

Rise 295

Chapter 295: Li Shu, I Adore You

While Zhu Ping'an was listening to the chubby brat reciting "Though the divine tortoise is thin" with his pudgy cheeks jiggling, the boudoir of the second young lady in the rear courtyard of the Marquis' residence was filled with melodious voices and dazzling colors. Li Shu and several other unmarried young ladies of the residence had gathered together after greeting the old madam, chatting about the usual topics girls discuss.

The conversation mostly revolved around how prestigious their future husbands' families were, how high-ranking their fathers-in-law were in the court, how much power they held—then subtly or not-so-subtly bringing up that Li Shu's future husband was merely from a farming family, had neither power nor influence, and though he had barely managed to pass the imperial examination as a juren, he had been assigned to the "Stinking Post." In the end, they would pretend to console her, saying Zhu Ping'an was just unlucky this time, maybe he'd get a better post next time. Even if he didn't, it was no big deal—they'd have their own husbands pull some strings to help him get a better appointment or fill in a vacancy.

Basically, the whole thing was just a competition over whose future father-in-law was more accomplished, while using Li Shu as a foil to feel superior.

Li Shu deeply disdained her sisters' behavior. A girl marries her husband, not her husband's father. What's the point of comparing future fathers-in-law? Are you saying your happiness depends on your father-in-law? If you're going to talk about your future married life, shouldn't you be talking about your husband, not circling around his dad?

Li Shu's disdainful expression was misinterpreted by the sisters as disappointment from being outshone by them.

So, they chatted even more enthusiastically.

Eventually, the topic shifted to the marriage of the eldest daughter of the Marquis' residence—their eldest sister—who was the cherished daughter of the second master and had just married the eldest son of the Duke of the Founding Nation's family last year. They looked at her enviously, then sighed regretfully while trying to comfort Li Shu.

As the conversation continued, they moved on to rouge, powders, and shampoo soaps. These were typical topics among girls in their boudoirs—beauty, clothes, accessories, daydreams about the future, maybe even some gossip. With lives confined to the inner residence, they didn't have much else to talk about.

Marriage and family background mattered, yes, but the most important person was still the husband. If you didn't even understand your own husband, how could you hope for a happy marriage? A bunch of pitiful fools. So what if your hair looked beautiful after washing it with soapberry? Don't think that just because you become husband and wife you'll be inseparable. If your husband isn't good, then those strands of hair will end up entangling only yourself.

Had they never heard that ancient legend? When the leader of the Ba people, Lin Jun, sailed west along the Qing River, he fell in love with the beautiful goddess of the Salt Water Lake. Lin Jun gave her a lock of his hair and said: "Tie it up—we shall live and die together." But Lin Jun was unwilling to give up his expedition westward. The goddess, heartbroken, turned into a flying insect to block his path, trying to make him stay. On Yang Rock, Lin Jun shot and killed her with an arrow. When the goddess died, Lin Jun's hair was still wrapped around her neck...

You don't know whether your future husbands will turn out like Lin Jun, but I know that stinky toad definitely won't.

“When my hair was first tied, I plucked flowers before the gate. You came riding a bamboo horse, circling the bed and playing with green plums.”

So many years of childhood friendship—she knew that stinky toad too well.

Li Shu cast a scornful glance at her sisters.

After leaving the boudoir, Li Shu gave an order to her attendant maid Hua'er: to prepare a few red envelopes and deliver a message to the inn where Zhu Ping'an used to stay. She instructed the innkeeper and staff that if anyone came looking for Zhu Ping'an—including to deliver good news about the exam results—they should come directly to the Marquis' residence.

The Marquis' residence needed some good news too, didn't it?

Li Shu curled her lips into a smile and, surrounded by her old maid and maidservants, returned to her own courtyard. She lazily half-reclined on her embroidered bed and pulled out a book she had casually placed under her pillow the night before. Looking at the handwriting left by that stinky toad on the book, her lips curved into a smile.

“All right, I'm tired. I want to rest for a bit. You may all leave.”

Li Shu put down the book and glanced around at the maids in the room, waving them off with a weary look.

“Yes, miss.”

The maids and old matron responded and quietly exited the room. The last little maid to leave even thoughtfully closed the door behind her, to keep any noise outside from disturbing the young lady’s rest.

Once the footsteps faded into the distance, Li Shu wrapped herself in a fox fur cloak, lifted the silk and cotton quilt, picked up the book, and got out of bed.

She went to the desk, placed the book with the stinky toad’s handwriting on it on the table, then spread out a sheet of pink stationery. Her slender jade-like hand picked up a brush, dipped it in ink, studied the handwriting in the book for a moment, and then began to write.

“Li Shu, I adore you. I only wish: whether in life or in death, we remain together; I take your hand, and grow old with you.”

The signature was: Zhu Ping’an of Xiahe.

If it weren’t for the fact that it was Li Shu’s own fair hand holding the brush, the handwriting on the pink note was identical to the writing in the book. It truly looked as if Zhu Ping’an had written it himself.

After finishing, Li Shu waited for the ink to dry slightly, then sneakily tucked the pink note inside the book. Then, tiptoeing, she returned to her embroidered bed and hid the book back under her pillow, once again reclining lazily.

A few seconds later, still in that room— A beautiful young woman was half-reclining on the embroidered couch. A golden hairpin inlaid with gems and pearls adorned her hair. Her loose cloud-like tresses resembled raven wings, as if she had just woken up. Her slender hand reached under the pillow and retrieved a book, which she gently opened.

And then— A pink note accidentally slipped out.

The beauty's small mouth curled slightly as if seeing such a pink note for the first time, and with a bit of surprise, she picked it up, opened it, and read the contents:

“Li Shu, I adore you. I only wish: whether in life or in death, we remain together; I take your hand, and grow old with you.”

—Zhu Ping'an of Xiahe.

“Very well.”

Her starry eyes shimmered, her smile bloomed like a flower, radiating charm. Her cherry lips parted slightly, and she uttered two cheerful words.

Then, hugging her embroidered pillow, she laughed by herself for a long time.

“Stinky toad, I’m going to stew you and eat you.”

Only after a long while did the beauty mutter that line, reluctantly tossing the pink note into a nearby brazier.

Not long after she burned the note, the sound of light footsteps came from outside.

“Miss, I’m back!”

The next second, the voice of the little maid Hua’er rang out at the door, followed by another maid trying to stop her, saying something about the miss still resting. Soon, Hua’er’s regretful voice sounded—she regretted being so loud and possibly disturbing her mistress’s rest.

“Let her in.”

Inside the room, the beauty glanced at the ashes in the brazier and, satisfied, softly called out to the door.