter stole Little Yue’s marriage, and now, your granddaughter is causing harm to her daughter. Don’t you feel any guilt?”

“My lord, I indeed have a connection with Little Yue, but no matter how wonderful she may be, she is still someone else’s daughter. I cannot disregard my own flesh and blood to prioritize someone else’s daughter, can I? Besides, I was unaware of the truth initially. Wasn’t it upon your daughter’s request that I sought this marriage alliance for her? It was only later that I discovered it was the Yue Family from the South that was originally intended for her.”

The Duchess Qi retorted with dissatisfaction.

Even she learned about this matter much later. She was actually unwilling to have her daughter marry a man without a strong background. However, by the time she found out, the marriage had already been arranged. She couldn’t oppose it even if she wanted to. As a result, the Duchess Qi had harbored resentment towards her daughter for many years. Whenever the matter was brought up over the years, it filled her with anger.

As for the marriage alliance between the Liu family and the Yue family, she also came to know of it later. This further fueled her resentment towards Duke Qi, as she couldn’t fathom why her daughter couldn’t find a suitable husband without resorting to competing for the affection of someone favored by the Yue family.

Although the Yue family held significant status in the South, they were relatively lacking in influence within the capital.

Duke Qi’s face turned red as he was refuted by Duchess Qi. He was unable to utter a single word, feeling as if something inside him had shattered, leaving him with mixed emotions.

This feeling of irreparable regret would occasionally resurface over the years. However, it was never as clear and profound as it was this time.

He regretted it!

He genuinely regretted it!

If he had the chance to start over, would he still have the audacity to commit such actions? Would he dare to deceive others? He didn't know. But what he did know was that even if such a situation were to arise again, he wouldn't act so decisively, so resolutely.

"This time, I absolutely cannot let down the daughter born to the Yue." Duke Qi finally exclaimed in anger.

"What should we do then? Should we let your granddaughter bear the blame?" Duchess Qi challenged him, finding it hard to believe that Duke Qi was truly willing to do so.

Compared to her daughter, Duchess Qi now held a stronger affection for his granddaughter. She was convinced that her granddaughter was superior to her own daughter in every aspect. Just by looking at her marriage to the Crown Prince, it was evident that she was different from her mother. She hadn't settled for a scholar like her daughter did. Although she now found her son-in-law, Minister Liu, acceptable, she had been dissatisfied years ago. She always felt that her daughter lacked good judgment.

But her granddaughter was different; she was nothing like her daughter at all.

"In that case, let her take the fall!" Duke Qi gritted his teeth.

"What... What? My lord, have you lost your senses? How... how can you say such things?" Duchess Qi stood up in shock, staring at Duke Qi in disbelief. Were these really the words spoken by the Duke?

"Don't you understand? If someone must suffer harm and damage their reputation in this matter, I don't want it to be Forth Lady Qu from the Qu Mansion. Let it be Jingyu!" Duke Qi suddenly regained his composure and spoke sternly.

Having said that, he turned around and strode out. If someone had to bear the consequences of this matter, he would let Liu Jingyu bear them. This was the debt owed by Liu Jingyu and her mother to Yue.

The memories of the past tormented Duke Qi, causing a burning pain in his chest. It was an excruciating and heart-wrenching feeling!

Were they innocent? The true innocents were always the Yue and her daughter, not the two individuals from his own mansion. He had already inquired about it. He knew that Liu Jingyu had visited the study, which had a separate courtyard in the Duke Qi's Mansion. Besides her, no one else could leave notes there.

Could it be that it was another incident from the past?

If he had known about the engagement between Liu Borui and the Yue family back then, even if his daughter had cried and fainted before him, he would not have relented.

He is a military general who has never been soft-hearted, except for that one time when he let his guard down. However, the final outcome proved to be unbearable for him.

He shut off his senses and paid no attention to the affairs of the Qu Mansion. But in the end, it led to the unfortunate fate of the mother and daughter. Whenever he thought about it, he regretted it so much that he wished to strike himself with a sword.

Liu Jinyu owed a debt not only to Qu Moying. Himself, and the entire Duke Qi's mansion, all owed a debt to Qu Moying.

That child was the one with the power to defy them.

Upon hearing the Duke Qi's final words, Duchess Qi stood there in shock, staring at his departure. Her legs weakened, and she steadied herself by gripping the nearby chair. She could hardly believe what she had heard. Why did Duke Qi care so much about the Forth Lady Qu?

What kind of secrets were hidden here that she was unaware of?

She sank into the chair, physically and mentally exhausted, pondering over the matter of the Forth Lady Qu.

Outside the rear window, Liu Jingyu's grip on the handkerchief tightened almost to the point of tearing. She, too, could hardly believe what she had heard. What was going on with her grandfather? Why was he so determined to protect Qu Moying?

Had her grandfather lost his mind? Couldn't he differentiate between family and strangers?

Qu Moying, once again Qu Moying. It seemed that whenever she faced Qu Moying, she could never gain the upper hand.

No, she wouldn't let Qu Moying step on her this time. She would cling to the matter of Qu Qiuyan and speak to her grandmother. Her grandmother would surely support her.

A maid rushed over anxiously and whispered in Liu Jingyu's ear.

"What? Lord Jing is here?" Liu Jingyu exclaimed in shock.

"Yes, Lord Jing has arrived. He is outside. It seems he came because of Third Lady Qu. They say something happened to her at the Duke's Mansion and he is looking for the Duke to discuss the matter." the maid whispered.

Liu Jingyu's face turned pale, realizing that the situation was taking a turn for the worse. How could Lord Jing intervene in this matter? She stomped her foot forcefully, disregarding Duchess Qi inside the room, and hurriedly left with her people.

"Duke Qi, this matter originally had nothing to do with me. However, Lady Qu is now my concubine. We have already discussed and decided on this matter. Now that something like this has happened, I must investigate to find out the cause for Lady Qu's current unconsciousness."

Lord Jing said, putting down his teacup and his smile fading.

The matter of a concubine was easily explained to father emperor. Although she carried the title of a concubine, in reality, it wasn't much. It was just a name. However, compared to other side concubines, it held a bit more dignity.

It occupied a position that was neither too high nor too low.

Qu Qiuyan was the legitimate third daughter of Qu Zhizhen. Initially, she barely qualified as the consort, but she was suitable as a side concubine. Now, as a concubine, her status had dropped significantly. It was almost unbelievable that Qu Zhizhen had agreed to send his daughter to Lord Jing Mansion as a concubine.

Duke Qi pondered for a moment and looked at Lord Jing, asking, "What does Your Highness suggest we do?"

"This matter has something to do with County Lady Jingyu. I hope that County Lady Jingyu will pay a visit to Third Lady Qu to apologize. After all, Third Lady Qu is still unconscious because of her." said Pei Yucheng with a stern expression. "Then, let's end this matter here. If we continue to investigate, it won't be good for Third Lady Qu, but it won't be good for County Lady Jingyu either!"

Duke Qi lowered his head and thought for a moment before asking, "What did the Fourth Lady of Qu say?"

"Minister Qu mentioned that the fourth Lady Qu also agreed to this plan. Moreover, Third Lady Qu has also been involved, and with the presence of County Lady Jingyu, it would be beneficial for everyone to avoid further complications. The root cause of this matter lies with County Lady Jingyu, so it is necessary for her to take a stance."

Pei Yusheng explained.

Once again, Duke Qi fell into silence. After a moment of obscure and uncertain expression on his face, he nodded and said, "Then let's follow Your Highness's suggestion."

"That would be best!" A hint of satisfaction appeared on Pei Yusheng's face as he nodded. He was pleased to see that things were going so smoothly.

"No, I disagree!" Suddenly, a voice came from outside the courtyard door...

