

Rise 204

Chapter 204: The Young Lady is Acting Strange (1)

Under the Yingtian List, the bustling city refuses to quiet down.

Outside Yingtian City, a courier holding a red-sealed official document switched to a sturdy horse at the Hezhou relay station and continued along the official road...

At the grand courtyard of the wealthy Li family's estate in Shanghe Village, the young maid Hua'er pouted as she fed a horse with a heart full of sympathy. She occasionally glanced at the study's doorway, muttering, "Brother Wang is really something. He's run Master's Jade Lion Horse ragged. Look at its fur—it's dripping wet! Oh no, it's almost freezing. I need to give it a good brushing."

Hua'er, the little maid, wore a light blue winter dress cinched at the waist, with a rabbit fur cloak draped over her shoulders. Holding a brush, she carefully groomed the panting, exhausted steed.

If Hua'er knew that another fine horse had been driven so hard that it nearly collapsed and had to be abandoned at an inn along the way, she would surely weep bitterly.

Inside the study, a young girl with a delicate, oval-shaped face and striking beauty was reading a small slip of paper. Her long eyelashes trembled slightly, and her flawless fair cheeks carried a faint trace of anger. Her thin lips, as delicate as rose petals, seemed ready to drip with indignation.

"This examiner must have had his head caught in a door!"

The girl rolled up the note she had read three times and tossed it into a brazier at the side, watching as it turned to ashes.

After the note had burned completely, her eyes flickered with thought. She rose from her seat, walked to the doorway, and immediately noticed the little maid brushing the horse—then her gaze fell on the utterly exhausted Jade Lion Horse.

Her temper flared.

"Go and fetch Wang Xiao'er! I must give him a good scolding. Running my father's prized horse into such a state—he won't get away with this!"

Hua'er, ever obedient to her mistress, lifted her skirt and scurried off to find Brother Wang.

After calling him over, Hua'er stood outside and listened as her mistress raged in the study. When Wang finally emerged, he wore a crestfallen expression, clearly having been reprimanded harshly.

"Hua'er, make the arrangements. We're going to town today to offer incense and pray for my father and elder brother."

About half an hour later, as Hua'er was still grooming the horse, she heard another instruction from her mistress.

As luck would have it, that very day happened to be the town's monthly market day. People from Xiahe Village, Shanghe Village, and several nearby settlements had all come to join the bustling trade.

Upon arriving in town, the carriage carrying the scheming young lady moved slowly through the crowded streets.

Inside the carriage, she would occasionally lift the curtain to glance outside. Besides Hua'er, another little maid accompanied her, though unlike Hua'er, this girl sat curled up like a quail, trying her best to remain unnoticed.

The road to the temple passed through a street where villagers often set up stalls. On both sides, vendors had claimed spots to sell their surplus farm produce and handmade goods. From her seat in the carriage, Li Shu lifted the curtain, scanning the lively marketplace. Occasionally, she exchanged a few words with Hua'er.

Not far ahead, a stall selling bamboo crafts and wild mushrooms came into view. Li Shu's eyes flickered with interest, but she nonchalantly lowered the curtain and casually instructed Hua'er:

"I think I heard someone selling candied hawthorn. Go buy some for us to try."

Following her mistress's orders, Hua'er poked her head out and told the driver to halt the carriage. She instructed the other maid to look after their mistress before hopping off to find the candied hawthorn vendor.

Meanwhile, Zhu Ping'ans's mother, Chen, had brought her eldest son to set up their market stall, as Zhu Ping'ans's father was busy driving the cart elsewhere. They displayed Zhu's father's handmade bamboo crafts alongside the wild mountain delicacies her son had gathered. The goal was to earn enough money to host a grand wedding for her eldest son when the New Year arrived.

Over the years, life had become increasingly smooth for Chen, especially after her second son passed the scholar's exam. She had been in high spirits, though recent days had brought her an uneasy feeling.

Her second son had been away for over half a month to take his provincial examination. She worried whether he was eating well and sleeping well.

As for how well he performed in the exam—well, that was a secondary concern. To her, her son's well-being mattered far more than his scores. Of course, his results were important, but nothing could outweigh her love for him.

Actually, having the status of a scholar was already enough to satisfy Chen. Recently, quite a few people had come to propose marriage for her second son, but Chen always felt that those families' daughters were not worthy of her son.

After the little maid, Hua'er, got off the carriage to buy candied hawthorns, the eldest daughter of the Li family, Li Shu, also stepped out of the carriage, using the excuse that it was too stuffy inside, accompanied by another little maid.

By coincidence, the Li family's carriage happened to be parked not far from where Chen had set up her stall. The carriage was large and took up a lot of space, making it particularly conspicuous. When Chen looked up, she immediately noticed the carriage.

Then, she saw Li Shu stepping out of it.

Among the crowd of rustic village girls passing by, Li Shu was dazzlingly outstanding. She was like a golden phoenix suddenly appearing among a flock of sparrows.

Her face was exquisitely beautiful, with bright red lips and pearly white teeth, her every glance filled with grace and charm.

Not only was Li Shu beautiful, but her movements were also elegant and poised. With her slender jade-like hand, she helped the little maid down from the carriage.

She wore a light orange-red gauzy long dress, a rose-red brocade jacket over it, and an outer robe of purple-black satin embroidered with gold and mixed with ivory-white threads, which concealed the splendor of her inner garments. Around her slender waist, barely enough to hold in two hands, was tied an orange-red silk belt. Her long hair, as smooth as satin, was styled into a falling moon bun with a red jade coral hairpin, adorned with a row of dangling glass bead curtains, making her look even more refined and elegant.

What a coincidence—just as Li Shu stepped out of the carriage, an old lady, possibly due to the slippery ground, suddenly fell, landing right at Li Shu's feet.

"Old madam, are you alright?"

Li Shu softly asked, not minding the old lady's somewhat worn and dark cotton-padded jacket. She bent down and helped the old lady up.

By the time this series of actions was completed, the little maid standing beside her, timid like a quail, had yet to react.

When she finally did, her young mistress had already helped the old lady to her feet.

"Miss, be careful! Your hands—"

The quail-like little maid broke into a cold sweat in panic and hurriedly pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her mistress's hands. Miss despised filth the most—she had been scolded many times for similar incidents before.

"What nonsense are you saying? Didn't you see that the old madam had fallen?"

The cunning young lady Li Shu lightly reprimanded the little maid. "Auntie, please don't take it to heart. This girl is just ignorant."

The seemingly shrewd Li Shu suddenly became exceptionally kind and patient with the old lady, showing great concern and care. Before leaving, she even gave the old woman a packet of snacks.

"Miss, I'm sorry, I... I..."

The quail-like little maid trembled as she apologized, not knowing what to do after Li Shu sent the old lady on her way.

"Enough, just be more mindful in the future."

Li Shu, as if she had changed her temper, merely gave a light scolding and let it go.

Miss is acting so strangely today.

The little maid, watching her mistress's unusually gentle demeanor, felt that something was off.