

When Han Sien returned to the Duke's estate, a highly curious spectacle was unfolding within its walls, with the Fifth Prince, Ji Huai, as the star of the show.

Ever since Han Zhuo and Consort Xian, Han Yun, had begun harboring certain designs regarding Han Mingzhu, Ji Huai's visits to the estate had grown far more frequent than in previous years. Of course, they were not so frequent as to arouse the Emperor's suspicion that his son and the Duke's family were plotting treason.

Earlier today, when Han Sien was leaving the estate for his appointment, Ji Huai had just arrived, and the two had crossed paths at the gates. Upon learning that Han Sien was going to meet Ji Luo, the Fifth Prince had remarked with a touch of poorly concealed envy:

— A rather close relationship you share with Third Brother, I see.

Ji Huai had not spoken out of any genuine regard for his own relationship with Han Sien, but rather because seeing Han Sien grow closer to Ji Luo than to himself stirred a subtle, prickly resentment in his chest. After all, during the long years Han Sien had spent bedridden and wasting away, neither he nor Ji Luo had ever bothered to show him the slightest attention.

Yet now, in the blink of an eye, Han Sien had transformed into the Emperor's most trusted confidant and the focus of everyone's attention. Seeing Han Sien align himself so closely with Ji Luo made Ji Huai feel uneasy; he could not help but suspect that Han Sien had chosen his side and intended to help the Third Prince ascend the throne.

At times, Ji Huai even wondered if Han Sien's attitude stemmed from a personal dislike of him. After all, compared to him, Ji Luo had never maintained any ties with the Duke's estate, so his failure to visit Han Sien during his illness was only natural. Ji Huai, on the other hand, was different. He had frequented the estate on major occasions, such as the Old Madame's birthdays, yet he had never once visited his sick cousin. In fact, under the deliberate influence of certain members of the household, he had completely forgotten that such a person even existed in the estate.

And now that Han Sien had risen to power, he ignored Ji Huai entirely, throwing his weight behind Ji Luo instead. This filled Ji Huai with a sense of indignation. Ji Luo was, after all, the most neglected and unfavored of their Imperial Father's sons. With only Han Sien backing him, how much assurance did he truly have for the future?

Admittedly, he had never taken Han Sien seriously in the past, but Han Sien himself had never shown any remarkable capability back then. If he had managed to catch the Emperor's eye years ago, who would have dared to ignore him? Neither his Imperial Mother nor his uncle, the Duke, would have allowed it.

The current tension between Han Sien and the Duke's estate was, in Ji Huai's eyes, a result of mistakes on both sides. Besides, wasn't Ji Luo associating with Han Sien now solely because of the latter's bright prospects? If Ji Luo had truly valued him as a person, he would have approached him long before he rose to power.

Hearing Ji Huai's internal monologue, Han Sien merely shook his head. He found that people in this world loved nothing more than to dramatize their lives and indulge in endless, convoluted theories. Which of the princes became Emperor would depend entirely on their own competence.

Though he chose to remain a cold onlooker, why on earth did Ji Huai assume so naively that because Han Sien had gained favor with the Emperor, he was obliged to accept whatever crumbs the Duke's estate and Han Yun deigned to throw his way? Did they honestly expect him to risk his life for them simply because they shared the surname Han and came from the same clan?

For a contender in the battle for the throne, Ji Huai, raised under Han Yun's wing, was remarkably ill-suited for the treacherous vortex of power. Perhaps his temperament had been deliberately molded this way by others, but he remained an absurdly naive idealist.

Help him win the throne? Han Sien was no fool. Once such a man became Emperor, Han Sien, left without any real power, would be entirely at the mercy of others, waiting to be disposed of.

Of course, had it been the original Han Sien, he might have agonized over his choices for the sake of so-called familial affection, only to end up turning his life into a tragic farce.

But he was not that Han Sien.

Occupied with these complex thoughts, Ji Huai had readily complied when his Imperial Mother hinted that he should frequent the Duke's estate more often.

Yet his visit today had taken an unexpected turn. He had been led by a servant who claimed that Han Yuezhong was waiting for him in the rear garden. Accustomed to spending time with his cousin, Ji Huai had headed there without a second thought.

Just then, he heard a loud splash, followed by a woman's shrill cry for help.

The voice sounded like Han Qingxue, and Ji Huai's heart skipped a beat. Over the years, he had naturally become aware of his mother's intentions; though nothing had been explicitly stated, he knew Han Qingxue was destined to be his wife. He bore no dislike toward her, and hearing her scream for help, he immediately rushed to the rescue.

However, just as Ji Huai reached the scene, the estate's resident cousin, He Yuzhu, happened to arrive as well. Seeing Han Qingxue thrashing in the water, He Yuzhu, without a moment's hesitation, dove right in to save her.

Her actions threw her maid into a panic. The girl fell to her knees on the bank, weeping and wailing:

— Young Mistress! You don't know how to swim!

Seeing both women struggling and sinking in the water, Ji Huai had no time to ponder. He ordered the maid to run for help while he jumped into the pond himself.

Fortunately, neither of them was too far from the bank, and both were quite light. Ji Huai first pushed He Yuzhu toward the shore, allowing her maid to pull her up, before wrapping his arm around Han Qingxue and swimming back.

The weather had already turned warm, and everyone was dressed in very thin garments. It was only after Ji Huai dragged Han Qingxue onto the bank that he realized the impropriety of the situation; the wet, flimsy fabric of their dresses clung tightly to their skin, outlining every curve of their figures.

Drenched and shivering, He Yuzhu realized her predicament. Her face flushed a deep crimson. Scrambling to her feet in a panic, she threw a fierce, resentful glare at Ji Huai before quickly grabbing her maid and fleeing the scene. Initially, Ji Huai had felt a surge of annoyance, assuming He Yuzhu had set a trap for him, but her hasty retreat to preserve her modesty disproved his suspicion.

He regretted his harsh judgment, realizing he had painted her as far too spoiled and malicious.

He Yuzhu was indeed an exceptional beauty. As she fled in disarray, her mixture of shame and anger stripped away her usual haughty demeanor, and the faint trace of sorrow between her brows made her look incredibly delicate and endearing.

In truth, ever since Han Xiu had been publicly slapped, both He Yuzhu and He Fan seemed to have matured overnight. Lately, they had kept an exceptionally low profile within the estate. It was rumored that they had tried to persuade Han Xiu to return to Qingzhou, but their mother, blinded by her own obsession, adamantly refused.

As He Yuzhu vanished from sight, the prostrate Han Qingxue began to weep in terror. Ji Huai withdrew his gaze and turned to her, but before he could speak, the Duchess, Madam Liu, Madam Zhang of the second branch, and Han Xiu all came rushing to the scene.

Upon seeing the state of the young pair, the faces of all three women paled. Madam Zhang hastily stripped a cloak from her maid and wrapped it around Han Qingxue, covering her body. With a dark expression, Madam Liu ordered that Han Qingxue be taken back to her quarters immediately to change, lest she fall ill.

Han Qingxue was paralyzed with fear, not only from her brush with death, but also from a chilling dread of the future. She had gone to the garden to meet Han Mingzhu, who had invited her there. On the way, her chief maid, Bai Zhi, had suddenly been seized by a sharp stomach ache and had lagged behind.

When she met Han Mingzhu, they had walked along the bank. Before she could even register what was happening, Han Mingzhu had muttered something incomprehensible and shoved her into the lake. Han Qingxue had no idea why her cousin had done such a thing, but she knew that if she could not clear her name today, a shadow of doubt would forever hang between her and Ji Huai, ruining any chance of marital happiness even if he did marry her.

Thus, the moment Madam Liu finished speaking, Han Qingxue clutched her damp cloak and grabbed her mother's hand, crying out hysterically:

— Mother! Mother, it was Han Mingzhu! She pushed me! It was Han Mingzhu...

At the mention of Han Mingzhu's name, Han Qingxue's eyes widened with sheer terror. She was truly terrified of the cousin who had tried to drown her.

Hearing this, Madam Zhang flew into a rage. Turning sharply to Madam Liu, she demanded a full explanation. Han Qingxue continued to weep hysterically until she finally fainted from exhaustion.

Watching the chaotic scene unfold, Ji Huai felt his head throbbing. He was utterly baffled. Why would Han Mingzhu want to push Han Qingxue into the lake? Did some deep, unspoken hatred exist between them?

By the time Han Sien returned to the estate, Han Mingzhu and the revived Han Qingxue were both kneeling in the Old Madame's courtyard. Han Qingxue insisted that Han Mingzhu had pushed her, while Han Mingzhu steadfastly denied it, challenging her to produce any proof.

Naturally, Han Qingxue had no proof. When Han Mingzhu invited her, she had gone without a second thought. With Bai Zhi falling ill on the way, no one had been present to witness Han Mingzhu's actions.

The Old Madame was furious. She turned on Madam Liu, demanding to know why there had been no maids nearby to help when Han Qingxue fell into the water. Where had everyone gone? This was clearly a premeditated act.

Faced with the collective suspicion of the room, Han Mingzhu also began to weep. Her elegant, striking features grew sorrowful as she bit her lip, silent tears streaming down her face in a display that would move anyone to pity. Looking around at the accusing faces, she pleaded:

— Eldest Sister and I have no grievances between us. Why would I ever want to take her life?

Han Mingzhu's question left the Old Madame speechless. Madam Zhang, aching with sympathy for her daughter, was consumed by fury. Stepping forward, she spat:

— Perhaps you simply covet what is hers! You are jealous of your Eldest Sister!

Han Mingzhu blinked in confusion, asking softly:

— Jealous of her? For what?

Madam Zhang was on the verge of shouting that she was jealous of Han Qingxue's impending match with the prince, but while she had lost her mind to anger, the Old Madame had not. Before Madam Zhang could utter another foolish word, the Old Madame barked:

— Silence!

Startled, Madam Zhang shrank back, not daring to speak another word.

Han Sien, who had been watching the drama unfold with detached amusement, finally spoke up. With an indifferent gaze and a leisurely tone, he remarked:

— The only thing a young lady might envy in another is her prospects of marriage. But since Mingzhu's marriage is to be decided by His Majesty himself, she already holds the greatest honor imaginable. What could she possibly find to envy in anyone else?

A heavy silence fell over the room at his words. The Old Madame cast a dark, searching look at Han Sien. She knew he was reminding her that Han Mingzhu's marriage was far beyond their station to meddle with.

Still trembling, Han Qingxue watched the Old Madame's expression, her heart freezing as her mind descended into chaos. She remembered the words Han Mingzhu had whispered right before pushing her into the water: "Let me lend you a hand."

Looking at the Old Madame's face now, she wondered if her alliance with Ji Huai was in jeopardy. At that thought, Han Qingxue turned deathly pale, her body shaking as her hand instinctively gripped Madam Zhang's sleeve. Believing her daughter was merely suffering from the shock of her ordeal, Madam Zhang held her close and wept.

As for Ji Huai, the central figure in the mess, he offered a few words of comfort to Han Qingxue and promised the Old Madame that upon his return to the palace, he would immediately inform his Imperial Mother to ensure the Han family received a proper resolution.

This was the most diplomatic way to handle the situation. In front of so many onlookers, the Old Madame could not contradict the prince's wishes, and she could only watch in silence as Ji Huai departed for the palace.

After the crowd dispersed from the Old Madame's courtyard, Han Sien glanced at Han Mingzhu. The girl offered him a plaintive, tearful smile, looking thoroughly wronged, before turning to walk back to her own quarters.

Han Sien raised an eyebrow in amusement and slowly made his way back to his own Fanglan Courtyard.

Inside the quiet courtyard, everything was as peaceful as ever. Han Sien pushed open the door to his room, only to find Bai Shu standing inside.

The moment Bai Shu saw him, his eyes crinkled into a warm, gentle smile. Raising the sheet of drawing paper in his hands, he murmured:

— Do you have some time today? I would love to paint a portrait of you.

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