

Rise 330

Chapter 330: Rivalry Between Sisters

After sunset, dusk spread across the sky.

Li Shu returned to the backyard in the fading light. Hongjian was restrained by several strong, burly maids, a rag stuffed in her mouth. She shook her head, whimpering, but no sound came out. Around them, numerous maids and servants had gathered.

The incident with Hongjian had caused a stir throughout the entire backyard. People had heard that the Fifth Miss had ordered Hongjian to be tied up, and curiosity had drawn a crowd. The Second, Third, and Sixth Misses of the Hou residence also arrived, each surrounded by their attendants and maids.

When they saw Li Shu approaching, the surrounding servants quickly greeted her and made way, letting her pass.

A faint smile blossomed on Li Shu's delicate face as she slowly approached the struggling, whimpering Hongjian. A chill swept over the scene. Hongjian, trembling as if returned to the depths of winter, looked into the Fifth Miss's dark, cold, and slightly mocking eyes and shivered.

"Oh? Fifth Sister, what's this? Why have you tied up my maid so thoroughly?" The Sixth Miss of the Hou residence tilted her round, cute face, her fair fingers holding a small embroidered handkerchief as she covered her mouth slightly, letting out an innocent inquiry.

“Has my maid offended you, Sister?”

The Sixth Miss blinked, then asked again, still wearing an innocent expression, though her eyes sparkled with mischief and glee. Even a mere maid could climb into bed ahead of you, and even your husband couldn't stop it—let's see how proud you can remain!

The other Misses of the Hou residence looked at Li Shu with curiosity, their eyes glinting with gossip.

“What's the matter? You can't even tie up your maid?”

Li Shu, hearing this, turned slightly to regard the Sixth Miss, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips—half mocking, half playful.

“Ha... tie her up? Of course I can. If I want to, I tie her. But to tie your maid for no reason at all... I do fear that the maid might feel disheartened beneath.”

The Sixth Miss's gaze burned on Li Shu, her fair fingers holding the handkerchief to her mouth as she let out a series of laughs. She wanted to force Li Shu to reveal the story of Hongjian climbing into bed, to make a scene and embarrass her, to make Li Shu's triumphs less satisfying—she couldn't let all the good fortune fall on Li Shu alone.

“Oh...”

Li Shu nodded slightly, lips parting to utter a soft “oh,” then, without warning, she turned to Hongjian and delivered a sharp slap across her face.

Crisp. Resounding.

“Ah... that feels good...”

Afterward, Li Shu shook her hand lightly, a subtle, cherry-red smile curving her lips. A small maid scurried forward with a pure white handkerchief. Li Shu accepted it, wiped her hand, and casually tossed it to the ground.

The Sixth Miss felt as if the sharp slap had landed on her own face. The smile that had been forming on her round, cute features wilted instantly, her rosy cheeks paling.

“Sister, what are you doing?” the Sixth Miss asked, her gaze intense as she bit her lip.

“What am I doing? Haha... why are you looking at me like that? I’m merely helping you discipline your maid. Didn’t you just say it was fine as long as it wasn’t without reason?” Li Shu’s expression mirrored the Sixth Miss’s earlier innocence almost exactly.

The Second Miss and the others looked on with growing amusement, wishing they had some melon seeds and tea to enjoy the spectacle.

“Then tell me, what’s wrong with my maid?” the Sixth Miss asked, a flicker of anticipation in her heart. Come on, Fifth Sister, let everyone know your husband isn’t in control, that a mere maid sneaked into bed...

“Your maid’s hands are not clean,” Li Shu said with a faint smile, pursing her lips. She reached out gracefully and nudged the peacock hairpin in Hongjian’s hair—the one crafted with gold filigree and holding a strand of black pearls—so that the pearls swayed gently.

The black pearls shimmered with a natural iridescence, the light dancing as they moved.

Even just this strand of black pearls was worth hundreds of taels of silver—and nearly impossible to purchase.

Unlike modern times, ancient black pearls couldn’t be cultured artificially. They came from the precious black-lipped pearl oyster, rare and only found in specific seas.

Clearly, this gold filigree peacock hairpin could never belong to a maid like Hongjian—it had to be stolen. What’s more, this hairpin was nearly identical to the one Li Shu herself wore. Originally, they were a matched pair. In theory, the one on Hongjian’s head must have been Li Shu’s.

Of course, that was in theory. In practice...

“Sister, there must be some misunderstanding. My maid... she’s never—”

The Sixth Miss covered her mouth with her handkerchief, blinking in surprise. She hadn’t expected things to escalate like this. How had a petty matter of sneaking into bed turned into theft? She had watched Hongjian personally deliver the sobering soup to Zhu Ping’an in the front courtyard; it was impossible she would steal a hairpin from Li Shu’s quarters. Besides, Li Shu’s hairpin came as a matched pair. If one had been stolen before, Li Shu wouldn’t have worn the remaining one; if it hadn’t been stolen before, how could Hongjian have managed to steal it without anyone noticing?

“Ah, so the thief has been caught, yet the little sister doubts her elder sister?” Li Shu’s lips curved in a mocking smile as she countered.

“No, Sister, it’s a misunderstanding. How could I ever doubt you?” The Sixth Miss shook her head, explaining under Li Shu’s piercing gaze.

“Oh, then it seems I misunderstood you. To make amends, I shall personally discipline your maid properly.”

As Li Shu spoke, the black pearls on her peacock hairpin swayed gently, accentuating her pale, flawless face, giving her an ethereal, untainted beauty.

“Now, do you wish to turn your fortunes around?”

With that, Li Shu ignored the others, turning her attention to Hongjian. She reached out a delicate hand to pat Hongjian's cheek, a cold smile blooming on her face.

Hongjian's mouth was gagged with a rag, her head shaking, her face ashen.

"Listen well—turning over doesn't mean you're free."

"You're still just a salted fish!"

Li Shu's dark eyes glimmered like ink, a sardonic smile playing on her lips.

"My things, don't touch them! Not even a glance! Understand?"

She swept her gaze over the crowd, deliberately lingering on the Sixth Miss for a moment before returning to Hongjian. Then she extended her delicate fingers, hooked Hongjian's chin, and with a lip-curving smile, spoke in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.