

Rise 86

Chapter 86: A Quarrel Between Ladies

Warm sunlight lazily climbed through the window, filtering through the purple gauze, filling the room with the fragrance of a young lady's chamber. Under the sun's glow, the girlish boudoir appeared even warmer and more lively.

The faint fragrance of sandalwood filled the room, and the embroidered bed was covered in luxurious cloud-patterned silk.

A young girl lounged lazily on the bed, holding a small, delicately written volume titled *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*. She was reading with great interest.

Though the girl was still youthful, her beauty was already apparent. It seemed that when she fully blossomed into adulthood, only women or those who were uninterested in women would not be captivated by her.

"Miss, miss! I heard that villain was robbed on his way to the imperial exam..."

A voice, filled with a mix of excitement and nervousness, came from outside the door. Then, a maid with a double-bun hairstyle and a slightly chubby face ran into the room with small, quick steps.

The girl lounging on the bed was deeply engrossed in her book, and she was visibly displeased at being interrupted. She remained propped on the bed and beckoned the chubby maid with a small wave of her finger.

The maid rushed over, her round face flushed.

"Don't you know that I'm reading?" the girl on the bed said as she sat up, rolled the book in her hand, and tapped the maid on the head twice.

"Miss, that hurts..." The maid covered her forehead with her small hands, pouting in grievance.

This pair—young lady and maid—were none other than Li Shu, the eldest daughter of the wealthy Li family in Shanghe Village, and her personal maid, Hua'er.

"Go on, you little troublemaker, why are you making such a fuss?" Li Shu raised her eyebrows slightly, her large, watery eyes rolling in exasperation.

The chubby maid put down her hands and, still somewhat nervous, said, "Miss, I just overheard someone gossiping outside, saying that the villain was robbed on his way to the imperial exam. They said all the examinees were robbed clean."

"Come on, don't be fooled. Though that villain may look foolish on the outside, he's as sly as a fox. Who could rob him?" Li Shu said, biting her lips as if remembering something. Her small red lips and her pearly white teeth stood out more clearly, hinting at some hidden emotions.

"It's true! Everyone's saying they were completely robbed!" Hua'er, the chubby maid, said with absolute confidence.

"So what?"

Li Shu adjusted her sleeves, acting as though she didn't care at all.

"They were robbed of everything! Do you think... do you think that villain will starve or freeze?" Hua'er pouted as she asked, her round face flushed—whether from nervousness or excitement, it was hard to tell.

"Of course not," Li Shu replied with an air of certainty, pursing her lips and dismissing her maid's worry.

"How could he not? He was completely robbed!" Hua'er spoke as if she had been robbed herself, sympathizing deeply with the villain's misfortune.

Li Shu cast a glance at her maid, half teasing and half amused. "Maybe that villain will have to beg his way to the exam. I bet he'd look awful begging. Someone might even take pity on him and give him twenty or so taels of silver."

Hearing this, Hua'er's eyes briefly lit up, but then dimmed again. She pouted and said, "No way! Who would be so kind as to give him twenty taels of silver? That's enough for an ordinary family to live on for a year."

"Why are you so concerned about him? When he returns, should I marry you off to him?" Li Shu's lips curled into a playful smile.

The moment those words were spoken, Hua'er's round face flushed bright red, like a ripe apple.

"Miss, you're bullying me again... I wouldn't marry that villain..." Hua'er's face nearly sank into her chest, much like an ostrich burying its head in the sand.

"I was just testing you. Looks like this little maid has a crush..." Li Shu teased, lifting Hua'er's chin with the rolled-up book.

"Miss..." Hua'er pouted in grievance.

Her face was burning with embarrassment, and she couldn't lift her head. But suddenly, something occurred to her, and her eyes brightened. Summoning her courage, she responded cheekily.

"I'm Miss's personal maid, and Madam said I would accompany you in marriage. Whoever Miss marries, I'll be given to him as well. So, if you want to marry me off to that villain, wouldn't you have to marry him first?"

Hua'er's words made Li Shu both embarrassed and angry. She quickly withdrew the book from under her maid's chin and knocked it three times on Hua'er's head. In a huff, she scolded, "You little rascal! Who would marry that poor scoundrel? My husband will be the best man in the world, at least a top scholar! That poor scoundrel isn't even worthy to carry my husband's shoes..."

The young girl's playful rebuke, along with Hua'er's whining cries of "Miss, I'm sorry!" filled the room with liveliness.

"But, but... what if by some chance that villain..." Hua'er mumbled, still holding her head, breaking the lighthearted atmosphere.

"What 'by chance'?" Li Shu glared at her.

"What if that villain also becomes the top scholar?" Hua'er mumbled, widening her eyes and looking at her lady.

All she saw, however, was the rolled-up book rapidly enlarging in front of her face.

Thud, thud, thud

"There is no 'by chance'! What kind of nonsense is that? You think top scholars are as common as turnips and cabbages?"

"That poor scoundrel could study for a hundred years, a thousand years, or even ten thousand years and he still wouldn't have a single chance!"

"It's simply impossible. Even if the sun rose from the west, that poor scoundrel could never become the top scholar. It's impossible, just impossible!"

Having just put down the book, Li Shu exploded again upon hearing her maid's mutterings. Her delicate hands quickly lifted the book and started thumping it against Hua'er's head once more.

"Miss, that hurts... I was just saying 'what if'!" Hua'er pouted in grievance.

"There's no 'what if'! That greedy, shameless, spineless toad who always hides in the shadows—how could he ever pass the exams?"

Li Shu's temper flared, yet her large, watery eyes began to ripple with emotion.

What if he did pass? How could that be? That scoundrel is just a toad—a stinky, poor, bad toad. No matter how much it jumps, it will always be a toad. A toad isn't a carp, and even if it leaps through the dragon gate, it's still a toad...

Far away in Huaining County, Zhu Ping'an sneezed several times in a row. Rubbing his nose, he looked up at the warm sun in confusion. The weather was nice, and he felt perfectly fine, so why did he keep sneezing? Strange...