

Three-Time 371

Chapter 371: 371. Death Warrant

Su Liang indeed knew some sewing, but only for simple tasks such as making personal clothes for herself and Gu Ling. She rarely spent time making things that could be purchased because she was busy.

Having brought back the flower cloth yesterday, after Su Liang told Gu Ling what she thought was the most suitable use for it, Gu Ling pushed the new baby carriage in front of her that day.

The misunderstanding of the grey-clothed elder was very deep. Gu Ling could make the baby carriage because Su Liang had told him what it should look like. As for sewing, Gu Ling was much better at it than Su Liang.

“So adorable!” Su Liang looked at the beautiful little carriage and felt her heart soften. Gu Ling had perfectly created what she wanted, even sewing a rabbit plush on the canopy of the carriage.

Su Liang could imagine their precious daughter sitting inside, with the little rabbit dangling above her head.

“I think I can see what Great God would look like as a child if he were to sit in such a small carriage.” Su Liang chuckled lightly. She firmly believed that her daughter would resemble Gu Ling.

Gu Ling nodded, “Killing two birds with one stone.” He had never been embarrassed by such things.

Everyone brought a new unique toy home, but nobody trespassed into the Wan mansion to steal, and no one came to Gu Ling and Su Liang. It made them doubt whether the old man who threw the grenade at Gu Ling earlier had already left the capital city of Qian Country.

If his mission was only to investigate and confirm who was the transmigrator between Gu Ling and Su Liang without doing anything else, then this conclusion would also make sense.

Now, Gu Ling was proficient in making explosives. For safety, he placed some finished products in the unoccupied Marquis Chang Xin Mansion for backup. It was a palace granted to him, originally in ruins. He later took all the trees in the garden of Yao City’s King Yue Mansion from Situ Xie and planted them there. At first, people managed it, but later, they left it alone, locked the door, and let the trees and plants grow wildly.

So now, the Marquis Chang Xin Mansion wasn’t a ruin, but a large garden with a wild, natural charm.

Making firearms was not easy. Only Gu Ling and old Mu formed a team. They even personally dealt with tasks like casting iron. However, both weren’t doing this kind of work for the first time.

Su Liang served as a long-distance adviser, as Gu Ling needed to ensure she stayed away from anything with safety risks.

About bullets, Su Liang said that iron balls or nails could also be used. Old Mu believed they were similar to short arrows, so why make it so complicated?

Gu Ling thought it was worth a try; the most crucial factor of such weapons was speed. The speed of bows and arrows depended on the user's strength, which was very limited.

Mid-Autumn Festival fell on the 15th of August, and the baby in Su Liang's belly was already five months old.

The mooncakes were made by everyone. After they were made, Su Liang sent festival gifts to the Qin, Lin, Lian, and Xing families.

It was also the harvest season for the Lian Family's Jiaye City Orange Garden. Lian Shun sent people to pick a large number of oranges and transported them to the capital city with haste.

After Nangong Qian's health improved, she became interested in cooking, especially making pastries, and was quite good at it.

Cen Man tasted the freshly baked mooncakes, praised them delicious, and asked if they should send some to Qiao Cong in Xuanbei City.

Su Liang said that they had sent fresh fruit pastries and new clothes for the grandfather and grandson of the Qiao family as festival gifts a few days ago.

Cen Man smiled, "You are very thoughtful. He and his grandson should have a good time during the New Year, and they shouldn't feel lonely."

Xuanbei City.

Qiao Cong and Qiao Jing received a whole cart of items sent by Su Liang the day before the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Qiao Cong was deeply touched, but also a bit depressed. As he could imagine how lively Su Mansion in the capital city would be during the festival, while he could only stay in the already wintry Xuanbei City with Qiao Jing.

Wearing the cloak sent by Su Liang, Qiao Cong asked Qiao Jing how it looked.

Qiao Jing nodded, "It suits my grandfather."

Qiao Cong held the cloak in his arms and sighed after sitting down, "We've waited for a long time, and no one has come to assassinate you. Should I go home?"

Not this again... Qiao Jing nodded calmly, "If my grandfather wishes to return, please do so."

In fact, since the third day in Xuanbei City, Qiao Cong had been saying this every day. Qiao Jing completely understood his feelings, but every time he said Qiao Cong could leave if he wanted to.

However, every time the outcome was the same. This time was no exception... Qiao Cong squinted at Qiao Jing, "Who did I come here for? Do you really not need me?"

Qiao Jing pinched the bridge of his nose, "I do. Please stay, grandfather." If he said Qiao Cong could leave again, he would be scolded.

There was no way; Qiao Cong was such a peculiar person. He wanted to leave, but didn't intend to leave. Qiao Jing knew that Qiao Cong was doing all this for him.

As for why Liang Country hadn't reacted to his betrayal yet, Qiao Jing figured it might just not be the right time. He didn't believe that Situ Xie or Situ Han really cared about blood and family ties.

Yao City of Liang Country.

The Royal Mid-Autumn Festival banquet had just ended, and Emperor Situ Han called Situ Xie to the Imperial Study for a talk.

Since last year, when his facial paralysis symptoms were cured by Su Liang, Emperor Situ Han had been very attentive about maintaining his health and avoiding being frozen or angered.

However, upon seeing Situ Xie and uttering the words "Situ Jing," his face still involuntarily twitched for a moment, but thankfully it recovered quickly.

"The betrayal of Situ Jing won't go away just because we don't mention it!" Emperor Situ Han said coldly.

The message was not received today, but Situ Jing had returned to Yao City with the wedding procession yesterday. Before that, the royal family had not made any statement about how to deal with the second prince's betrayal, no matter how many rumors flew around.

Situ Xie's face was calm, "How does Your Majesty plan to deal with him?"

Situ Han sneered, "If it weren't for my uncle intentionally hiding it from me and sending him to Qian Country, today's situation wouldn't have happened! My own acknowledged son announced that he would sever ties with me, not only betraying Liang Country and pledging allegiance to Qian Country, but even becoming the chief general of Xuanbei City and planning to attack Liang Country in the future! Despicable! Utterly despicable!"

At this point, any argument about "driving him mad" by Situ Xie would be pointless. No matter what intentions or plans he had for Situ Jing initially, they have all been declared a complete failure by now. And the so-called spy and most treasured grandson he carefully cultivated didn't bring him or Liang Country any benefits, except ruining his long-planned scheme!

Situ Han's reproach to Situ Xie was not completely unreasonable.

"At this point..." A cold light flashed through Situ Xie's eyes, "It's impossible to make him change his mind now, so just kill him."

Situ Han's eyes widened in disbelief, looking at Situ Xie, "What did you say? You want to kill my son? You used to claim he was your most cultivated grandson, the hope for Liang Country's breakthrough!"

"Your Majesty, please calm down. Getting angry is bad for your health." Situ Xie had obviously thought this through, "Looking back on the events of the past two or three years, I realize that the real variable isn't Situ Jing but Su Liang and Gu Ling, or rather, it's just Su Liang."

Situ Han frowned, "What does my uncle mean?"

"If it weren't for Su Liang, Gu Ling would probably still be living in seclusion somewhere, minding his own business. If it weren't for Su Liang, Duanmu Chen

wouldn't have had the opportunity to ascend the Dragon Throne so quickly. If it weren't for Su Liang, Situ Jing would have chosen Liang Country in the end despite any previous conflicts and struggles. That woman has ruined too many of our plans. If this continues, she'll ruin everything!" Situ Xie's eyes turned fierce at the end.

Situ Han's brow remained furrowed, "Doesn't my uncle feel embarrassed to blame all his failures on a woman? Don't forget, her greatest skill lies in medicine."

"No," Situ Xie shook his head slowly, "What she's best at is controlling people's hearts."

"What's the point of my uncle saying all this? If Su Liang is killed, will Gu Ling go into hiding, will Duanmu Chen lose the Dragon Throne, and will Situ Jing be loyal to Liang Country?" Situ Han looked impatient, "At the moment, it's crucial to mitigate the impact of Situ Jing's betrayal on Liang Country. If we can't handle it properly, the morale of the army and the people will be shaken! The Situ Family will become a laughingstock!"

"First kill Situ Jing, then find a way to get rid of Su Liang. When that happens, Gu Ling won't go into hiding, but he will definitely crumble. Without the couple acting as strategists, Duanmu Chen is nothing to be feared!" Situ Xie said coldly.

"One is your..." Situ Han almost said that Situ Jing was his own grandson, paused for a moment, and continued, "Gu Ling is Aning's only son, and Su Liang in her womb is carrying Aning's grandson. Is my uncle sure he wants to do this?"

"If not, they will sooner or later destroy the entire Situ Family." Situ Xie stood up and sighed, "My biggest mistake was being too lenient with Situ Jing and Gu Ling, not doing this earlier. But from today on, that won't be the case. What does Your Majesty think?"

Situ Han thought for a while, rubbing his forehead, "If Situ Jing dies, everyone in the world will think it was my doing. As the saying goes, 'even a tiger wouldn't eat its own child.' Even if we really need to eliminate him, there's no need to kill him directly. Find a way to bring him back alive from Xuanbei City and deal with him then. As for Gu Ling and Su Liang, my uncle can decide on his own."

Hearing this, Situ Xie looked deeply at Situ Han, thanked him, and left.

Upon returning to the Prince Yue Mansion, Situ Jing was waiting for Situ Xie in the study. When he saw him, he asked, "Grandfather, what did His Majesty say?"

"He wants Situ Jing to be brought back alive, and he doesn't care how Su Liang and Gu Ling are dealt with." Situ Xie said coldly.

Situ Jing clenched his fists upon hearing this, "Grandfather, do you see? Among so many people in the Situ Family, His Majesty only cares about his own biological son. When I was captured, where

did he care whether I lived or died? Now that Situ Jing has committed such treasonous acts, he still can't stand to see his son die! If grandfather isn't around, will any of us brothers, father and uncle, have a chance to live? Even if grandfather exerts more effort, he's not the one who makes the decisions. His Majesty doesn't have opinions on many major issues. He relies on grandfather yet fears him at the same time, and any merit will make him more suspicious. He'll make a big fuss over any minor mistake to assert his imperial authority!"

Hearing this, Situ Xie's expression grew even gloomier.

Situ Jing saw his chance, and he poured out all the words that had long been brewing in his heart, "Grandfather has always valued relationships, but after what has happened in the past two years, he should see that some people are nothing but ungrateful wretches! Situ Jing is one, and Gu Ling even more so! Even His Majesty also... If Grandfather doesn't start planning for our own family, the future of King Yue's Mansion is concerning!"

Situ Xie remained silent. He admitted his mistake in front of Situ Han, saying that he was too soft-hearted, and Situ Jing also said that it was because of his strong sense of loyalty that led to the current situation.

But Situ Xie knew that was not the case. The answer lay in what he said about Su Liang.

Situ Xie corrected Situ Han, saying that Su Liang was best at controlling people's hearts, not medical skills. When he said that, his heart was filled with waves of unwillingness.

Because this used to be what Situ Xie himself believed he was most skilled at. Otherwise, he wouldn't have supported Situ Han as the emperor, he wouldn't have helped Gu Ling regain his identity, showing complete obedience to him, nor would he have sent Situ Jing to be a spy, still thinking of him as an important chess piece even after he had ruined everything...

All of these things now made Situ Xie regretful, and the reason they happened in the first place was that he overestimated his ability to control people's hearts and underestimated just how troublesome Su Liang and Gu Ling could be, and how fatal the blows they could deliver to him...

Absolutely, this could not go on any longer... Situ Xie told himself.

"Is Grandfather all right?" Situ Jing asked with concern.

Situ Xie regained his senses and shook his head, "I'm fine. You're right, if I had taken that step earlier, perhaps everything would have been different. Now, I can't wait any longer."

Situ Jing's face lit up with joy, "Grandfather is wise!"

Three days after Mid-Autumn Festival, bad news came from the imperial palace of Liang Country: Emperor Situ Han stumbled and fell during a midnight walk, hitting his head, and just like that, he was gone!

They found a decree regarding passing on the throne sealed by Situ Han in the imperial study that was apparently drafted when he suffered a stroke and facial paralysis last year. It stated that if Situ Han passed away, for the sake of Liang Country's stability and future, the throne would be handed over to his imperial uncle, King Yue Situ Xie.

Situ Xie's people quickly took control of the Imperial Palace and Situ Han's sons, while he hid his "grief" and took charge of the situation, becoming the new emperor of Liang Country. He was also the oldest emperor in the history of Liang Country when he ascended the throne.

The former Empress Dowager Min committed suicide by hanging herself three days after Situ Han's death, following her son to the grave.

The former crown prince accused Situ Xie of murdering Situ Han and seizing power, claiming that the decree was forged. Unfortunately, he had little ability and was soon placed under house arrest by Situ Xie in the name of "protection."

Situ Xie did not hold a grand coronation ceremony, keeping everything simple. The first edict he announced after becoming emperor was an order to kill the traitorous Situ Jing: anyone who brought Situ Jing's head would be rewarded with a hundred thousand gold coins!

Situ Xie claimed that it had been Situ Han's intention before his death, and it was precisely because of Situ Jing's treacherous betrayal that he had broken his heart, causing him to become exhausted and delirious, leading to the accident.

Since there was a reward offered, all the warriors in the world could accept this task, and the bounty was an amount that made many hearts race. It was clear how determined the royal family of Liang Country was to see Situ Jing dead.

"Imperial Grandfather, with this, won't my younger sister's situation in Qian Country's Imperial Harem become even more difficult?" Situ Jing asked worriedly.

Situ Xie shook his head, "No matter how much we worry or hesitate, it will only provide opportunities for our enemies. What's done is done. I will not order Yao'er to do anything more for Liang Country. As for the rest, she will have to take care of herself!"

Chapter 372: 372. Bounty and Temptation

The sudden upheaval in the Liang Country's Royal Family quickly spread.

Discerning people knew that it was Situ Xie's plot to seize power and usurp the throne. It seemed that only Situ Han had died for now, but his sons would not have a good ending. The first one to be targeted would be Situ Jing.

Ironically, Situ Xie issued such a ruthless order against his nominal nephew Situ Jing, and it was both reasonable and justifiable because Situ Jing had already betrayed the Liang Country, changed his name to Qiao Jing, and became the Chief General of Qian Country's Northern Army. Who could tolerate such treason?

When the news entered Qian Country, it reached Xuanbei City first.

When Qiao Cong heard about it, he had just bought some roasted chicken outside and took out a jar of good wine that Su Liang had sent during the Mid-Autumn Festival, intending to have a few drinks with his Qiao Jing and his grandson.

Hearing the spy hurriedly coming in, saying that there was news from the Liang Country, Qiao Cong tore off a huge chicken leg and sneered, "News from the Liang Country? Have they launched an attack? Or has Situ Han been struck by lightning and died?"

Qiao Jing knew that Qiao Cong hated Situ Han the most, so it was normal for him to say such things.

The spy quickly reported the changes in the Liang Country's Royal Family. Qiao Jing's eyes narrowed, and Qiao Cong stopped eating the chicken leg halfway through.

"Tigers don't eat their cubs. Situ Xie actually killed Situ Han for the Imperial Throne?" Although Qiao Cong hoped that Situ Han wouldn't die a good death, he didn't expect this outcome.

The spy then mentioned the matter directly related to them, "The new Emperor Liang has offered a reward of 100,000 taels of gold for General Qiao's head."

Qiao Jing's expression only became calmer. If Situ Xie could eliminate Situ Han, it showed that he had completely shed his disguise after the continuous failures of his plans in the past two years, revealing his true cruel and ruthless nature. How could he possibly spare Qiao Jing, the person who ruined his big plan and mercilessly crushed his face into the ground?

Qiao Cong instantly burst into rage, "That cheap bastard, Situ Xie! I knew it! 100,000 taels of gold? Good, I'd like to see who has the guts to kill my grandson! I've been itching to have a go for a long time!"

The last sentence was true. The main reason why Qiao Cong insisted on following Qiao Jing to Xuanbei City and staying with him was because he was afraid that he would be assassinated by the Liang Country's Royal Family. While waiting for something to happen, Qiao Jing said that the time hadn't come yet and indeed, the time had come now!

"Grandfather, eat the chicken quickly before it gets cold." Qiao Jing pulled Qiao Cong and made him sit back down, then let the spy rest and called someone else over.

Soon, urgent news from Xuanbei City set off for the capital city.

After completing these tasks, Qiao Jing picked up the glass of wine Qiao Cong had poured for him and drained it in one gulp, "This wine is not bad."

"It's from Xiaoliang, of course it's the best." Qiao Cong frowned as he looked at Qiao Jing, "From now on, I will live with you in the same room and you're not allowed to leave my sight."

"Well... I don't mind, but with a reward of 100,000 taels of gold, I'm afraid even some old-timers who have remained hidden might be tempted." Qiao Jing appeared calm, but he knew that the risk was great at this moment and this trouble wouldn't be easy to resolve. In the letter he sent to Duanmu Chen, he asked for a decision on who would take charge of Xuanbei City if something happened to him and to make it as soon as possible.

Qiao Cong, who used to be one of those hidden old-timers, snorted, "Let them come and give it a try!"

“It shouldn’t happen too soon.” Qiao Jing sighed slightly before suddenly laughing, “It’s not bad. With my grandfather’s protection, I can take advantage of this opportunity to practice and improve my skills. The next time I see Gu Ling, I want to have another fight with him.”

“That’s right. We did the deed, and we’ll bear the consequences. What’s there to be afraid of? Situ Xie is your greatest enemy. Now that he has become the emperor, he thinks he can control everything in the world. What a dream!” Qiao Cong’s eyes were icy cold, “Finish the chicken leg, and then we’ll continue practicing!”

The capital city of Qian Country.

The rumors from the Liang Country had not yet reached the capital city, but the urgent news from Xuanbei City had arrived.

Su Liang and Gu Ling were invited by Chang’an into the palace. When they met Duanmu Chen, his complexion was still acceptable as he shared with them the news he had just received.

“He’s finally not pretending anymore.” Su Liang was a little surprised, but only slightly. Situ Xie would take this step sooner or later because there was only one Dragon Throne, and if he let someone else sit on it, he wouldn’t be able to control the situation. Situ Xie had absolute strength and power in the Liang Country, and even though Situ Han had been the emperor for many years, he was essentially just a puppet.

Situ Xie didn’t want to become the emperor, yet he wouldn’t give up supreme power. This could only show that he was an arrogant and controlling person at heart. He was excessively conceited and had a strong desire for control, thinking that even without sitting on the Dragon Throne, he could still control everything. It was indeed the case once, but many things had gone beyond his expectations in the past two years, and his plans no longer worked.

In a nutshell, Situ Xie was both a master and a supporter before usurping the throne. He wanted power, but didn’t want to be labeled with the stigma of plotting to usurp the throne.

“There is not much essential difference between Situ Xie ascending to the throne and Situ Han being on the throne. Perhaps the Liang royal family will be more tough on their wrist strength in the future.” Duanmu Chen had already regarded Situ Xie and Situ Han as the same entity. It was just that their “uncle and nephew” coexistence and scheming to fight against each other were more in line with the interests of Qian Country. The situation has changed now, but it is not at all frightening to Duanmu Chen.

“However,” Duanmu Chen continued, “the most urgent task is to solve Situ Xie’s bounty order for Qiao Jing.”

Qian Country is now using people, and Qiao Jing is the most outstanding among the generals of Qian Country. If something happens to him, it will be a great loss to Qian Country and will also

affect the military. He risked betraying Liang Country and pledged loyalty to Qian Country. If his identity as the chief general of the northern army was taken away by Liang Country, Qian Country would also be embarrassed.

Su Liang's tone was bleak, "Use the condition of sending Situ Yao back to Liang Country to let Situ Xie cancel the bounty order for Qiao Jing?" Assassinations are different from open rewards. Assassinations can only be done by Situ Xie's people, but open huge rewards will attract masters from all walks of life, and the latter is more uncontrollable.

Duanmu Chen's face darkened upon hearing this, "Su Liang, don't tell me you are serious! Situ Yao is my woman. Isn't this the same as letting me sell my own woman for profit?"

Su Liang coughed lightly, "Your Majesty, please calm down. I am only presenting a possibility."

"She is already pregnant." Duanmu Chen snorted coldly.

Su Liang was surprised, "Then congratulations to Your Majesty and Imperial Concubine Liang."

"Speak up some serious and feasible methods!" Duanmu Chen didn't really get angry. At this moment, he even felt that his reaction just now seemed a bit too intense. Would Su Liang and Gu Ling think that he regarded Situ Yao as very important?

"It's actually simple." Su Liang said, "For the reward, money matters, just use money to solve it. Since the new emperor of Liang Country has such a determined attitude, we just need to return a big gift. Our Qian Country rewards one hundred thousand taels of gold and one tael for the head of Situ Jing, the eldest grandson of Situ Xie."

Duanmu Chen's eyes narrowed slightly, "What is the reason?"

"For the matter of spending money, we are willing to do it without any reason," Su Liang snorted lightly, "Just tell Situ Xie that Qiao Jing is my Qian Country's person, and he can't move as he pleases. If he wants Qiao Jing to die, let his beloved grandson accompany him. If you don't want Situ Jing's safety to be threatened, hurry up and withdraw that bounty order!"

Treat others as you would like to be treated. As for Situ Xie, he would say that Qiao Jing is a traitor to Liang Country and let Qian Country return him to Liang Country for disposal. Then he would have to talk about why Qiao Jing grew up in Xuanbei City. The root of the matter was that Situ Xie secretly sent Qiao Jing to Qian Country as a spy. This account can also be calculated.

Duanmu Chen felt that this method was good, "The national treasury is tight, so will you two financiers pay the reward?"

Su Liang smiled and shook his head, "It's not that we can't afford it, but I'm afraid it will embarrass the emperor when it spreads."

Duanmu Chen was just joking, because in all likelihood, there would be no need for real money in the end, and it was just to show a stance.

When Su Liang and Gu Ling left the palace, the bounty order of Qian Country was also officially released: The head of Situ Jing, the Crown Prince of Liang Country, was rewarded with 100,000 taels of gold and one tael.

This extra one tael was very interesting; it was clearly intended for Situ Xie.

But in order to put on appearances, Situ Xie really dared to bet, risking the danger of his grandson. The masters who wanted the bounty didn't care about the twists and turns in the matter, they only believed that the royal family would not deny the bill for the sake of face, and they might go to complete the bounty task.

At nightfall, Duanmu Chen went to Empress Dowager Xiao Shi's place, and saw Empress Xing Yuyan and Imperial Concubine Liang Situ Yao there.

Both of them were pregnant, and Xiao Shi naturally hoped that they could get along peacefully, and it was the most important to give birth to their children safely.

Xing Yuyan deliberately showed off her higher status in front of Situ Yao, and Duanmu Chen did not refuse her intimacy, but secretly observed Situ Yao's expression.

Situ Yao behaved very generously, as gentle as ever, just occasionally narrowing her eyes, revealing some loss.

Duanmu Chen did not even realize it himself, but when he saw Situ Yao seemingly jealous, he was a little happy.

After dinner, Xiao Shi spoke up and asked Duanmu Chen to send Xing Yuyan back first.

Duanmu Chen agreed and stood up, while Xing Yuyan couldn't hide her smile. However, she heard Duanmu Chen say, "I'll send the Empress back, then go to Yao'er."

Situ Yao's eyes lit up, and Duanmu Chen didn't care about Xing Yuyan's suddenly changed expression as he walked out on his own.

Seeing this, Xiao Family frowned. As an onlooker, she recently felt that Duanmu Chen's attitude towards Situ Yao was truly different, not just a test as he said at first.

On the way, Duanmu Chen didn't speak to Xing Yuyan, just wondering if he should tell Situ Yao the news he got today. Such a big event couldn't be concealed.

After sending Xing Yuyan back, Duanmu Chen didn't even sit down, but turned around and left.

Xing Yuyan was so angry that she cursed Situ Yao for being a seductive vixen, then cried again.

By the time Duanmu Chen came to Situ Yao's palace, she had already changed her clothes and prepared a late-night snack to wait for him.

After talking for a while, Situ Yao, as always, was good at understanding people's feelings, "Your Majesty seems to have something on your mind?"

Duanmu Chen sighed, "Indeed there is something, and I think I should tell you."

Situ Yao nodded, "Please speak, Your Majesty."

"It's news that came from the north today." Duanmu Chen told Situ Yao about the changes in Liang Country's royal family.

At first, Situ Yao's expression was shocked, then she showed a sad look, "Emperor Uncle always loved me very much."

Duanmu Chen looked at Situ Yao's sad appearance, thinking it seemed a bit fake. Did she really not know that Situ Han was killed by Situ Xie? Was this real innocence, or a disguise?

However, Duanmu Chen didn't care about this. He liked intelligent people, and Situ Yao's current performance was normal. She couldn't possibly be happy to say that her grandfather finally became emperor.

Duanmu Chen held Situ Yao's hand, "I was shocked when this happened as well. However, there's one more thing. After your grandfather ascended the throne, he issued a bounty of ten thousand taels of gold to claim Qiao Jing's head."

Situ Yao was stunned for a moment, "This... maybe my grandfather had no choice. General Qiao, originally had my grandfather's trust, but he betrayed Liang Country as a prince. My grandfather had to do this to explain to the common people. I believe my grandfather didn't intend to offend Qian Country."

Duanmu Chen's face became paler, "Then what do you think I should do?"

Situ Yao sighed, "I just think that General Qiao is fickle and unreliable. Your Majesty has given him an important position, so he shouldn't ruin everything."

"Because he once ruined your grandfather's plan, otherwise, you wouldn't have married over here?" Duanmu Chen's sudden change of expression made Situ Yao's heart tremble, her face turning pale in an instant.

"Your Majesty, I truly didn't mean that. I was raised in Liang Country and just married here not long ago. I can't forget my family. If I said something wrong, please forgive me." Situ Yao got up and knelt down, her face pale from fright, but her eyes were filled with pity.

"Qiao Jing was a spy your grandfather had placed in Qian Country. I haven't settled this score yet, and now he's offering a reward to kill the chief of my Qian Country's North Army. You want me to do nothing and let your grandfather kill him?" Duanmu Chen looked at Situ Yao disappointedly, "Actually, there's a way to resolve the conflict. If you care so much about your family, I can send you back and let your grandfather cancel the bounty. Do you think he'd agree?"

Situ Yao's face stiffened, "I'm carrying Your Majesty's child in my belly..."

Duanmu Chen snorted lightly, "So if you weren't pregnant, you'd really want to go back?"

Situ Yao grabbed Duanmu Chen's clothes, "I really didn't mean that, Your Majesty, you misunderstood..."

Duanmu Chen's face was expressionless, "Actually, what I really wanted to tell you tonight is that I've already issued the same bounty during the day, for your elder brother's head. I'm offering even one more tael of gold than your grandfather."

Upon hearing this, Situ Yao was first astonished, then immediately bowed and begged Duanmu Chen to revoke the order, "I know my grandfather was wrong first. But he's my elder brother. If Your Majesty has even a little bit of pity for me, please don't do that."

"My pity for you is more than just a little, but it seems that you are not worthy of it." Duanmu Chen shook off Situ Yao and strode away with a turn.

Chang'an, who was waiting outside, saw Duanmu Chen's somber face. Not knowing what had happened and not daring to ask, he silently followed behind Duanmu Chen to the Imperial Garden.

There was a pavilion in the Imperial Garden. Whenever Duanmu Chen encountered something troubling since he was young, he liked to sit in a certain spot, allowing himself to calm down.

The night before, when Ji Yueyan stabbed him with a hairpin, Su Liang and Gu Ling came to see Duanmu Chen, who was sitting here, gazing at the moon.

Seeing Duanmu Chen heading to his old spot, Chang'an also stopped at his usual position, where he could see Duanmu Chen but not disturb him.

Duanmu Chen sat down and looked up, only to find that there was no moon in the sky tonight, just a few sparse stars with light much dimmer than usual, reflecting his current mood.

At the moment he was disappointed in Situ Yao, Duanmu Chen realized that he seemed to have genuinely fallen for this woman. Because Situ Yao matched his preferences, being with her made him feel comfortable and relaxed.

But now, Duanmu Chen had sobered up. He had always wanted to test Situ Yao, and today's events finally gave him the answer.

Ultimately, what disappointed Duanmu Chen was not the fact that Situ Yao cared about her family. After all, Duanmu Chen wouldn't like a cold-blooded and ruthless woman either.

The crux of the matter was that Duanmu Chen found Situ Yao to be foolish.

Born in the Royal Family, Situ Yao should have known that feelings were a luxury. When she was sent to Qian Country by her grandfather as a bargaining chip for Situ Jing, when Situ Jing expressed his concern for her but allowed her to marry into Qian Country's Imperial Harem, she should have understood that her future security would depend on Duanmu Chen, not her family members who didn't genuinely care for her.

She used to be a Princess, and now Situ Yao's status in Liang Country was that of a true Princess. Despite carrying Duanmu Chen's child, she still foolishly defended the Liang Royal Family in front of him. She hadn't figured out where her true home was for the rest of her life, which was simply laughable.

Situ Yao excelled in music, chess, literature, and painting, as well as understanding people's feelings. However, she was clearly Situ Xie's obedient granddaughter and had already shown her intention to use her emotions to influence Duanmu Chen's decisions and help Situ Xie. Duanmu Chen had probably given Situ Yao the illusion that she was the most special one in the Imperial Harem.

Actually, it could have been more than just an illusion, as long as she had chosen the correct position.

Unfortunately, Duanmu Chen was slightly smitten, and Situ Yao was also led astray.

Duanmu Chen's requirements for a woman were not that high, but he thought that Situ Yao was intelligent. He liked smart people.

From this point of view, Ji Yueyan was much smarter than Situ Yao. At least she had seen through the nature of the Royal Family, and after leaving them, she no longer had any attachment. Her previous plan was not bad, but it was thwarted by Su Liang. However, she had a goal, the courage to act even if it was dangerous, and was willing to fight for her love.

All Duanmu Chen wanted from Situ Yao was for her to be clear-headed, to plan for herself and not to think about those unworthy people.

From this perspective, Xing Yuyan was also foolish, but at least she was simple-minded, and Duanmu Chen could easily see through her thoughts.

Not to mention Su Liang, but there was another very smart woman in Duanmu Chen's life, and that was his mother, Empress Dowager Xiao. She leveraged her family's power while avoiding being controlled by them, always maintaining a clear-headed perspective. She became the most trustworthy concubine beside Duanmu Yi, protected her son, and now she was still helping Duanmu Chen manage the Imperial Harem and prevent conflicts among the concubines.

"Chang'an." Duanmu Chen suddenly spoke up.

Chang'an immediately ran over, "What is your command, Your Majesty?"

"I want to eat Sauce Meat Buns made by Su Liang," Duanmu Chen answered.

Chang'an hesitated for a moment before weakly saying, "It might be too late now. Madam Gu must be in bed early due to her pregnancy. Besides, it is Marquis Gu who is cooking now."

Duanmu Chen nodded, "That's fine too."

Chang'an thought that if he dared to disturb Gu Ling to steam buns at this time of the night, there was a high chance of getting hit, and he felt he would deserve it...

"This subordinate is going to..." Chang'an said reluctantly.

However, Duanmu Chen stood up, walked over, and said, "Why are you going at such a late hour? I didn't say I wanted to eat it right now. Tomorrow, I plan to visit Su Mansion in disguise to see my godson." He wanted to talk to Su Liang about some of his troubles, after all, he was his best friend.

Chapter 373: 373. The Emperor's Heart Medicine

The melodious sound of the zither entered Duanmu Chen's ears, as he slowed down his steps and listened carefully. He found the tune to be full of charm, an excellent piece that he had never heard before.

"So Su Liang knows how to play the zither! And he plays it so well." Duanmu Chen exclaimed with a smile.

However, when he walked through the sheltering green trees, and the open Bi Lake appeared in his sight, he also saw the real player. It was not Su Liang, but Gu Ling.

As expected... He guessed wrong, yet it still gave Duanmu Chen a feeling that this was also right. He once thought that Su Liang was an all-rounder, but later found that Gu Ling was even more so.

This was a prenatal education session, with Gu Ling concurrently learning the famous tunes from Su Liang's past life that he had not yet forgotten. Gu Ling's zither skills were already outstanding, having learned from his mother, Situ Ning, since he was young.

"You two have such refined taste." Duanmu Chen waved his hand, indicating that Chang'an need not follow him anymore, and walked alone towards the lakeside pavilion.

Upon hearing his voice, Su Liang looked over without standing up to greet him. Duanmu Chen's outfit today resembled the one he wore when he was the County Magistrate in Bei'an County.

As the music ended, Gu Ling left the zither case and sat back down next to Su Liang, peeling an orange for her. His slender fingers peeled the golden skin off of the orange seamlessly, removing the white fibrous strands from the segments and arranging them neatly on a white porcelain plate in front of Su Liang in the shape of a flower.

When the orange flower was completed, Duanmu Chen had just entered the pavilion. Seeing the situation, the corners of his mouth twitched, "Gu Ling, if you're so idle, I can find something more important for you to do?"

Gu Ling ignored him, taking out a small knife and starting to carve the orange peel...

Duanmu Chen cleared his throat to hide his embarrassment, "The oranges from the Lin family are indeed excellent."

"Your Majesty, how come you have the time to pay us a visit?" Su Liang said with a light laugh.

Duanmu Chen took a seat without waiting to be invited, picked up an orange from the fruit plate, and began to peel it himself, "I came to visit my godson." Pausing, he asked, "It's a boy, isn't it?" as he remembered that Su Liang was five to six months pregnant and should have determined the baby's gender by now.

Su Liang shook her head, "No."

Duanmu Chen then laughed, "A girl? That's even better."

Hearing this, Su Liang suspected that Duanmu Chen must also be planning for future marriage alliances. It was best not to say such things, otherwise Gu Ling might want to punch him...

"I should prepare some beautiful gifts for my goddaughter." Duanmu Chen knew the temperament of this couple, so he naturally did not reveal his real thoughts.

Su Liang nodded, "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Actually, there is another reason for me coming here today." Duanmu Chen's expression turned serious.

Just as Su Liang was thinking that it was time to talk about business, Duanmu Chen came out with one sentence, "I want to eat Sauce Meat Buns, either of you can make it."

“None.” Gu Ling shook his head.

Duanmu Chen: ...Why is he not at all surprised?

“Well... since I’ve come out of the palace today, it’s not excessive for you, as my hosts, to leave me some dinner, right?” Duanmu Chen’s smile deepened.

“Five hundred...” Gu Ling began, hesitating for a moment, before continuing, “Million taels.”

Duanmu Chen looked at him with an exasperated expression but didn’t say anything to Gu Ling. Instead, he said, “Baby, look at your father, he’s so stingy.”

Su Liang couldn’t help but laugh, while Gu Ling slightly furrowed his brows. He placed the carved orange peel basket in front of Su Liang and then told Duanmu Chen, “We are having Plain Steamed Buns today.”

Duanmu Chen’s expression became cheerful, and he laughed. It seemed like he had discovered Gu Ling’s weak spot, which was interesting. Whether it was Meat Buns or Plain Steamed Buns, they were all steamed buns, and he was already looking forward to enjoying them, all thanks to his goddaughter.

When Duanmu Chen said he wanted to have a private chat with Su Liang, Gu Ling had no objection and stood up with the teapot to fetch water.

“Your Majesty, is something bothering you?” Su Liang popped an orange segment into her mouth, the sweet juice swirling in her cheeks.

Duanmu Chen let out a soft sigh, “You could say that. Yesterday, I informed Consort Liang about the changes in Liang Country’s throne and the bounty order.”

Su Liang raised her eyebrows. Even if Duanmu Chen did not tell Situ Yao about this matter, she would eventually find out. But since Duanmu Chen took the initiative to tell her, was it to test her reaction or that he didn’t want to deceive her?

These two situations were different in nature. However, perhaps both were true to some extent.

Su Liang asked Duanmu Chen about Situ Yao’s reaction upon hearing the news. The focus was not on Situ Xie becoming Emperor because that was a “good thing” and there were no problems. The issue was that Duanmu Chen issued a bounty order for Situ Jing’s head, which was a problem for Situ Yao.

“She...” Duanmu Chen began, furrowing his brow.

Su Liang had already guessed what had happened.

After listening to what Duanmu Chen had said, Su Liang was not surprised by Situ Yao’s reaction. What truly surprised her was that Duanmu Chen seemed to have developed feelings for Situ Yao. Otherwise, given his previously stated requirements for women, he wouldn’t have cared about these matters, let alone been troubled by them. Because Situ Yao’s desire to protect Situ Jing and her restlessness were definitely not the same thing. In the Imperial Harem, all she could do was think about it; she couldn’t do anything else.

“What does Your Majesty hope for her to do?” Su Liang asked.

Duanmu Chen sighed, “I hope she can think more about herself and stop constantly worrying about those people from Liang Country.”

Su Liang’s expression was indifferent, “Those are her relatives. As for Your Majesty’s comment that Consort Liang is not as smart as Consort Yan, it is not entirely true. While both can be said to be foreign princesses, before Consort Liang was married, she was not a princess but a princess of a Commandery, not raised in the Imperial Palace, and the only granddaughter of Situ Xie, beloved by her whole family. On the other hand, Consort Yan’s situation is different. Their attitudes towards their families depend on their past experiences, and their experiences differ greatly.”

Although they were both born in the royal family, one was a princess without rivals who was loved by everyone, while the other was a princess with many sisters, raised in the scheming Royal Family.

Ji Yueyan had no feelings for the Yin Royal Family and wanted to leave, which was definitely not only because of Bai Yang. Even her liking for “ordinary guard” Bai Yang was a manifestation of her desire to escape from the Royal Family deep in her bones.

After listening to Su Liang’s words, Duanmu Chen fell into deep thought. After a while, he spoke again, “Do you feel that I have been too harsh on Consort Liang?”

Su Liang coughed lightly, “That’s not what I meant. I just wanted to express my thoughts on Your Majesty’s comparison of the two consorts.”

As soon as Su Liang’s words fell, Duanmu Chen spoke again, “I have indeed been harsh on her. There’s no choice, it’s also your fault. You’re too smart, making me feel that other women are stupid when I look at them.”

Su Liang: ...

Duanmu Chen’s eyes relaxed, “Shall I talk to Consort Liang again when I return to the palace? I should give her a chance, an opportunity to have an open and honest conversation.”

Su Liang realized that Duanmu Chen had truly fallen for Situ Yao, otherwise, he wouldn’t have come to talk to her today. Su Liang merely stated an objective view, which Duanmu Chen seemed to be waiting for, and promptly resolved his dilemma.

Gu Ling came back with the teapot and a plate of delicate desserts.

“Did you make it?” Duanmu Chen picked up a piece and tasted it before nodding, “Not bad.”

It was not made by Gu Ling, but by Nangong Qian, who had just made it and asked Qiuyue to bring it over.

After Gu Ling sat down, Su Liang talked about what happened just now, asking for his opinion.

Duanmu Chen didn’t feel awkward, “She’s your cousin. What kind of person do you think she is?”

Gu Ling shook his head, “I don’t know.”

Duanmu Chen held his forehead. But it was fine since Gu Ling never made unfounded comments about uncertain matters; this at least indicated that Situ Yao hadn’t done anything bad.

“Do you want to see her true heart?” Gu Ling suddenly took the initiative to ask Duanmu Chen.

Duanmu Chen nodded, “Kind of.”

“There is a way.” Gu Ling said.

Duanmu Chen was curious. Was Gu Ling going to help him? It was quite rare.

“Su Xiaoliang has created a strange poison.” Gu Ling’s expression was indifferent.

Su Liang: ...She has made many kinds of poisons, but she doesn’t remember which one would allow people to see the truth of someone’s heart? She had the intuition that Gu Ling was making up a story.

“Once ingested, that poison makes a person only able to tell the truth. If they lie, the poison will take effect within three breaths, causing the whole body to tremble. After poisoning twice, the person will die. The drug effect lasts half an hour,” Gu Ling said.

Duanmu Chen stared at Su Liang, “Is it true? Is there such a miraculous medicine?”

Su Liang maintained a smile, “There is a special reaction inside the body when people lie, even though it might not be visible from the outside.”

“You guys have tried it? Are you sure it works?” Duanmu Chen asked. Obviously, he was interested in it.

Gu Ling shook his head, “It doesn’t work. We never lie to each other.”

Duanmu Chen snorted, “There is no need to say that. What is the name of the medicine? Give me one.”

Gu Ling reached into his pocket, and Duanmu Chen waited. However, he saw Gu Ling coming back empty-handed, making a gesture of placing something in front of him.

Duanmu Chen wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him because he couldn’t see anything!

“Where’s the medicine? Are you making fun of me?” Duanmu Chen frowned.

Gu Ling’s expression was calm, “This medicine is called Emperor’s Heart Medicine.”

Duanmu Chen’s expression was strange, “Where is it?”

When Su Liang heard this name, she knew what Gu Ling was doing. Last night, Gu Ling told their baby a story, and it was about “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” which Su Liang had mentioned before.

The Emperor’s Heart Medicine... It couldn’t be seen or touched, but it strangely fit the current situation.

Su Liang thought her Great God was so talented!

Duanmu Chen also realized that the medicine Gu Ling was talking about didn’t exist at all. He was somewhat annoyed, “Are you making fun of me?”

Gu Ling shook his head, “When the emperor goes back to the palace, give Tang Empress Consort this medicine and tell her that she must tell the truth, otherwise, she will die. She will tell it.”

Su Liang’s smile deepened. The so-called “Heart Medicine” was just that, and it even had the prestige of the emperor. It was so clever.

Duanmu Chen was stunned, then his eyes narrowed, “Heart Medicine... Very good.”

This “medicine” came from Su Liang, so it was nine points credible. If innocent, there’s nothing to fear about telling the truth. In a situation where lying would cause death, and telling the truth could save a person’s life, there would be no room for lies to exist.

So, Duanmu Chen reached out and pretended to pick up the “medicine bottle” that Gu Ling had just placed in front of him and stuffed it into his pocket.

Su Liang: ...There was no need for that. As for acting with no actual object, her Great God was definitely more natural and beautiful.

Gu Ling went to cook, and Duanmu Chen didn’t express his intention to return to the palace early to interrogate Situ Yao. He changed the topic and asked Su Liang about the name of the song he heard when he arrived. He wondered if it was Gu Ling’s creation.

Su Liang casually made up a name. She remembered only a part of the melody and didn’t know the actual name.

“I didn’t expect him to be so good at playing the piano. What else can’t he do?”

Duanmu Chen asked.

Su Liang thought about it seriously, gently touching her protruding belly, and smiled faintly, “He can’t give birth to a child.”

Duanmu Chen: ...It made sense, but it was really speechless.

However, Duanmu Chen was really relaxed in front of Su Liang and Gu Ling. Especially as time went on, when he discovered that the strength of this couple would always give him more surprises, he trusted them more that they were genuinely not interested in power. Otherwise, they would have had a chance to seize the imperial throne long ago. It would be easy to get rid of him, and there would be no need to support him.

This sense of relaxation differed from what he felt in front of Situ Yao. He felt happy being with Situ Yao, compared to other women in the harem. However, it also owed to her beauty and desire; it was an intimate relationship. But so far, he still couldn’t build trust with Situ Yao, which made the so-called “relaxation and happiness” groundless and ephemeral.

Duanmu Chen admitted that he had a crush on Situ Yao at the moment. But as for how deep the feelings were, he would never admit it. He came to talk to Su Liang because he had such friends with whom he could openly express some of his inner feelings, so he came. And his acceptance of the “Heart Medicine” given by Gu Ling was a manifestation of his tiredness of suspicion.

Duanmu Chen turned from prince to crown prince, and from crown prince to emperor, without becoming more callous and suspicious like other emperors. Maybe even he didn’t realize that he had actually become much simpler than before, especially in his personal life.

Talking to Su Liang was often speechless but joyful. Duanmu Chen simply asked Su Liang how he should treat Xing Yuyan.

“If the emperor needs her to take the throne of empress, and doesn’t want her to make trouble, it’s actually simple – occasionally appease her when in a good mood,” Su Liang smiled, “But in the future, let her be less involved in the upbringing of your children.”

Duanmu Chen touched his forehead, “It makes sense.”

“I thought you would hate Ji Yueyan.” Duanmu Chen mentioned the Yan Imperial Concubine, “She and Bai Yang originally had calculations and tried to use you, didn’t they?”

Su Liang nodded, “Yes. But sometimes when judging people, we should consider their deeds, not their intentions, for no one is perfect. No matter their plans, they haven’t reached that step yet, and the so-called calculation and use cannot be considered as damage to me. Ren Dong’s face is worth giving that pair of miserable lovers another chance. After all, Ren Dong has only one brother, and has worried about him for so many years, it’s not beneficial to me to let her see him going down a dead end.”

Duanmu Chen suddenly realized that Su Liang, in some ways, was like him. They would both weigh the pros and cons before thinking about how to do things. However, the difference was that Su Liang’s approach had a more humane touch, and Duanmu Chen had long discovered that Gu Ling, who appeared to be cold, was actually very humane in his actions.

“I know why you guys have more and more friends now.” Duanmu Chen sighed, “Including myself.”

“Why?” Su Liang smiled and asked.

Duanmu Chen heard footsteps and looked at Gu Ling coming over with a tray. On the tray were hot and plump steamed buns.

Duanmu Chen said solemnly, “Because your buns taste the best.”

Chapter 374: 374. The medicine is extremely effective

Upon returning to the palace, Duanmu Chen went to find Situ Yao.

Situ Yao’s eyes were red as she sat by the window. Seeing Duanmu Chen, she seemed unable to believe it and quickly stood up to greet him. After bowing, she explained the events of the previous night, saying that she was just worried that her brother would be in danger and that she had no intention of controlling Duanmu Chen’s decision.

“It was my grandfather who first issued the reward order, so it’s normal for His Majesty to act in this way. I spoke impulsively and recklessly last night; please forgive me, Your Majesty.” Situ Yao said as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Duanmu Chen sighed, taking her hand, "I have always wished for a confidant. I hope that person is you."

Situ Yao leaned into Duanmu Chen's embrace.

Duanmu Chen gently patted her back, "I just left the palace to visit the Su Mansion and brought you something nice."

Situ Yao burst into a smile, "Is it something delicious?"

Duanmu Chen nodded, letting go of Situ Yao, took a steamed bun from the food box that Chang'an had quietly placed on the table. It was still warm.

The steamed bun wasn't big, and the outer skin was delicate, with neatly pleated folds.

"Did my sister-in-law make this?" Situ Yao asked.

Duanmu Chen shook his head, "It was made by your cousin himself, and you have never tasted it before. Give it a try."

Situ Yao then took it with a handkerchief as a mat, had two small bites, and nodded, "It's delicious. I didn't expect my cousin to have such excellent cooking skills."

"Gu Ling is a demon. There's nothing he can't do." Duanmu Chen sighed and then laughed, "There is one thing he can't do, have children."

Situ Yao laughed as well.

Once Situ Yao finished the small steamed bun, rinsed her mouth and brewed tea, the two seemed to have returned to their previous harmony.

After Duanmu Chen took a sip of tea, he put down the teacup and suddenly asked, "Yaoyao, can I trust you?"

Situ Yao looked startled but then nodded affirmatively. She spoke gently, but her eyes were resolute, "I belong to Your Majesty. I may not forget the relatives who raised me in this lifetime, but I will never betray Your Majesty."

"Good." Duanmu Chen nodded with a smile, "Today, I went to Su Mansion and happened to hear Su Liang and Gu Ling talk about a new, interesting medicine she had made."

With that, Duanmu Chen pushed a teacup towards Situ Yao, "Drink this."

Situ Yao looked uneasy, "Does this contain the medicine you mentioned...?"

"Yes. Don't be afraid." Duanmu Chen's smile was gentle, "I said it's interesting because it has no harm to the body. Otherwise, I wouldn't use it on you."

"Your Majesty, I am puzzled. What kind of interesting?" Situ Yao did not touch the cup.

"Well, I'll tell you first so that you won't be afraid." Duanmu Chen said, "This medicine is called the Heart Pill. If the person taking it lies, their body will tremble. The effect lasts for half an hour, after which it dissipates."

Situ Yao looked somewhat hurt, "Is it because of last night that Your Majesty doesn't trust me...?"

"It's related to last night's events, but not entirely. I have been thinking about you and worrying about you all the time lately, even my Mother has noticed. This is the first time in my life that I have been so attached to a woman." Duanmu Chen took Situ Yao's hand, "As the emperor, I just want a confidant that I can talk to about everything. Do you understand my feelings?"

Situ Yao frowned and nodded, "I understand. But are you sure that the medicine is as magical as you say?"

Duanmu Chen nodded with certainty, "I saw it myself in the Su Mansion as Chang'an tried the medicine. It won't cause any problems. I told you beforehand because I wanted you not to panic and calmly answer my questions."

With that, Duanmu Chen picked up the teacup again and handed it to Situ Yao, "Drink this."

Situ Yao lowered her eyes, took the cup, and asked, "Is Your Majesty sure that this medicine will not harm the fetus?"

Duanmu Chen nodded, "Of course, I specifically asked Su Liang."

Situ Yao bowed her head and sighed softly before starting to drink the warm water in the cup. She had only confirmed her pregnancy a few days ago and hadn't drunk tea since then. This cup of water was personally poured for her by Duanmu Chen.

Situ Yao didn't taste anything unusual in the water. But she knew that some high-level medicines, when dissolved in water, became colorless and tasteless. She also believed that Su Liang could make such a substance with her medical skills. She just didn't know what Duanmu Chen was going to ask her...

The teacup returned to the table, and in the quiet space, the brief collision between the bottom of the cup and the table surface produced an exceptionally crisp sound.

"Your Majesty, ask whatever you want to ask," Situ Yao spoke.

"Look up, look into Our eyes." Duanmu Chen's tone was undoubtedly gentler, but it carried an undeniable deterrence.

Situ Yao raised her head, looking at Duanmu Chen, her eyes glistening with teary light.

Duanmu Chen was not softhearted. The more he found himself somewhat caring about Situ Yao, the more he needed to confirm whether this woman was trustworthy.

As for changing the name that Gu Ling had given to this "medicine," it was necessary. The original name was too strange.

The so-called effects of the medicine were also changed by Duanmu Chen. Because he thought, if Situ Yao knew that she was pregnant, telling her that she would die if she lied, she might guess that it was Duanmu Chen who was trying to scare her, not serious.

"Do you like..." Duanmu Chen hesitated for a moment, "Gu Ling?"

Situ Yao was taken aback.

Anyone would think that Duanmu Chen would ask Situ Yao if she genuinely liked him, but he asked her if she liked Gu Ling instead.

After being surprised, Situ Yao calmly shook her head. "I don't like him."

"We are not asking about the liking between men and women. We want to know your opinion on Gu Ling—as a person and your relationship as cousins." Duanmu Chen said.

He had never doubted that Situ Yao liked Gu Ling, and the issue he was asking about at the moment was not that.

Situ Yao furrowed her brows, pondered for a moment, sighed first, then shook her head again. "I don't like him."

"Why?" Duanmu Chen asked.

Situ Yao sighed again. "Cousin Gu Ling has never taken the people of the Situ family seriously, let alone treated me as a sister."

Duanmu Chen nodded. It was true. But before, Situ Yao's attitude towards Gu Ling was different. However, that was normal. The fact was they were irrelevant to each other. Being courteous was nothing more.

Then, Duanmu Chen asked again, "You have said more than once that you admire Su Liang, and you like her very much. Is that true?"

As soon as the words fell, Situ Yao's fingers clenched her sleeve. This was something Duanmu Chen had noticed a long time ago, an unconscious action for her when she was nervous.

"I...}" Situ Yao lowered her head again, forgetting her manners. "I don't like Sister-in-law Su either..."

"Why?" Duanmu Chen's eyes darkened slightly.

"She... she..." Situ Yao clearly did not want to say the following words, "She always has a condescending attitude, as if everyone should revolve around her, she is always right, and anyone who disagrees with her must be wrong."

After Situ Yao said this, she seemed to regret it a bit and wanted to explain but stopped short.

It was probably the "unable to lie" that made her unable to come up with any more polite, insincere words to cover up her true thoughts.

Duanmu Chen's eyes, once warm, were now devoid of any warmth, even the fake ones. He asked Situ Yao, "Has Su Liang ever offended you?"

Situ Yao did not answer directly, "Her master caught me once and threatened my grandfather."

"That was because Situ Jing had captured her first."

"That was Situ Jing's doing, it has nothing to do with me."

“Capturing you was her master’s idea, she didn’t know it at the time.”

“If it weren’t for Su Liang, many things wouldn’t be like this now!”

After blurting it out, Situ Yao looked panicked and quickly lowered her head to hide her face. Under the influence of the “medicine,” she kept reminding herself that she had to tell the truth and not lie. In psychological warfare, Situ Yao couldn’t compare with Duanmu Chen.

Duanmu Chen’s expression was indifferent. “What are you dissatisfied with now? Do you wish no one would stand in the way of your grandfather’s path to unify the world?”

“I...” Situ Yao wanted to refute but didn’t dare. Her face showed a strange redness, as if the calm ice in her heart was colliding violently with long-hidden anger.

Not daring to answer is an answer in itself.

“He is my grandfather,” Situ Yao said softly, with a hint of tears in her voice.

“Your grandfather killed his son Situ Han. How do you feel about this?” Duanmu Chen asked.

Situ Yao was silent for a moment, “The imperial throne has always changed hands like this. That position was originally given to him by my grandfather.”

“Is it right for a father and son to fight for the throne?” Duanmu Chen asked.

“The Emperor didn’t kill his father too...” Situ Yao blurted, then realized what she had said, and her face turned pale.

Duanmu Chen laughed, “Yes, I snatched the throne from my father. However, at least my father is alive. It has always been said that a tiger won’t eat its offspring. Your grandfather is just showing his true colors. Have you never thought of abandoning the Situ Family and fully supporting me instead?”

This time, Situ Yao took even longer to respond, but she eventually answered Duanmu Chen’s question, “If the Situ Family of Liang Country is not good, neither are my days.”

“Heh...” Duanmu Chen let out an almost inaudible sigh, “You are pregnant with my child, yet you don’t understand me at all.”

With that, Duanmu Chen stood up and said, “Let’s end it here.” He then walked out.

Situ Yao sat there, dazed. It was as if she was in a dream, her mind blank. She didn’t know what had happened, what she had just said, or what the medicine was like...

Situ Yao looked at the teacup on the table and said hesitantly, “I really like Su Liang.”

It was a lie, but her body showed no signs of discomfort. She looked at her arm, which was hanging still, without shaking.

The so-called interesting medicine... Situ Yao’s face went pale in an instant!

Duanmu Chen went to the Imperial Garden again, walking slowly by the lake with Chang’an.

He had never asked Situ Yao about her feelings for him, but there was no need to ask now.

On the way back from the Su Mansion to the palace, Duanmu Chen had been thinking about what he should ask and what he wanted to know.

When he entered the palace, he thought of the answer. He didn't really want to hear Situ Yao say she loved him because of their positions and the fact that they had only been married for a month. Deep feelings couldn't have developed in that time.

What he wanted to know was what kind of person this woman, who had caught his attention, truly was, and whether she was worth his affection.

Asking Situ Yao about her opinion on Gu Ling and Su Liang was Duanmu Chen's way of judging her character and sense of right and wrong.

From Duanmu Chen's perspective and the facts, Gu Ling and Su Liang had not done anything to harm Situ Yao. When Situ Yao was captured by Old Bai and Old Mu, it was just a countermeasure. At that time, Su Liang was captured by Qiao Cong, and Situ Jing was still a good grandson of Situ Xie, who applauded when he learned of Su Liang's capture.

Even if Situ Yao didn't know the details beforehand, she should have understood the reasons afterward. But because of this, she held a grudge against Su Liang, which made no sense.

From Situ Yao's tone, it wasn't difficult to hear her jealousy of Su Liang, as if Su Liang's excellence was a mistake. She said Su Liang was always right, as if she was above everyone else. But the truth is that Su Liang was right. It's those who do wrong who try to twist the truth.

As for her grandfather, Situ Yao had endless tolerance and understanding for him. No matter how many evil deeds he had done, she dismissed them with just a sentence: "It has always been like this."

Situ Yao believed that the Situ Family of Liang Country would always be her support. As long as the Situ Family remained powerful, Duanmu Chen would treat her well.

Duanmu Chen found it amusing. He chose a diplomatic marriage for the greater good, but once the women became part of his harem, he did not want them to be involved in political matters. His attitude towards these women had nothing to do with the so-called overall situation. Once a marriage alliance was completed, its significance came to an end.

"It's a shame about the steamed bun made by Gu Ling," Duanmu Chen suddenly said.

Chang'an listened in silence.

"Go to the Su Mansion and get another one," Duanmu Chen ordered.

Chang'an hesitated, asking weakly, "Just...one?"

"A few more would be better," Duanmu Chen smiled. "I'll treat the Empress Dowager to a taste."

Chang'an responded, thinking this was a good reason.

"Tell Su Liang that her miraculous medicine is very effective, and thank Gu Ling on my behalf," Duanmu Chen said.

Chang'an: ... Gu Madam's medicine is effective, but I should thank Marquis Gu? I don't get it.

After Chang'an left, Duanmu Chen also left the Imperial Garden. He felt that he had been idling recently, to the point of thinking about all sorts of trivial matters for a woman whose appearance was all she had and whose character was flawed. It was ridiculous. He should better plan on how to annihilate Liang Country, which was the important matter.

When Su Liang and Gu Ling saw Chang'an again and heard him relay Duanmu Chen's words, they knew the matter was already settled.

A "medicine" used to test for lies. If everything Situ Yao said was true and satisfied Duanmu Chen, they would have to doubt if she had seen through the deception.

Only the appearance of a "bad answer" that Duanmu Chen didn't expect would make him praise the effectiveness of the medicine.

Su Liang was not surprised by this result. Not that she thought that Situ Xie's granddaughter would be just like him, since Gu Ling's mother was Situ Xie's daughter and not that kind of person either. It was just that Situ Yao's past interactions with her had always made Su Liang feel that Situ Yao was too perfect to be genuine, in other words, she couldn't see Situ Yao's sincerity.

This was also the reason why Gu Ling and Su Liang only treated Situ Yao as a member of the Situ Family.

When Duanmu Chen came to Su Liang to say those things, it meant that Situ Yao had not successfully pretended in front of him. Today simply made some things even more certain.

Without any steamed buns left, Su Liang let Chang'an take away a box of date flower crisp made by Gu Ling.

After Chang'an left, Su Liang asked Gu Ling, "Do you think Duanmu Chen will ever meet his true love in this lifetime?"

Gu Ling thought for a moment and said, "I didn't think so before. But after experiencing this incident, maybe he will."

Duanmu Chen was transforming from a typical Royal Family member into a normal person. If it were the previous him, he wouldn't have had the trouble of coming to find Su Liang today.

Duanmu Chen didn't confine Situ Yao to the Cold Palace and didn't restrict her from moving around the Imperial Harem. He still treated her kindly when they met, but he never spent the night at her place again, only saying that it was inconvenient because she was pregnant.

Situ Yao cried in front of the Empress Dowager of the Xiao Family and said she had misspoke. She didn't know what happened at that moment, as if someone was controlling her.

Empress Dowager Xiao just comforted her, but she never said anything to help explain the situation, only urging her to take good care of her fetus.

As for the servants who had accompanied Situ Yao as her dowry, they had all been replaced by Duanmu Chen, including the nanny who had served her since childhood and whom she had desperately begged to keep.

Yao City in Liang Country.

The bounty orders issued by Situ Xie haven't yet produced any results; he just received the news that Duanmu Chen had also issued a bounty order, asking for Situ Jing's head.

When the news arrived, Situ Jing was also present, and his face changed drastically on the spot.

“Imperial Ancestor, what should we do?” Situ Jing said gravely. No matter how high the walls of the palace were, they couldn’t stop some martial arts experts who could fly through the sky and escape through the ground. The fact that there were no results for Liang Country’s bounty order to date meant that killing Qiao Jing was not easy. And Situ Jing knew that the strength of both Qiao Cong and Qiao Jing, grandfather and grandson, was extremely powerful.

Situ Xie’s gaze was fixed, “This must be the idea that Su Liang and Gu Ling gave to Duanmu Chen.”

Situ Jing said with hatred, “Had I known this earlier, I should have thought of ways to get rid of them back then!”

Situ Xie shook his head, “No one can predict the future. Someone, bring Liang Zhen here!”

Situ Jing frowned, and for a moment he couldn’t remember who Liang Zhen was.

Soon, an elderly man was dragged in by two guards. The old man was not tall, with white hair and a blurry gaze, obviously drugged.

Situ Jing remembered that this man was originally from Liang Country and had received Situ Ning’s favor. After the Gu Family’s incident, he had followed Gu Ling before eventually returning to Liang Country.

Then, Situ Xie threw a piece of paper, ordered the guard to pick it up, used a knife to cut Liang Zhen’s hand, and pressed his hand on the paper, leaving a bloody handprint.

When the paper returned to Situ Xie’s hands, he looked at it coldly, “Send this to my good grandson and tell him that if he wants Liang Zhen’s family to live, let Duanmu Chen cancel the bounty order and send Situ Jing’s head here!”

Chapter 375: 375. You are not allowed to come to our house from now on.

Early in the morning, Qiao Jing got up, got ready to go out, and glanced into the courtyard, whereupon he froze.

The outside was foggy, with very low visibility. The deciduous trees in the courtyard were already bare at this time of year, and in the dense fog, only the dark lines of their twisted branches could be seen.

At this moment, however, there were not only lines on the trees but also “black balls” that drifted lightly in the wind, creating a very eerie shape.

Any outsider who saw this would probably be terrified.

Qiao Jing was just speechless because he knew what those “black balls” were – the heads of the masters who had recently come to claim the reward offered by Situ Xie, all flocking from all directions to kill him.

And this “human head tree” was Qiao Cong’s perverse taste.

“How is it?” Qiao Cong appeared behind Qiao Jing, his tone marked with a mix of satisfaction and disdain, “They’re all trash, the more they come, the better!”

Qiao Jing shook his head, “Although most of them are acting alone, with no more than three at a time, with my help, those who want my head should think twice.”

Qiao Cong scoffed, “That’s right, no one came last night. I think it must be because the bounty order issued by Xiaoliang has also been made public, and some people saw that your side was too difficult, so they went to Liang Country to kill Situ Jing instead!”

Qiao Jing nodded, “Perhaps. But that bounty order wasn’t issued by Su Liang.”

“Then it must be a plan Xiaoliang suggested to the Emperor!” Qiao Cong said.

Qiao Jing agreed on this point. However, speaking of which, if it were not for Qiao Cong’s help, he wouldn’t have been able to handle this trouble by himself. With their combined efforts, it was much easier.

A gust of wind blew, and the thick fog began to move, and the heads on the tree began to sway as well.

Qiao Jing asked Qiao Cong if he could throw away the heads, as they were an eyesore to him.

Qiao Cong refused, saying it was nice to hang them up, and since the weather was so cold, they wouldn’t rot for a while. If he wasn’t stuck there, he actually wanted to stuff all these heads into Situ Xie’s bed.

Qiao Jing:…As long as the old man is happy.

“I don’t even know if Xiaoliang’s baby is a boy or a girl, they didn’t mention it in their letter, really!” Qiao Cong grumbled.

Qiao Jing smiled, “What does Grandpa want it to be?”

“Of course, I hope it’s boy-girl twins!” Qiao Cong blurted out.

Qiao Jing shook his head, “It’s not.” It had already been determined.

“Xiaoliang and Xiaogu’s child, whether it’s a boy or a girl, will be the most beautiful in the world!” Qiao Cong was looking forward to it, then turned his head and taught Qiao Jing, “By the time you let me hold my great-grandchild, who knows when it’ll happen.”

Qiao Jing just smiled, not in a hurry about that. First, they would have to conquer Liang Country.

In the southern city of Jiaye, the weather was the most comfortable at this time of year, not too hot nor too cold.

The Orange Garden of Lian Shun’s house harvested its last batch of fruit this year, and most of it was sent to the capital city again. At present, there were just him, Nian Jincheng, and Yang Yu at home, and they could eat only a few fruits, so they didn’t plan to sell them.

The southern border had been quiet since the last conflict was resolved, with no further clashes between the two armies, especially since the recent marriage alliance.

Although Liang Country had also formed a marriage alliance with Qian Country, Lian Shun had already received news that Situ Xie had offered a huge bounty on Qiao Jing's head, and the Qian Royal Family had offered a huge bounty on Situ Jing's head. What a play where both sides hurt each other.

From the perspective of the tripartite situation, Yin Country remained on the sidelines, while the animosity between Liang Country and Qian Country had become open, with no signs of easing.

The more tense the situation, the more vigilant the south needed to be, preventing Yin Country from colluding with Liang Country or being suddenly attacked by Liang Country's spies as it had been last time.

Lian Shun was very busy because he had done a lot of work for Nian Jincheng. It wasn't that Nian Jincheng was lazy; Lian Shun volunteered to help, needing to use busyness to dispel boredom and loneliness.

That night, Lian Shun returned home, holding a bunch of flowers in his hand to give to Nian Jincheng and his wife.

As he entered, he found a surprise.

"General Lin." Qi Jun and Ren Dong appeared in front of Lian Shun, with Bai Yang standing behind them.

Previously, Ren Dong had found Bai Yang in Yin Country and met with Nian Jincheng and Lian Shun when they passed through Jiaye City.

"How did you guys get here?" Lian Shun's eyes lit up, "It must not be for sending a message, three people aren't needed for that! Did Su Xiaoliang send you to find Ying Xiaoying?"

Ren Dong shook his head, "The emperor has sent Bai Yang here to be at the disposal of General Nian and General Lin, and we've come to help you both guard the city."

Lian Shun paused for a moment, "Has the capital received any secret news that Yin Country is going to attack?"

Qi Jun explained that there was no particular situation, they just wanted to come.

"I see." Lian Shun nodded and put his arm around Qi Jun's shoulder, "That's great, I was just feeling bored with no one to play with! You guys have no idea, that bastard Xiao Nian only has eyes for his wife and treats me like I don't even exist!"

Qi Jun coughed lightly, "Young Master Lin, Ren Dong and I also plan to get married this year."

Hearing this, Lian Shun pushed Qi Jun away and embraced Bai Yang, "From now on, let's hang out together! I'm so fed up with those couples! Why hasn't there been any news about Ying Xiaoying yet!"

Later, when Lian Shun asked Bai Yang why he was ordered to join the army, Bai Yang only said it was the emperor's arrangement and did not reveal his relationship with Ji Yueyan. Ren Dong knew that even Qi Jun didn't know about this.

Yang Yu was very happy to see Ren Dong. When Su Liang and Gu Ling were not at home, Yang Yu had lived in Su Mansion for a while and had become very familiar with Ren Dong.

However, when Yang Yu asked Ren Dong whether Su Liang was carrying a boy or a girl in her belly, Ren Dong immediately froze, "Master didn't say, I don't know."

Qi Jun shook his head, indicating that he didn't know either.

"Xiao Nian, let's have a bet!" Lian Shun said excitedly, "Since no one knows, let's guess. I bet I'm going to have a godson!"

Nian Jincheng thought about it and said, "Perfect, I think it's a girl."

"What's the stake?" Yang Yu asked with a smile.

Nian Jincheng said, "Whoever guesses right gets to be the baby's godfather."

Lian Shun completely agreed.

Over the next few days, Lian Shun took Bai Yang, Qi Jun, and Ren Dong to familiarize themselves with the environment and defenses of Jiaye City. Regarding their positions, Bai Yang served as Lian Shun's Deputy General, while Qi Jun and Ren Dong both served as Nian Jincheng's Deputy Generals. They arranged it this way because Ren Dong believed that they had a duty to protect the safety of Nian Jincheng, Yang Yu, and Lian Shun while in Jiaye City.

Su Liang calculated the time. If everything went smoothly, Ying Ying and Old Bai should have returned by now, but there was still no news at all.

"Yue Mei raised Ying Ying and won't kill her easily. Old Bai is the man she once loved." Gu Ling comforted Su Liang, "In the worst-case scenario, they fall into Yue Mei's hands. In that case, Yue Mei would definitely use them to deal with you, and there would be news. Let's wait a little longer."

Caressing her bulging belly, Su Liang sighed softly, "I know."

Now, whether the three countries will go to war mainly depends on whether Yin Country wants to join, and there is no sign of this happening at the moment.

Su Liang felt that the struggle outside the battlefield between the three countries would continue for some time, such as the ongoing battle between the Royal Families of Liang Country and Qian Country with their bounty orders.

It wouldn't be long before Liang Country's Situ Xie's response to Qian Country's bounty order would be known. In the most recent message from Xuanbei City, Qiao Cong said that he had collected many heads, and he and Qiao Jing were unharmed and told them not to worry.

When the letter containing Uncle Liang's bloody handprint was delivered to Su Mansion, Su Liang had already put on the thick clothes made by Gu Ling.

The letter was delivered to the mansion by an old beggar who was paid by someone on the street.

Upon learning that Situ Xie used Uncle Liang to threaten Gu Ling, Su Liang's face was strangely calm, "If he hadn't mentioned it, I would have almost forgotten about Uncle Liang."

It had been quite some time since their last meeting. At that time, Gu Ling wasn't present, so Su Liang had talked with Uncle Liang and advised him to go home and not meddle in Gu Ling's affairs anymore.

As for Uncle Liang, Su Liang didn't have any pleasant impressions of him, because the old man never liked her. More precisely, he looked down on her and despised her. He thought that she had bewitched Gu Ling and firmly believed that she was not worthy of him.

However, although people's prejudices are like mountains, Su Liang and Gu Ling have already been truly married for more than half a year. Uncle Liang hasn't specifically come to bother them about anything since, so Su Liang thought the old man had probably accepted her marriage to Gu Ling.

As for how things had come this far between Situ Xie and her, Su Liang wasn't entirely surprised. However, she had originally thought that if Situ Xie tried to kidnap hostages again, he would target her and Gu Ling's real friends and family, not Uncle Liang.

"Uncle Liang's entire family is probably in Liang Country, closer and easier to capture," Su Liang analyzed. "As for this letter, it shows that Situ Xie thinks your relationship with Uncle Liang is very good, so you'd save him."

"When Uncle Liang initially looked for me, it was just to repay a favor," Gu Ling threw the bloodstained paper on the table, "I don't owe him anything."

If anything, there was still a score to settle between them. Uncle Liang trusted Situ Xie to genuinely care about Gu Ling and once "betrayed" Gu Ling by exposing his disguise as Ning Jing. Fortunately, Su Liang and Gu Ling managed to deal with the crisis this issue could have brought by adapting to the situation.

"But... Situ Xie has already made his move. If we ignore it, he will kill Uncle Liang's whole family as soon as he realizes that Uncle Liang has no value to us. Plus, he will definitely target the people we really care about. For example, the people of the Su Village are not far from Liang Country," Su Liang frowned. Little Tiger had already been kidnapped once because of them.

She felt that once things started to head in this direction, Situ Xie wouldn't back down. He understood what would have the most impact on Su Liang and Gu Ling.

Gu Ling's eyes fell on Su Liang's pregnant belly, and he reached out, gently touching it.

Su Liang sighed softly, "If it wasn't for my pregnancy, we should have gone to Liang Country to assassinate Situ Xie at a time like this."

"No," Gu Ling shook his head, "he knows we can't kill Qiao Jing."

Su Liang's eyes narrowed, looking at the letter again, "So his purpose is only to force us to cancel the reward for Situ Jing?"

Even though it seemed impossible, he proposed such a condition to force Su Liang and Gu Ling to compromise and cancel the reward first.

Afterward, Situ Xie should also cancel the reward for Qiao Jing, with the reasoning that Qian Country had already shown their willingness to make peace through their actions. Otherwise, this would be never-ending, and Situ Jing would never know peace either.

Having just ascended to the throne, Situ Xie had to take a strong stance against Qiao Jing's public betrayal of the Liang Royal Family. Otherwise, he would lose face.

There's not much difference between offering a reward and assassinating. Even if the reward is later canceled, the assassination could still continue.

If Qian Royal Family cancels the reward first and then Situ Xie does so, there would be a significant time gap. The skilled fighters out for the money might feel cheated and left with no choice but to become even more desperate to kill Qiao Jing.

Situ Xie surely anticipated this as well.

Uncle Liang and his family were just tools, not the real goal. This was a game of chess, with Situ Xie making the first move to force Su Liang and Gu Ling's hand. It was a deterrent, playing on their good nature in his eyes.

"Let's just cancel it then," Su Liang and Gu Ling spoke at the same time, saying the same words.

It wasn't just for Uncle Liang's sake, but also to put an end to this matter on the surface. They dared to do this knowing fully well that Qiao Cong and his grandson Qiao Jing were not in actual danger.

Originally, the Qian Royal Family's reward was only meant to make Situ Xie cancel his reward for Qiao Jing. Now things had just taken a detour.

Additionally, although they didn't like Uncle Liang, they didn't want him to die either. His family was innocent, and Su Liang and Gu Ling never wanted innocent people to be involved or hurt because of them.

When Gu Ling went to the palace to tell Duanmu Chen about canceling the reward, Duanmu Chen was speechless, "This will make me lose face."

Gu Ling's expression was indifferent, "Just say something noble and grand."

Duanmu Chen: ...

However, he was good at that.

The next morning at court, Duanmu Chen announced that in order for Liang Country and Qian Country to coexist peacefully, Qian Country would revoke the previous reward for the capture of the Crown Prince of Liang Country. He also hoped that Emperor Liang would rescind the reward for capturing Qiao Jing as soon as possible and seek opportunities for peace talks.

On the surface, it appeared that Qian Country had been the weaker party, but as long as Qiao Jing remained alive, it was the Situ Family of Liang Country that would ultimately be humiliated by these events.

Two days later, a special guest arrived at Su Mansion.

He was a spirited old man, sent by the Crown Prince of Yin Country, Ji Yuebai. He was merely passing through Qian Country on his way to Liang Country, where he was to serve as an envoy of Yin Country and meet with Situ Xie to discuss the alliance between the two countries.

The secret operation was meant to prevent any leaks or interference from Qian Country.

The Emperor of Yin Country had neglected state affairs due to years of indulgence in wine and carnal pleasure, and he now lay ill. Ji Yuebai had essentially taken control of the country, just waiting for the Emperor Yin to pass away.

“Master Gu, Madam Gu, this is a letter from my master for you both.” The old man handed a letter to Gu Ling, then took a delicate brocade box from his bosom and said, “This is a gift for you both.”

The gift was meant to celebrate the baby that Gu Ling and Su Liang were expecting.

After the old man took his seat, Gu Ling read the letter while Su Liang opened the gift box. Inside was a dark pearl, not very noticeable during the day, but definitely a valuable treasure by night.

Gu Ling handed the letter to Su Liang after reading it.

Although Su Liang had never met Ji Yuebai, she had heard Gu Ling mention him, and she imagined the Crown Prince of Yin Country to be a gentle and refined scholar.

This letter, however, was full of surprises, as its content was very rough... There was not a single unnecessary word, no pretentiousness, just a straightforward assurance that he intended to “sincerely” ally with Liang Country to fight Qian Country. However, it was up to Gu Ling to decide the date of the war and to then inform the messenger.

The so-called sincerity, of course, meant that he planned to take advantage of Liang Country once again. Ji Yuebai didn’t like war, but if the people of Liang Country were unwilling to stop the fight, he would have to deal with them.

“My son is clever and quick-witted. If Madam Su gives birth to a daughter, please let her become my daughter-in-law!” This was Ji Yuebai’s last sentence in the letter, which Gu Ling chose to ignore as if he hadn’t seen it.

The actual alliance was between Gu Ling and Ji Yuebai, and everything in this letter had already been discussed between them. But until now, they had not informed Duanmu Chen.

With Ji Yuebai becoming Crown Prince, Duanmu Chen becoming Emperor of Qian Country, and Situ Xie becoming Emperor of Liang Country, some plans could finally be put into motion.

Of course, Ji Yuebai didn’t actively send envoys to Liang Country; before this, the deceased Situ Han and Situ Xie had repeatedly sent people to secretly visit Yin Country to negotiate cooperation, but Ji Yuebai had never given them a straight answer.

Su Liang chuckled. Over the years, Gu Ling had saved many people due to his special abilities, most of whom weren’t even aware of his existence, and he never sought anything in return. However, this Crown Prince of Yin Country was an unexpected delight.

The old man couldn't stay in Su Mansion for too long as he had to rendezvous with his accomplices. He needed Gu Ling to give him a message to relay to Situ Xie in Liang Country, claiming it was the intent of the Crown Prince of Yin Country.

Gu Ling thought for a moment and said, "Let's wait until next spring."

The old man nodded, "How about March? I'll just say we should be considerate of Liang Country's harsh winters and insufficient supplies."

Gu Ling agreed.

After finishing his tea and accepting the food Su Liang had prepared for him, the old man left secretly.

After he left, Su Liang asked Gu Ling, "Why wait until next spring?"

Gu Ling gently stroked Su Liang's pregnant belly, "By then, the baby will be born, and you'll have finished your confinement. It wouldn't be good for you to worry about the war while pregnant or during your confinement."

Given Qian Country's current situation, most of the generals in power were friends of theirs. If war broke out in the North, it was very likely that Xing Ji would have to go north again to oversee the situation.

Su Liang laughed softly, "Alright, that makes sense. But, can we really trust Ji Yuebai? Isn't there a possibility that he's deceiving us and Yin Country will join forces with Liang Country to fight against Qian Country?"

Gu Ling shook his head, "There's only one lie in Ji Yuebai's letter."

Su Liang expressed her curiosity, only to hear Gu Ling say, "I've seen his son, and he's neither clever nor quick-witted. He's not allowed at our house in the future."

Chapter 376: 376. Changed mind

The news of Duanmu Chen cancelling the bounty spread quickly.

Upon learning about it in Xuanbei City, Qiao Cong couldn't understand, "Situ Xie didn't cancel the bounty on you, so why did we cancel the bounty on his grandson first?"

Qiao Jing thought about it and said, "There must be something happening that we don't know."

Qiao Cong frowned, "What could it be?"

"For example..." Qiao Jing pondered, "Situ Xie caught someone who could threaten Su Liang and Gu Ling."

"What about yours then? I'm not afraid, but it's annoying to be on edge every day!"

Qiao Cong's brow remained furrowed.

Qiao Jing shook his head slightly, "Grandfather need not worry. I think when the news reaches Liang Country, Situ Xie will probably also cancel the bounty on me, just a little later. Otherwise, it

will be endless. I might not die, but the chances of his precious grandson being caught or killed are greater.”

Qiao Cong snorted lightly, “I hope so!”

Outside the window in the courtyard, a few more heads appeared on the tree.

There was something to be happy about that day, as letters and things from the capital city came again. However, these were sent before Duanmu Chen canceled the bounty, so they didn’t mention it.

The letter from Su Liang only urged them to be very careful.

There was also a letter from Cen Man to Qiao Cong, which talked about some trivial matters at home, such as what interesting weapons Old Muhu and Gu Ling made, how Zhengzheng caught a fat fish, and how Nangong Qian learned a few new dishes.

In addition to the winter clothes and cold medicines that Su Liang had prepared for them, there were also two cloaks that Nangong Qian had made by hand for Qiao Cong and Qiao Jing. Although the stitches were not very fine, Qiao Cong was very happy and put it on immediately.

Qiao Jing also tried it and thought it was fine. Nangong Qian’s sewing skills needed improvement, but if she was interested in it, she could do it or not do it at all.

Although the clothing prepared by Su Liang was all top-quality from Yang Family’s Embroidery Workshop, the handmade ones by Nangong Qian made the grandfather and grandson even happier. It wasn’t about the cloaks themselves, they felt relieved about Nangong Qian’s current physical, mental, and living conditions.

Qiao Cong looked around, feeling like something was missing.

After a while, he slapped his forehead, “Why did no one mention if Xiaoliang is having a boy or a girl? This is so important, shouldn’t they tell us?”

“This is a matter between Su Liang and Gu Ling, and they definitely don’t think they should tell me. However, since they didn’t tell grandfather, I think they probably want to give grandfather a surprise.” Qiao Jing analyzed.

Qiao Cong scoffed, “If it’s a surprise, then I have to be able to go home before the New Year. With the current situation, it’s difficult.”

Qiao Jing obediently said, “It’s all my fault.”

Qiao Cong sighed, “Just hurry up and fight the war, and it’ll be over.”

Qiao Jing came here to seek redemption through merit; he needed “merits” to count. Qiao Cong had to wait for the Situ Family of Liang Country to be eliminated before he could relax his protection of Qiao Jing.

Qiao Jing shook his head, “Liang Country won’t start a war in this season.” In winter, there was no advantage for Liang Country, where the climate was extremely cold, because the weather had much less impact on Qian Country. The lack of food and supplies made it impossible for Liang Country’s army to travel far unless there was a solid and reliable alliance with Yin Country.

However, based on past experience, if the Yin Country's Royal Family said to the Liang Country's Royal Family: "Let's fight! Fight now! We'll provide all the food and supplies." The Liang Country's Royal Family would certainly think that the Yin Country was trying to trick them again.

Qian Country was located in the central plains. If Yin Country really wanted to transport food and supplies to Liang Country, it would be impossible to avoid Qian Country's eyes. Disguising as a merchant convoy would not work either, as the scale of food and supplies needed for war was completely different from that of a normal merchant convoy.

"So we have to wait until next spring at the earliest?" Qiao Cong furrowed his brows.

Qiao Jing nodded, "I think so."

Qiao Cong sighed, "When will I be able to see my disciple then!"

"It will be sooner than me giving grandfather a great-grandchild." Qiao Jing said.

Qiao Cong kicked him away irritably.

Although the bounty on Situ Jing had been removed, the one on Qiao Jing had not. However, those who had been drawn by the reward knew that targeting Qiao Jing would result in a dead end, so most of them chose to go to Yao City to find a chance to kill Situ Jing.

These masters, who would rather "die for wealth," did not worry about becoming the targets of Liang Country's Royal Family's revenge. In worst-case scenarios, after collecting the rewards in Qian Country, they would receive protection from the Royal Family there, and they might even receive promotions and titles.

To protect Situ Jing, Situ Xie hid him for several days, not allowing him to show his face. He was not in the Imperial Palace nor in the original Yue Wang Mansion.

This was somewhat useful but also somewhat humiliating. Qiao Jing could not be hidden as he was the leader of Qian Country's Northern Army, responsible for managing Xuanbei City. Although the reward had been in place for a long time, no one had been able to do anything to him, nor were there any reports of him being injured.

This made people understand why Situ Xie had once valued Qiao Jing so much. In terms of strength, Qiao Jing was unmatched by the princes. In terms of wisdom, the fact that he was entrusted with important tasks by the Emperor Qian already spoke volumes.

But this was even more ironic. The best prince of Liang Country's Royal Family was wholeheartedly supporting Qian Country, treating Liang Country as an enemy. This matter was worth the deep reflection of the Liang Country's ministers.

Finally, on this day, Situ Xie received a message. Within the expected time frame, Duanmu Chen had canceled the bounty on Situ Jing.

Situ Jing could finally come out of the dark treasure vault in Liang Country's Imperial Palace. After being bored for several days, his face was somewhat pale, and his mood was extremely bad. Hearing the name "Qiao Jing," he gritted his teeth with hatred. The second person he hated most was Gu Ling.

“It seems that Gu Ling really cares about the lives of Liang Zhen’s entire family.” Situ Jing’s eyes were cold as ice. “In that case, if he doesn’t bring Qiao Jing’s head to us, we will not be polite!”

Situ Xie’s face was calm, “He won’t kill Qiao Jing. Neither for Liang Zhen nor for anyone else.”

Situ Jing blurted out, “If we catch Su Liang, won’t Gu Ling kill Qiao Jing to exchange for her?”

Situ Xie nodded, “No.” This was the principle of Gu Ling and Su Liang’s personalities, and it didn’t matter who was more important.

“Why did our imperial grandfather propose such conditions to them?” Situ Jing was puzzled.

“Just to tell them that Qiao Jing must die.” Situ Xie said coldly, “In three days, we will cancel the bounty on Qiao Jing.”

Situ Jing failed to understand this even more, but then he heard Situ Xie say, “Let this issue end on the surface.”

The truth was that Qiao Jing was not afraid of the bounty, but Situ Jing was.

“What about Liang Zhen’s family?” Situ Jing asked.

Situ Xie said to keep them for the time being as they might be useful later.

When Situ Jing personally told Liang Zhen that Gu Ling had chosen to compromise for his sake, Liang Zhen cried relentlessly and repeatedly said that he was sorry for Gu Ling.

If Liang Zhen hadn’t revealed Gu Ling’s secret to Situ Xie back then, many things might not have turned worse and would have been different from now.

Looking back at what he had once said to Gu Ling, “Your grandfather truly cares about you,” it now seemed to be utterly ridiculous.

Three days later, Situ Xie announced in court that since Emperor Qian had shown sincerity in seeking peace, Liang Country would also cancel the bounty on Qiao Jing, severing all ties between Qiao Jing and the Situ Family.

Although Qian Country had canceled theirs first, the officials of Liang Country still felt somewhat aggrieved, as Qiao Jing was still alive, which was an embarrassment to the Royal Family of Liang Country.

However, observant people believed that just because the bounty was canceled, it didn’t mean that the Liang Country’s Royal Family would stop trying to assassinate Qiao Jing.

Two days later, Situ Xie finally met the guest he had been waiting for: a secret envoy sent by the Crown Prince of Yin Country. The leader was the master of Ji Yuebai, a man named Lai Hong.

Lai Hong and his team moved into the original Yue Wang Mansion. Situ Xie did not entertain them with a grand feast, mainly to conduct secret negotiations to avoid being detected by Qian Country’s spies, which would ruin their plans.

“My master only wishes for peace and well-being of the common people in the world.” Lai Hong said seriously, “It’s time to break the current situation. Nothing can be achieved without breaking it.”

Situ Xie nodded, “What Lord Lai said is reasonable.”

“Cooperating with Emperor Liang to exterminate Qian Country is the fastest and the only choice to promote the unification of the world,” Lai Hong said.

Upon hearing this, Situ Xie’s face brightened with joy, “The idea of the crown prince of Yin Country coincides with mine!”

“My master has not been involved in the past entanglements between Yin and Liang countries. If Emperor Liang doubts our sincerity in cooperating this time, there is no need to talk,” Lai Hong said neither arrogantly nor humbly.

“No!” Situ Xie said decisively, “I believe in the sincerity and credibility of the crown prince of Yin.”

Lai Hong then mentioned that Ji Yuebai’s intention was to set the start of the war in early spring next year, at the beginning of March, when the cold weather would no longer be a hindrance. During the remaining half-year period, they should carefully plan how Yin Country would send the supplies to support Liang Country.

Upon hearing this, the expression on Situ Xie’s face became even more relaxed, “Good! I will also order my men to prepare the finest warhorses as soon as possible and present them to Yin Country.” The supplies sent by Yin Country would not be sent for free, of course.

As for the date of the start of the war set by Ji Yuebai, Situ Xie was very satisfied because that was his plan as well. If the Yin Country said they wanted to start the war within the year, Situ Xie would definitely suspect that they were trying to deceive Liang Country.

Next, the urgent issue to be addressed was how to transport the supplies from Yin Country to Liang Country and how to send the warhorses from Liang Country to Yin Country.

Even if the war was to start in early spring, when it was no longer cold, Liang Country’s supplies would still not last very long. Most parts of Liang

Country were cold and barren, with a perennial shortage of food. This was why successive rulers of Liang Country had to wage wars, as winning wars was the only way to improve the lives of the people.

The fertile land of Yin Country provided an abundance of food, which was one of the reasons why the royal family of Yin Country did not want to engage in a war. They already occupied the best regions and had no need to wage wars against others to rob the people of their wealth; it was best for them to defend their borders and watch the fires from across the river.

Although it was feasible to form an alliance with Liang Country to get rid of Qian Country, what would happen afterward? If Liang Country, as a wolf, was assisted in its expansion, would it truly be beneficial to Yin Country? To shake the status quo meant taking risks.

Unless the ruler of Yin Country wanted to unify the world.

Now, Ji Yuebai had shown such a desire, which was something Situ Xie wanted to see.

Although Situ Xie didn't fully trust Yin Country, based on his understanding of Ji Yuebai's past actions, he believed Ji Yuebai to be a man of great ambition.

The Liang royal family had been waiting for a truly ambitious person to take control of the Yin royal family. Only in this way could Liang Country have a chance to use Yin Country to take an important step in breaking the deadlock.

Regarding how Yin Country and Liang Country would complete the "transaction" before the start of the war across Qian Country, Lai Hong conveyed Ji Yuebai's intention: to listen to Situ Xie's arrangements.

Following the battle at the beginning of the year, it had become a public secret that Situ Xie had been planting spies in Qian Country and Yin Country for many years.

Ji Yuebai's intention was simple: there was plenty of food in Yin Country, and they were willing to provide it, but Situ Xie had to find a way to transport it back to Liang Country himself.

This was something Situ Xie had long planned, and it was not impossible to achieve, but it required the use of his critical chess pieces and channels, with the utmost caution, so as to cover the eyes and ears of Qian's royal family.

This was absolutely confidential and could not be casually revealed to the people of Yin Country, especially at the beginning of the cooperation when trust was very limited.

Situ Xie invited Lai Hong and his party to rest in the King Yue Mansion. They would discuss other matters another day, as he needed time to think.

Lai Hong had no objections, but said he must leave in five days. He had always heard about the beauty of Wolong Snow Mountain and wanted to visit it since he was already here.

Situ Xie immediately agreed. Learning from past experience, he did not arrange for his grandson to accompany them but instead assigned a team that was very familiar with the terrain of Wolong Snow Mountain.

Lai Hong and his entourage were all skilled martial artists, and no accidents occurred.

Upon returning from the mountain, Lai Hong mentioned an unreasonable request to Situ Jing, who hosted him: his grandson was unwell, and the doctor said he needed Snow Lotus for his treatment. Lai Hong intended to try his luck to see if he could find any, but unfortunately, his luck was not good.

After receiving Situ Xie's instructions to try to meet Lai Hong's demands, Situ Jing said that he could provide Lai Hong with some high-quality Snow Lotus.

Lai Hong appeared very pleased and repeatedly expressed his thanks.

After reporting to Situ Xie, Situ Xie asked him to prepare more Snow Lotus and also took an extra thousand-year-old Snow Lotus petal from his limited supply to send to Ji Yuebai.

Lai Hong gladly accepted the precious items given to him, appearing quite materialistic.

Situ Xie enjoyed dealing with people with such flaws, so he sent many treasures to please Lai Hong.

Regarding the supply of grain and warhorses, Situ Xie still had no concrete plan when Lai Hong put it into practice. He would inform Ji Yuebai later, after the plan was ready. In the meantime, Lai Hong should request that Yin Country start preparing to support Beiliang Country with grain.

Lai Hong agreed with everything, and the guests were entertained pleasantly.

The next day, Lai Hong set out early, leaving Yao City with his people.

Situ Jing asked Situ Xie, "Can we really trust Yin Country this time?"

Situ Xie's eyes were deep and mysterious, "It's worth taking a gamble. As long as Yin Country hasn't allied with Qian Country, even if they break their promise at the last minute, the situation won't be worse than before."

Situ Jing frowned, "What if... Yin Country secretly allies with Qian Country? Although this possibility is small, many things have changed since Duanmu Chen became the emperor and Ji Yuebai took power. However, I heard that the Princess of Yin Country fell ill as soon as she arrived in Qian Country, and she remains sick. The only person who makes Duanmu Chen look twice is his younger sister."

Situ Xie thought for a moment, "The affairs of Duanmu Chen's palace prove nothing. There is no reason for Yin Country to ally with Qian Country, as their safety relies on Liang Country's restraint. If Liang Country were to disappear, Yin Country would face extinction."

"Your Royal Grandfather speaks wisely," Situ Jing agreed wholeheartedly.

In the capital city of Qian Country.

Yuanming Pavilion was renovated and had underfloor heating installed before winter started. As usual, it was Su Liang's idea, and Gu Ling put it into practice. He only gave people surprises and never disappointed them on such matters.

Su Liang's belly grew larger, and Gu Ling looked at it daily, occasionally revealing a faint hint of worry.

Su Liang found this amusing, asking him what he was thinking about.

Gu Ling sighed lightly, "Why is it that only women can give birth? It would be nice if couples could choose who gets to bear the child."

He just thought that Su Liang was going through a lot, and he couldn't empathize or shoulder any of the burdens himself.

Su Liang thought Gu Ling's idea was fascinating. In the world of her previous life, it might have been possible with the advance of technology.

Looking serious, Su Liang told Gu Ling, "If our positions were switched and you were the one giving birth, I'd worry about you too."

Gu Ling paused for a moment, "True. It would be great if our baby could just pop out of a stone crevice."

Su Liang couldn't help but laugh, "That's the Monkey King."

Some more days passed, and there was still no news from Lao Bai and Ying Ying. Lai Hong returned from Liang Country, stopping by to secretly visit Su Liang and Gu Ling.

“The Master has instructed that whatever gifts Emperor Liang sends, they should all be given to your child,” Lai Hong handed over the Snow Lotus flowers and other treasures brought back from Liang Country to Su Mansion, clarifying that they were for the unborn baby, not Su Liang and Gu Ling.

Gu Ling gave Lai Hong a prepared box, “This is a gift for Ji Yuebai’s son. Please pass it on.”

Lai Hong accepted the gift with a smile, and after informing them of his conversation with Situ Xie, he left.

Curious, Su Liang asked Gu Ling, “When did you prepare a gift for Ji Yuebai’s son? What is it?”

“A wooden sword,” Gu Ling replied, “Ji Yuebai had asked for his son to become my disciple, but I had refused. Now, I’ve changed my mind and decided to accept him.”

Su Liang laughed, “Aren’t you afraid he’ll kidnap your precious daughter?”

“That’s why I need to keep an eye on him, teach him well, and train him to be a good brother to our baby,” Gu Ling said.

Chapter 377: 377. Disciple’s Great Harvest

Lin Xueqing’s delivery was more than a month ahead of Su Liang’s.

Although Su Liang took Lin Xueqing’s pulse regularly and it was always stable, Xing Yusheng was still nervous when the day of the delivery arrived. In the middle of the night, he insisted on calling Su Liang to stand by, so Gu Ling accompanied her there.

Su Liang sat in the delivery room, thinking that her main task was to reassure everyone, but she was also prepared for any emergencies.

Gu Ling sat in the courtyard waiting, watching Xing Yusheng pacing back and forth anxiously like an ant on a hot pan. Instead of asking him to sit down, Gu Ling asked him about his current mood.

“I’m so anxious and scared!” Xing Yusheng’s forehead was sweating, both of his hands clenched together, and his voice was like a tightly-wound string, seemingly ready to break at any moment.

Gu Ling suddenly stood up and handed Xing Yusheng a pill, “Eat this.”

Xing Yusheng instinctively moved backward, “I’m not eating it! You won’t let me in, and now you want to knock me out?”

Lin Shuzhi and Xing Ji, who were sitting not far away, both looked over. They were also very anxious, especially Lin Shuzhi. Xing Ji tried to start a conversation about the state of the world, but Lin Shuzhi was unable to think clearly, making the conversation disjointed.

“It’s just sugar,” Gu Ling said.

With an inexplicit look on his face, Xing Yusheng took the pill and put it in his mouth. A fresh sweetness filled his mouth, and it was indeed sugar.

Gu Ling also handed a piece of sugary pill to both Lin Shuzhi and Xing Ji. He had made these, improving upon one of Su Liang's recipes.

The sweetness could temporarily alleviate anxiety and stress. Gu Ling brought them along specifically for times like this, thinking they might come in handy.

The brothers Lin Boyan and Lin Bojun, who arrived later, were also given sugar by Gu Ling.

Xing Yusheng felt slightly better, just a little bit, but his previously tense breathing had returned to normal.

Xing Ji sighed, "Xiaogu is really talented." It was very thoughtful of him to bring sugar pills with him in the middle of the night, obviously prepared for them.

Lin Shuzhi nodded, "A genius." His eyes were constantly fixed on the tightly closed door, his ears pricked, but he could not hear anything.

"With Xiaoliang inside, everything will be fine!" Lin Bojun patted Xing Yusheng on the shoulder to comfort him, but he inadvertently knocked Xing Yusheng to the ground.

With a helpless expression, Lin Boyan pulled Xing Yusheng up. They were both fathers already and could understand Xing Yusheng's feelings at this moment. Moreover, they were also worried as their precious sister was inside.

After handing out the sugar, Gu Ling sat back down and suddenly said to Xing Yusheng, "I can accept your son as my disciple."

Everyone looked at Gu Ling without understanding why he suddenly brought this up out of the blue.

Then, Gu Ling said to Lin Boyan and Lin Bojun, "Your sons should also become my disciples."

This was, of course, a good thing. Lin Shuzhi had just appraised Gu Ling as a genius.

Lin Boyan and Lin Bojun both expressed their eagerness one after another, making it a deal and declaring that there would be no backing out.

Xing Yusheng absentmindedly nodded, "Alright! Xueqing will be very happy, she thinks you're the most amazing! No, the most amazing one is Su Liang..." Before he finished his sentence, he shifted his attention and temporarily forgot about his soon-to-be-born son becoming one of Gu Ling's disciples.

Lin Xueqing's cry of pain came from the room, causing the faces of the three men of the Lin Family to turn pale, and Xing Yusheng almost fainted.

Gu Ling was the calmest one, knowing that nothing would happen.

At this moment, Gu Ling was thinking that he could practice midwifery on animals first, such as horses and cows, and experiment with the cesarean section technique that Su Liang had taught him if necessary. When it was Su Liang's turn to deliver, he wanted to prevent any possible accidents and consider all potential problems beforehand by preparing contingency plans.

It was cold outside in the late night, so the servants brought charcoal basins and hot water.

Gu Ling drank a cup of water and gave Xing Yusheng another sugar pill, fearing that he might faint.

As the sky began to brighten, a loud cry from the baby was heard, shattering the tense atmosphere in the courtyard, and everyone's faces lit up with smiles.

Lin Shuzhi finally dared to speak up and called out, "Is Xueqing alright?"

From inside the room, Old Madam Xing's excited voice responded, "She's fine! Mother and child are safe!"

Xing Ji held Lin Shuzhi, "Congratulations on becoming a grandfather."

Lin Shuzhi breathed a sigh of relief, "Congratulations to you too for becoming a grandfather."

Xing Yusheng was finally allowed to go in. It was Old Madam Xing who insisted on keeping him outside, not because it was a custom but because she knew that he would not be able to handle the stress and might make Lin Xueqing even more tense, so having Su Liang, the professional divine doctor staying with Lin Xueqing would be enough.

The newborn son of Xing Yusheng and Lin Xueqing was wrapped in swaddling clothes and carried to the door. Both Lin Shuzhi and Xing Ji's eyes glistened with tears as they looked at him.

Lin Boyan and Lin Bojun said in unison, "He looks like me."

Gu Ling looked at the just-born baby and thought that in some details, the boy really resembled his two uncles. Lin Bojun's son also somewhat resembled Qin Yujin's older brother, Qin Yuheng.

As he was thinking about this, Old Master Qin arrived as well. As soon as he entered the door, he asked, "Has she given birth? Is Xueqing okay?"

Xing Yusheng was Old Master Qin's only grandson, and the newborn baby was his great-grandson. Seeing that mother and child were safe and sound, Old Master Qin couldn't help grinning from ear to ear.

The child was quickly taken back inside, and Old Master Qin then noticed Gu Ling and asked if Su Liang's baby was a boy or a girl.

Gu Ling shook his head, "It's a secret."

"Really! You're still playing coy!" Old Master Qin glared at Gu Ling. Though it was not mentioned, everyone actually hoped that Su Liang would have a girl because there were too many boys...

When Su Liang came out, Gu Ling embraced her, gently stroking her hair.

Lin Shuzhi said, "It's a secret."

Gu Ling's expression was serious, "We will grow old and can't accompany our baby for a lifetime. She needs an older brother to protect her."

If the wooden sword that Gu Ling gave to Ji Xiaobai through Lai Hong the other day was just a whim, this time, it was not. He looked at Lin Boyan and Lin Bojun guarding their sister Lin Xueqing last night and felt that his baby daughter must have older brothers, and one was not enough.

But Gu Ling and Su Liang couldn't give their daughter an older brother themselves, so they looked for some instead.

Even if Gu Ling didn't take them as disciples, those boys would still be their baby's brothers, but he decided to cultivate them in both literature and martial arts from a young age. They must not be weak, otherwise, how could they let their daughter protect them in times of trouble?

Right now, many of Su Liang's friends rely on her to solve their problems, even though some of them are technically her elder brothers. Gu Ling doesn't blame them as they are his friends too, it's just the reality. He wants to plan ahead to prevent his daughter from being as tired as Su Liang when she grows up.

After listening to Gu Ling's explanation, Su Liang gave a thumbs up, "Great God, you really have a long-term vision. I support you."

Of course, they say it's for their daughter, but actually, Gu Ling likes children very much. Even if these boys he wanted to take as disciples did not worship him as a master, they would still be under his and Su Liang's care.

With five more disciples all of a sudden, Su Liang felt that the house would become more and more lively when her daughter was born. She could already imagine the scene of Gu Ling taking a group of little steamed buns fishing, climbing mountains, traveling lakes, and practicing martial arts. She was looking forward to it.

On the day Lin Xueqing's sons had their third bath, Gu Ling and Su Liang were invited to the Marquis Zhong Xin Mansion, where they saw Miao's son, Xing Yuyang, had returned. He looked much thinner, listlessly following behind Xing Ji. Only when someone greeted him would he crack a smile, but otherwise, he seemed lost in his thoughts.

Today, Duanmu Chen specially accompanied Xing Yuyan back to her parents' home, giving her tremendous face. Xing Yuyan, pregnant and increasingly pampered, was entitled to be pampered as the Empress, as long as she didn't act out, Su Liang didn't care about her.

Su Liang and Gu Ling went to the palace again, as they were invited by Duanmu Chen in Chang'an. "I heard that you've taken both sons of the Lin family and Xing Yusheng's son as your disciples?" Duanmu Chen asked Gu Ling.

Gu Ling nodded.

"Then, when my son starts learning martial arts, I would like you to teach him as well," Duanmu Chen smiled, thinking that since Gu Ling liked to accept disciples so much, it would be unreasonable not to accept his son. With the master-disciple relationship, wouldn't he treat his son like his own?

But to his surprise, Gu Ling shook his head and directly refused, "The prince's body is too precious, I dare not."

Duanmu Chen's expression darkened, "Is it not that you are unwilling, but dare not? What are you afraid of?"

Gu Ling remained silent.

Duanmu Chen snorted, "I understand your concerns. Learning martial arts is always difficult, and I am afraid my son will be spoiled and weak. Just teach him as you see fit, no need to be polite."

Only then did Gu Ling nod, "Alright."

"Alright? What do you mean alright?" Duanmu Chen grumbled, "Fine, it's settled! Su Liang, you be the witness!"

Su Liang chuckled, "No problem." She thought that if Gu Ling took Duanmu Chen's son as a disciple as well and made him a martial brother to Ji Yuebai's son, many things might become easier for them in the future.

Duanmu Chen approached them not for his son to become a disciple but to consult with them on Duanmu Yi's recovery.

"It's been a few months, and we can't keep doing this for the next ten or eight years," Duanmu Chen sighed softly. His reign was stable, and he couldn't bear to kill Duanmu Yi. He kept him half-dead, feeling it wasn't a long-term solution.

Gu Ling shook his head, "Not appropriate."

Duanmu Yi, in his prime, was certainly not reconciled to being deposed by Duanmu Chen. Even if he temporarily hid his pride, once his body truly recovered, there was no telling what troubles he might stir up.

Duanmu Chen explained, "Don't misunderstand me, I mean to let Father recover a little, not fully. Now he can only lie down, but can we make it possible for him to sit up and be pushed outside on a wheelchair to get some sunlight? This is Mother's idea, and I think it's worth considering. What do you think?"

Su Liang: ... Duanmu Chen has filial piety, but not too much of it...

Gu Ling nodded, "I'll give it a try." He had always been the one providing treatment to Duanmu Yi.

When Gu Ling went to apply acupuncture on Duanmu Yi, Su Liang suggested visiting Ji Yueyan, and Duanmu Chen let Chang'an accompany her over.

Ji Yueyan was dressed in a dark red dress, sitting by the window doing embroidery, her side profile was peaceful and beautiful. Occasionally, when her eyes felt tired, she would look out of the window. The evergreen trees in the yard looked gray in winter, their colors dull. Unlike in Yin Country, where there was no winter, and plants were always lush, but it could also get boring after a while.

When Ji Yueyan looked out the window again, she saw a familiar figure in her line of sight. Her eyes brightened instantly, and she hastily put down her things and went to greet her at the door.

Having married into Qian Country for several months, Ji Yueyan's days in the palace were lonely, and whenever Su Liang came to see her, she felt as if the sky had brightened up.

“Did Marquis Gu not accompany you into the palace?” Ji Yueyan was just a little surprised. Gu Ling had been with Su Liang every time she visited.

“He’s in the palace, busy,” Su Liang didn’t say too much, and was helped into the door by Ji Yueyan, “What were you doing?”

Ji Yueyan picked up the unfinished needlework to show Su Liang; it was a small red hat. The craftsmanship was exquisite, and the embroidery was very beautiful, intended for the baby in Su Liang’s belly.

“Your embroidery is really good.” Su Liang sincerely praised.

Ji Yueyan smiled, “I don’t have much else I can be proud of.”

“Don’t stay up late; it’s bad for your eyes.” Su Liang put down the half-finished little hat, took the warm water offered by Ji Yueyan, but did not drink it, “I’m fine, just came to take a look. Our home has been quiet since Ren Dong and Qi Jun left for the south.”

Ji Yueyan’s expression became serious, and upon hearing Su Liang mention Ren Dong, Qi Jun, and the south, she involuntarily straightened her body.

“I received a letter from the south a few days ago, everything is fine. Their departure has made Lian Shun’s job easier. They are all talented individuals but still have much to learn, and they definitely won’t be able to return for this year’s New Year.” Su Liang smiled softly.

Ji Yueyan looked at Su Liang gratefully, “It is thanks to you that they have such opportunities.”

Su Liang was talking about Qi Jun and Ren Dong, while Ji Yueyan was thinking about Bai Yang.

After sitting for a while, Gu Ling came to pick up Su Liang to go back.

After a long journey, Lai Hong finally returned to Xiangyue City in Yin Country. When he met Ji Yuebai, the latter was holding a vine whip, training his son to perform horse stance.

The fragile and gentle crown prince of Yin Country, in the eyes of outsiders, was now swinging a vine whip and yelling at his five-year-old son, “Don’t move, or I’ll whip you!”

The little boy had very fair skin, and his round black eyes looked like high-grade black gems, lively and mischievous. At the moment, he pursed his lips, pushed his hands forward, bent his legs, and trembled slightly, looking rather pitiful.

Lai Hong’s mouth twitched at the corner, and he quickly walked up, “Your Highness.”

Seeing Lai Hong, Ji Yuebai’s face softened instantly, “Master, have you returned? Was the trip successful? Did you see Gu Ling? Is his wife about to give birth?”

Lai Hong silently waved at the little boy who was giving him a pleading look, signaling for him to sneak away.

The little boy understood and slowly lowered his hands, retracted his feet, turned around, and ran towards the distance.

Ji Yuebai heard it but didn't turn around. He listened to Lai Hong's report about serious matters first, his expression gradually turning serious, then relaxed, "Let's wait for Situ Xie to send someone. Does Lady Gu's pregnancy hold a boy or a girl?"

Lai Hong shook his head, indicating that he didn't know, and then took out the gift Gu Ling had given to Ji Yuebai's son.

Ji Yuebai was somewhat surprised, "For my son?" Opening it, he saw a delicate small wooden sword inside. He immediately took it in his hand, turned around, and raised it toward his agile son who had climbed up a tree. He said with a smile, "Come here! This is a gift from your master. From now on, you are his disciple! I won't teach you martial arts anymore; you can go to his family to climb trees!"

Chapter 378: 378. Gu Xiaonuan is here (First update)

By November, Su Liang never saw Gu Ling sleeping with his eyes closed again. Every time she woke up, he would be awake, sometimes staring at her face, sometimes snuggling her pregnant belly, listening to the baby's movements.

Last month, Gu Ling had successfully helped deliver a horse and a cow, adding another skill to his repertoire, basically qualifying him for a part-time veterinarian. However, he didn't have the chance to practice a Cesarean section, as he couldn't just cut open an animal's belly without a reason.

One morning, Su Liang opened her eyes and found that Gu Ling wasn't there.

But in the next moment, she heard the soft sound of the door opening, as Gu Ling had gone out and come back in.

Lifting the bed curtain, Su Liang reached out, only to be hugged and pulled up by Gu Ling. This was already a habitual action, and Gu Ling enjoyed it very much, thinking that Su Liang, just awakened and leaning into his embrace, was particularly cute.

By the time they had finished washing up and having breakfast, Su Liang smelled an enticing aroma and saw Gu Ling bring a plate of roasted sweet potatoes.

"You got up early just to roast sweet potatoes?" Su Liang was pleasantly surprised. These were not ordinary sweet potatoes, but from Su Family's village. Previously, Su Liang had sent people back to the village to check on the school and brought gifts for relatives and friends, including village chief Su Bai, Gu Ling's carpentry master Su Dakuan, and Aunt Bai's family. The people she sent returned to the capital city yesterday, bringing back some local specialties, such as pickles made by Bai Dalao's wife, sweet potatoes grown by Bai Dalao, dried kidney beans sun-dried by Aunt Bai, as well as letters written by Little Tiger and Zhuzi for them, and a rattle drum that Su Dakuan made for their baby.

At that time, Su Liang recalled the happy times in Su Family's village. In winter, when snow was falling heavily, they would go to Bai's house, and as soon as they entered, they would be greeted by the sweet aroma of roasted sweet potatoes. Bai Dalao, with his dark skin and a kind smile, would fetch sweet potatoes with a burnt-black exterior from the stove, serve them in a bowl, and with a tap

of chopsticks, the skin would crack open, revealing the sweet and soft inside that melted in their mouths.

Last night, before going to sleep, Su Liang was still looking forward to having roasted sweet potatoes today, and as it turned out, Gu Ling got up early this morning to do it.

Gu Ling broke one open and handed Su Liang a small spoon, allowing her to scoop and eat without dirtying her hands.

Having tasted a bite, Su Liang found that it was still piping hot and just like the flavor she remembered, and couldn't help but sigh, "It's probably snowing heavily in Su Family's village now."

Su Liang wanted to try some pickles, but Gu Ling only allowed her a small bit and wouldn't permit her to eat more. He promised to use Aunt Bai's dried kidney beans to stew meat for lunch.

After breakfast, Zhengzheng arrived, and Gu Ling brought out the still-warm roasted sweet potatoes from the stove for him and Old Mu to eat.

These days, Old Mu would often sigh while looking south, knowing that he was worried about Old Bai and Ying Ying's safety, but to avoid causing Su Liang any worry, he didn't mention it in front of her.

Su Liang was also worried about Old Bai and Ying Ying. It had been several months since they went to Yin Country, and there had been no news at all. Things must have not gone smoothly; otherwise, they would have returned by now.

But if even the top Martial Arts and poison techniques master Old Bai couldn't handle Yue Furen and her group, sending more people would be suicide. Unless Su Liang and Gu Ling went personally, but they really couldn't go now. They suspected that even if they went, there might not be anyone left at that place.

All they could do was comfort themselves that no news was good news. Old Bai and Ying Ying were valuable to Yue Furen, and at the very least, they should still be alive. Even if they were in Yue Furen's hands, that poisonous woman would surely come looking for them.

Being so far away, and unable to solve the problem for now, Su Liang didn't think too much about it. She decided to focus on giving birth to her baby safely first.

"Master Mu, I'm now the senior disciple of the beauty master!" Zhengzheng puffed out his little chest and proudly declared. His uncle had become his master, making their relationship even closer.

Gu Ling wasn't sure if Zhengzheng was older than Ji Yuebai's son, but for now, since they couldn't see Ji Xiaobai, they assumed Zhengzheng was the eldest and the senior disciple, which made Zhengzheng very happy.

Old Mu rubbed Zhengzheng's head, "Well done! Defeat your master as soon as possible!"

Zhengzheng giggled, "That's too difficult, Master is invincible! But I will try my best! I have to protect my little siblings too!"

“Where did you get the little sister from?” Old Mu asked. Wan Hui gave birth to a son last month, named Lu Zhengfeng. Zhengzheng, with his real name Wan Zhengyang, followed his mother’s surname, and Lu Zhengfeng was his half-brother, sharing the same mother but different fathers.

No one knew whether the child in Su Liang’s belly was a boy or a girl, except for her and Gu Ling.

“The little sister in Aunt’s belly!” Zhengzheng’s little face was serious.

Old Mu’s eyes lit up, “Did they tell you it was a girl?”

Zhengzheng shook his head, “I guessed!”

Old Mu coughed lightly, “Alright, I hope you’re right.”

The winter in the capital city of Qian Country was colder this year than in previous years, but after the successful renovation of the Yuanming Pavilion, the courtyards of the Su Mansion where people lived had also been renovated with floor heating installed, so there was no need for charcoal basins. Gu Ling also taught the method to Qi Yan, who took people to make similar modifications to the areas needed by the Qin, Xing, Lin, and Lin’s families, which was especially beneficial for the elderly, pregnant women, and new mothers who are sensitive to the cold.

Lin’s Family lived in Jiaye City in the south all year round, and this was their first winter in the capital city. They weren’t used to the cold, but the floor heating made it much more comfortable for them.

However, as the due date approached, there was one problem Su Liang and Gu Ling hadn’t figured out up until now: what to name their daughter.

Su Liang felt that the name should be prepared in advance to avoid having a nickname for the baby if the name isn’t settled after birth.

“Xiao Sun doesn’t sound nice, how about Little Bamboo?” Gu Ling was still thinking about their time on the island.

Su Liang wasn’t fond of the name and asked Gu Ling to think about it some more.

“Today is the 10th. Whatever day she is born, her name could be based on that day,” Gu Ling thought of a simple solution.

Su Liang looked puzzled. “What if she’s born tomorrow? Will her name be Gu Eleven? That’s too perfunctory, isn’t it?”

Gu Ling had considered many long-term things for their daughter, but his heart was heavy with worry about Su Liang’s upcoming delivery, so he didn’t spend much time thinking about her name.

“It’s not suitable,” Su Liang rejected the idea. “Some days sound fine as names, but have you ever considered, Great God, what if she’s born on the 18th? Will her name be Gu Eighteen then?”

They had a friend named Yan Shiba...

Gu Ling frowned, apparently forgetting about Yan Shiba. "Forget what I said." Even if it wasn't eighteen, it would still sound like they were part of Yan Shiba's family, which didn't sound good.

"But where on earth has Yan Shiba gone? It's been almost half a year without any news," Su Liang sighed. "I hope he hasn't been captured again. If he was captured by Situ Xie's gang, they should have used him to threaten me by now, knowing our relationship. I wonder if Yan Shiqi, who didn't die back then, found him again? That would be a real restless ghost."

The reason they suspected Yan Shiqi might be back was that Gu Ling had tried to contact the assassins from Yanyun Building in the capital city but failed. They didn't know if it was because there were no longer any assassins from Yanyun Building in Qian Country after the incident or if there was internal turbulence in Yanyun Building.

They could only wait for news for now.

"Both our names are too cold," Su Liang thought. "How about we give our daughter a warmer name?"

Gu Ling nodded, "How about Gu Nuan (Warm)?"

Su Liang raised an eyebrow, "Not bad. In my previous life, there was a popular song called 'Nuannuan (Warm Warm)'."

She hummed the tune of the once-popular song in the streets and alleys. She didn't remember the lyrics very well anymore, but the melody was still very familiar to her.

Gu Ling silently memorized it, intending to play it for Su Liang the next day.

However, on November 11th, Gu Ling didn't get the chance to play the piano because Su Liang was going into labor.

The baby was full-term and within the time frame Su Liang had estimated, but when she told Gu Ling she thought she was going into labor, he couldn't help but turn pale.

Last month, the calm Gu Ling sat outside Lin Xueqing's delivery room, handing out sugar pills to the men of the Lin and Xing families, asking Xing Yusheng how he felt. Now that it was his turn, Gu Ling's anxiety was no less than Xing Yusheng's.

Nevertheless, Gu Ling had mentally rehearsed the steps of Su Liang's delivery many times, so after becoming flustered for a moment, he forced himself to calm down: first, he settled Su Liang, then asked Qi Yan to notify their family.

The midwife was an experienced old nanny who had worked for Xing Family's old lady and had delivered the babies of the Xing family. She had just delivered Lin Xueqing's baby last month. She had moved into Su Mansion three days ago, ready to be on call, and arrived quickly.

As Zhengzheng and Old Mu were playing with building blocks in the pavilion, they heard that Su Liang was about to give birth. Old Mu immediately stood up and scooped up Zhengzheng, who had jumped off his stool, slinging him onto his back before leaping across the lake to Yuanming Pavilion.

"Don't come in," said Cen Man sternly, as she hurried inside.

Still on Old Mu's back, Zhengzheng furrowed his brows, "Old Mu, my mom was in a lot of pain when she gave birth to my little brother. Will my aunt be in pain too?"

Old Mu had no children of his own in this life, but at his age, he knew that giving birth was not an easy task for women. To avoid scaring Zhengzheng, Old Mu tried to put it mildly, "Don't worry, she's a divine doctor."

"Grandpa Lin said, 'doctors can't heal themselves,'" replied Zhengzheng who had begun his education with Lin Shuzhi. Although he spent his days playing in Su Mansion, he also dedicated four hours to studying. Occasionally, Lin Shuzhi would give him a day off.

Old Mu coughed lightly, "That's true, but it depends on the person." Su Liang might not be able to heal herself, but having taught Gu Ling medical skills, she had extra protection.

As for Gu Ling, accompanying Su Liang during childbirth had been discussed early on with the midwife. Old Lady Xing had also instructed the midwife to respect the different customs of Su Liang and Gu Ling's families and follow their arrangements.

Nangong Qian arrived soon after, but not knowing much about childbirth and unable to help, she stood next to Old Mu for a while before taking Qiuyue back to prepare lunch for everyone.

Su Liang thought everything would be fine – it was just the beginning stages of labor and there was still time before the baby would be born. She had Gu Ling bring her a bowl of mixed porridge to eat, in case she wouldn't have the strength later on.

Unfortunately, there were no pain relief techniques in this world... As Su Liang endured the pain of childbirth, she thought about how much better things had been in her past life with modern conveniences and pain relief during labor.

Originally, Gu Ling was sitting on a stool by the bed, leaning over to hold Su Liang's hand. But as he was taller than her, he eventually removed the stool and sat directly on the floor beside the bed.

The midwife was efficient and quickly prepared for the birth. After checking Su Liang's condition, she said it wasn't time yet.

Su Liang then drank another bowl of chicken soup. Today's task was a difficult one, but she had to pull through.

Even the midwife couldn't help but marvel at Su Liang, who was the calmest and most sensible pregnant woman she had ever encountered.

Old Mu and Zhengzheng sat on the first floor of Yuanming Pavilion, gazing at the lake outside and the bleak trees on its shores, both resting their faces on their left hands.

Suddenly, Zhengzheng rubbed his eyes, jumped off the chair, and ran to the window, excitedly exclaiming, "Aunt, Uncle Mei Ren, it's snowing!"

Fluffy snowflakes fluttered down like catkins from the sky, gradually becoming more numerous.

This was the first snowfall of the winter.

For an area with a normal climate and four distinct seasons, the first snow was always a joyous occasion. It was not like Yin Country, without snow all year round, or Liang Country, where people grew tired of the heavy snow that covered the entire freezing winter.

Upstairs, Su Liang heard the news and tugged at the corner of her slightly pale lips, "A good omen."

Gu Ling also felt it was a coincidence, but the day their daughter was born would hold special meaning because of the first snow. Each year, the first snowfall would remind them of today, the joy and pain of bringing new life into the world.

Zhengzheng ran outside, and Old Mu didn't call him back.

Hearing Zhengzheng's laughter downstairs and imagining future snow-play with her daughter, Su Liang felt invigorated. Soon, she would be able to give birth and complete this difficult task... She tried to comfort and encourage herself.

After managing everything at Su Mansion, Qi Yan returned to the Xing Family. As instructed by Old Lady Xing, he informed her as soon as he heard that Su Liang was in labor.

So, before Su Liang gave birth, Old Lady Xing, Xing Ji, and Lin Shuzhi all arrived. Not long after, Old Master Qin also arrived by carriage.

Everyone couldn't help but be curious and eager to find out whether Su Liang would have a boy or a girl, as it would be a delightful surprise for them all.

Old Madam Xing entered the delivery room. Just last month, she had welcomed a healthy great-grandson, and she now looked younger than before, feeling rejuvenated by the happy occasion. In her eyes, Su Liang was not only a benefactor but also regarded as a granddaughter.

Old Master Qin suggested that they might as well make a bet on whether Su Liang would give birth to a boy or a girl.

However, the bet couldn't be established because everyone secretly hoped Su Liang would have a daughter. Of course, this was based on the fact that Su Liang and Gu Ling didn't have any elders, family constraints, responsibilities to carry on the family line, and they'd never cared about other people's opinions. They hoped for a daughter because they knew that Su Liang and Gu Ling didn't favor sons, so it didn't really matter.

"Great God, please sing a song for me," Su Liang, feeling the pain was close to exceeding her threshold, wanted to distract herself.

"What do you want to hear?" Gu Ling asked.

Unable to think straight due to the pain, Su Liang simply said for Gu Ling to sing any song.

But Gu Ling couldn't think straight either and couldn't come up with an appropriate song to sing.

Just then, Su Liang cried out from the pain, and the midwife announced, "Madam Gu is about to give birth!"

Gu Ling, drained of energy, instantly tenses up again, pale-faced, and gripping Su Liang's hand, he said, "We'll never do this again."

Old Madam Xing at the side didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Time seemed to drag on, and Gu Ling watched Su Liang's pained expression, their memories together flashing through his mind like a slideshow. His eyes settled on the sweat on her forehead, the size of a bean. He wiped it gently, but thin beads of sweat formed again, underneath which was her pale skin, with no black mist.

Inwardly, Gu Ling prayed. All the people he had saved before and the disasters he had averted were all for this moment, hoping for the safety of his loved ones.

The baby's cry seemed to reach Gu Ling's ears at the speed of light from afar, a surreal feeling... At last, his gaze moved from Su Liang's face to the midwife, who smiled as she held up a newborn, then immediately looked back at Su Liang.

Su Liang was still awake, sweaty and soaked through, her face almost translucently pale, her strength exhausted. Despite all the experience and knowledge she had gathered, it wasn't much help when it came to experiencing it herself. Under extreme pain, she could only struggle to regain control of her body and prevent her mind's clarity from being eroded.

"Do you want to cut the umbilical cord?" Su Liang asked Gu Ling weakly.

This was something they had discussed before, and Gu Ling said he wanted to cut the umbilical cord himself, but Su Liang doubted if he could stand up quickly enough.

"Yes..." Gu Ling finally remembered that, getting up from the ground, taking a deep breath, and gesturing for the midwife to pass him the disinfected scissors.

The midwife handed him the scissors and told him where to cut.

Gu Ling took another deep breath and decisively made the cut, returning to his original position. The midwife was busy taking care of things afterward.

Once again holding Su Liang's hand, he heard her say, "Congratulations, Great God, you're a father now."

"Congratulations on becoming a mother," Gu Ling lowered his head, softly kissing Su Liang, "Thank you," for everything she had given him...

Upstairs, the baby's cries were clear and bright, and everyone downstairs was overjoyed when they knew Su Liang was fine.

Old Master Qin said jovially, "Looks like it's a strong little boy!"

Old Mu asked three times, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Zhengzheng also asked, "Is it a sister?" He really wanted a little sister!

Finally, Cen Man answered their question, "It's a daughter."

Zhengzheng leaped with joy, "It's a sister! I have a sister now!"

Chapter 379: 379. A Conjecture (Second Revision)

Old Mu took the prepared firecrackers and accompanied Zheng Zheng to the entrance of Su Mansion, hung the firecrackers on a pole, lit them, and quickly carried Zheng Zheng to one side, covering his ears.

The firecrackers crackled loudly, like a red dragon dancing in the snow and white smoke, the flames quickly snaking upward, and small pieces of red paper falling like petals, instantly adding an unparalleled festive and lively atmosphere.

When the firecrackers were finished, Old Mu let go of Zheng Zheng, who happily stomped on the red paper scraps on the ground and spun around several times, shouting loudly, "I have a sister now! I have a sister now!" It was as if he wanted to share his joy with the whole world.

The news spread quickly in the capital city: Marquis Chang Xin Gu Ling's wife, Su Liang, the Divine Doctor of Su, was delighted to have a daughter.

Duanmu Chen learned of the news while having lunch with Emperor Duanmu Yi and Empress Dowager Xiao. Duanmu Yi was seated in a wheelchair, and though he still needed someone to feed him, he was in better spirits than before and could speak normally.

"A daughter? Good, very good, excellent." Duanmu Chen nodded repeatedly. He felt that having a daughter was even better than having a son.

Duanmu Yi's gaze shifted towards Duanmu Chen's face.

With an unchanged smile, Duanmu Chen said, "Father, Su Liang has given birth to a daughter."

Seeing Duanmu Chen so happy, Empress Dowager Xiao asked him gently with a smile, "Since the Empress is carrying a son, are you thinking of marrying into the Gu Family?"

Duanmu Chen nodded, then quickly shook his head, "I would like to, of course, but I can't say it, or else Gu Ling would be unhappy and will specifically guard against my son. Let nature take its course for such things. I have already agreed with Gu Ling that my son will become his disciple in the future. As for whether they can go further, it depends on my son's own destiny. I can't help him."

As for issuing an imperial decree to arrange a marriage, Duanmu Chen had never considered it, as it was something that would utterly offend Su Liang and Gu Ling. They disliked arranged marriages the most.

The Empress Dowager laughed and said nothing more, while Duanmu Yi's expression darkened, "You are really being manipulated by that couple! And you don't even realize it!"

Duanmu Chen didn't change his expression, "That's how Father sees it, and I understand. But after all, it's a happy event, so why should Father insist on thinking negatively?"

Duanmu Yi was so angry that he closed his eyes and refused to eat any more.

Duanmu Chen didn't care, continuing to chat with Empress Dowager Xiao. After putting down his chopsticks, he called someone to send gifts to Su Liang and Gu Ling, selecting many treasures from the palace's collection.

Duanmu Chen was neither greedy nor lustful; he merely enjoyed the sense of security and dignity that power brought him. And achieving these things couldn't happen without Su Liang and Gu Ling's help – he would continue to need them in the future.

By the time the palace's gifts arrived at Su Mansion, everyone had already left Yuanming Pavilion, afraid to disturb Su Liang's rest. Only Gu Ling stayed with Su Liang, taking care of her.

The newborn baby was brought down by Cen Man for everyone to see. As for who the child resembled, there was no dispute, because as Su Liang had hoped, her precious daughter looked like her dad. Her eyes and eyebrows were almost identical to Gu Ling's, incredibly beautiful.

This had something to do with Su Liang's belief that Gu Ling was the most beautiful in the world, as well as the fact that she was a transmigrator. Her current body and appearance weren't originally hers, and sometimes when she looked in the mirror, she would feel a momentary sense of unfamiliarity. Thus, her subconscious expectations for her daughter to look like her were not as high as her expectations for her daughter to look like Gu Ling.

It was snowing heavily in the capital city of Qian Country, and it didn't stop even by evening.

When Su Liang woke up from her sleep, it was already dark outside. The room was warm, and there was still a faint pain in her body. However, compared to the pain of the child's birth, it was nothing.

Gu Ling was sitting by the bed, and the crib he had personally made for their daughter was placed by the bed, with the cushions and the swaddle for the baby sewn by Gu Ling himself. He was delighted with it.

"Are you awake? Does it still hurt a lot?" Gu Ling's eyes were a little red as he held Su Liang's hand and checked her pulse.

Su Liang shook her head slightly, "It's okay." However, her still pallid face and furrowed brows were not persuasive.

Seeing Su Liang looking at the crib, Gu Ling carefully took the swaddled baby out and brought it to Su Liang.

Su Liang's eyes instantly softened, and she couldn't help but shed tears. Looking at the tiny infant, the feeling of being connected by blood overwhelmed all the rationality she had built up in the past.

Many people, before having their own child, cannot empathize or fully understand why others, after having children, would think only of their child and would even give their life for them. They might even think: If it were me, I wouldn't be like that.

Su Liang had had such thoughts before.

But now, everything has changed. This is her flesh and blood, the most important treasure of her life, she wants to protect her from harm, give her the best of everything, and watch her grow up slowly.

Gu Ling felt the same way. Although the child was not his own, he did everything a father could do, watching the child grow bit by bit in Su Liang's womb, with his heart moved by Su Liang and the child.

All the worries, anxiety, pain, and waiting were worth it.

"Gu Xiaonuan," Su Liang gently called her daughter's name, "you really look like your dad."

Gu Ling's eyes were tender, gently kissing away a tear from Su Liang's eye corner, "She cried very loudly, she must be a lively one."

"That's perfect. You are so cold, if our daughter is like you, it would be too exhausting for me." Su Liang laughed lightly.

As for taking care of Su Liang during her postpartum confinement, Gu Ling didn't let anyone else get involved. He was capable of doing everything himself. While taking care of Su Liang and the baby, he was busy and happy.

Soon, it was the day of the baby's first bath.

Relatives and friends from the capital came, Duanmu Chen didn't come, but he sent a lot of gifts, among which was a hat personally made by Ji Yueyan for Gu Xiaonuan.

Today, Gu Xiaonuan met her three brothers and cousins from the Lin Family.

"My little sister is so pretty." Zhengzheng looked at her approvingly.

Lin Jingyun grabbed Zhengzheng's hem, nodding his little head in agreement. Lin Jingxuan was fast asleep in Lin Bojun's arms, never waking up.

Gu Xiaonuan suddenly started crying, and Zhengzheng immediately called for Gu Ling.

Gu Ling steadily picked up Gu Xiaonuan and took her to change her diaper.

Old Madame Xing sat by Su Liang's bed, praising Gu Ling, saying that such a good man is truly rare in this world.

Compared to the day she gave birth, Su Liang's complexion had improved a lot, and she nodded immediately upon hearing this, "Yes, my judgement is also rare in this world."

Everyone laughed.

Due to the cold weather, Lin Xueqing, who had just left confinement, didn't come, but Old Madame Xing smiled when talking about her great-grandson, saying that the child was well-behaved and not noisy.

Su Liang thought that her child seemed a bit noisy, but luckily she had an exceptionally good father who could handle everything. Apart from breastfeeding, Su Liang didn't need to worry about anything else.

Su Liang's breast milk was just enough, and she wanted to feed the baby herself without seeking a wet nurse.

"Xiaonuan's name is nice, sounds good and has a good meaning." Madam Lin laughed, "I really envy you, I don't know when my ungrateful child will let us hold a grandchild."

If anyone was considered a winner in life, it was actually Lin Shuzhi. His son was accomplished, his daughter married well, and within two years, he had two grandsons and a granddaughter, truly enviable.

When the guests dispersed, Gu Ling came back with his hungry daughter, it was time to breastfeed.

Su Liang found it very natural and didn't think it was embarrassing for Gu Ling to watch.

However, this time when Gu Ling watched the baby eating happily, he suddenly said, "I wonder what it tastes like."

Su Liang said, "We all had it when we were little."

"I don't remember." Gu Ling leaned in, gently kissed Su Liang's lips, which had a faint milky taste, "Can I try some?"

Su Liang gave a light cough, "You're competing with the baby for food, isn't that a bit inappropriate?"

Gu Ling shook his head, "Just curious, just a little taste."

Su Liang: ...It's not a big deal. She fully understood Gu Ling's curiosity about such things, as he had always been like this.

So, after Gu Xiaonuan was full and Gu Ling put her in the cradle, Gu Ling tasted a bit of breast milk, resolving his doubts but igniting a fire in his body. After Su Liang and the child fell asleep, he asked Cen Man to look after them and went for a long walk in the snow outside to calm down. He only came back after changing his clothes.

The weather was getting colder.

Su Liang was bored during her confinement and sometimes wanted to look outside. Gu Ling would briefly open half a window and then quickly close it, worried that she would catch a cold.

The snow from the day of the first snowfall had not yet melted, and a thin layer of ice had formed on the lake.

When Zhengzheng used to come, he would always call out "Auntie", but now as soon as he heard his voice, it would be "Sister."

It wasn't until halfway through her confinement that Gu Ling remembered the song Su Liang hummed the day before giving birth. He still remembered the melody.

Since Su Liang was feeling bored, Gu Ling opened a crack in the window and played the zither for her to listen to.

A handsome man playing the zither was a pleasing sight and sound, but at that moment, Su Liang just wanted to take a bath, feeling that her hair had developed a smell.

Gu Ling played it once, and after Su Liang casually praised it, she asked if she could wash her hair.

Gu Ling nodded, "Sure." As someone who had accepted new ideas, he didn't insist too much on this matter. As a doctor, Su Liang knew better than ordinary people how to take care of her body.

Gu Ling fetched some hot water, let Su Liang lie on the edge of the bed, and let her hair hang down. After mixing it to the right temperature, he helped Su Liang wash her hair.

It was actually quite comfortable, reminding Su Liang of the shampoo girls from the hair salons in her previous life. She found it funny and told Gu Ling, to which Gu Ling calmly replied, "I'm a shampoo boy."

Su Liang laughed, but in the next moment, the warm atmosphere was shattered by Gu Xiaonuan's cry.

Gu Ling had no choice but to leave Su Liang for the moment and take care of their baby girl.

When Gu Ling came back after calming Gu Xiaonuan, he added more hot water and continued to wash Su Liang's hair, even giving her a scalp massage according to her instructions. After washing, he carefully dried her hair.

Overall, Su Liang had a good confinement period, thanks to Gu Ling.

And Gu Xiaonuan was no longer the red-faced baby she was when she was born. She changed every day, turning into a pale and lovely little girl. Everyone who saw her praised her beauty, especially her eyes, which were bright and sparkling when she opened them, making her incredibly beautiful.

Finally, the day came to end Su Liang's confinement. She took a nice hot bath, feeling as if her limbs had finally regained their normal function.

The full moon feast was only attended by close friends and relatives. Gu Xiaonuan didn't feel shy with strangers; she was fine with anyone holding her as long as she was full and didn't need a diaper change, and she was always well-behaved and smiled, making everyone's hearts melt when she did.

What a coincidence, the day Gu Xiaonuan was born, the capital city had its first snowfall of the winter. When she turned one month old, the second snowfall arrived.

Old Mu and Zhengzheng built a big snowman by the lake and let Gu Xiaonuan see it through the window.

Gu Xiaonuan showed little interest, cried out for a moment, and fell asleep after being fed by Su Liang.

That night, Su Liang was considerate of Gu Ling's months of abstinence and wanted to help relieve his pent-up desires. Regular exercise still had to wait for another ten days or so.

But Gu Ling refused, saying he could wait.

Su Liang nodded, "It's fine with me, as long as you're happy. Hey, Great God, look, has this place gotten bigger?"

Gu Ling: ...He noticed it early on, but he still managed to endure it.

After Gu Xiaonuan's one-month celebration, it was almost the Lunar New Year.

When Su Liang and Gu Ling received the congratulatory gifts sent by Ji Yuebai, he had already ascended the Dragon Throne, as his sickly father passed away at the end of October.

Thus, within the same year, the royal families of the three countries had a change of emperors, all without any internal strife.

However, there were differences among them.

Qian Country's former Emperor Duanmu Yi was still alive and was now the Grand Emperor. Yin Country had the most normal succession. As for Liang Country, both "usurping power" and "father and son killing each other" were present, but it wasn't the usual sense of father and son killing each

other. It was a father killing his son, which made Situ Xie the oldest ruler of the time. The other two emperors were just about the same age as his grandson.

Since the war at the beginning of the year, there had been both marriages and “mutual harm” among the three countries, but there had been no more wars.

As for how long this superficial peace could last, some people knew, and some people didn't.

Those who knew were not soothsayers but were aware that the hidden war had never stopped.

Ji Yuebai's congratulatory gift was a secret, and at the same time, he sent a secret letter to Gu Ling and Su Liang.

It mentioned two things.

First, his son couldn't wait to meet Gu Ling, his master, and he hoped that day would come soon.

Second, Situ Xie had already planned the route to secretly transport food and supplies from Yin Country to Liang Country. However, he didn't tell Ji Yuebai the details. He only asked Yin Country to prepare food and supplies and transport them to the border before sailing out at the end of the year. Someone would be there to receive the supplies. As for how they would be transported back to Liang Country, there was no need for the people of Yin Country to be involved. The warhorses offered by Liang Country would be delivered to Yin Country after the battle began.

If Ji Yuebai didn't agree, it would mean that the Yin Country's royal family had no sincerity. Because it was not necessary for Yin Country to wage war with those limited numbers of warhorses, but Liang Country couldn't do without enough food and supplies.

In order for Gu Ling's plan to go smoothly, Ji Yuebai had already agreed to Situ Xie's arrangements and prepared a large amount of food and supplies for Liang Country, and there were no problems with the supplies themselves. This was because the person “receiving the goods” on the Liang Country side would be sure to inspect them.

“The seaside?” Su Liang thoughtfully said, “If they want to land in Qian Country, they can only choose Jiaye City or somewhere near Nanshan City with a coast, and there's no coast further north. Once they land, so many supplies would be impossible to conceal.”

Qian Country's largest grain merchant was Zhengzheng's maternal grandfather, the head of the Wan Family. Su Liang confirmed that there was no problem with him. Even if they used the grain merchant as a cover, transporting so many supplies from the south to the north would definitely attract the attention of the Government Offices in various places.

“There's something strange about this,” Su Liang said, “I feel that things are not that simple. Situ Xie must have an important chess piece to help him cover up. But even if the Wan Family is a spy for Liang Country, they can't do such a thing. Great God, I suddenly have an idea.”

Gu Ling was thinking, and asked Su Liang what he had come up with.

Su Liang looked at Gu Ling's brow and said, "Since you have a special ability, I'm wondering if there are other people in this world who also have special abilities, such as a Storage Space that can carry anything without being seen by others."

Gu Ling frowned slightly as he had heard Su Liang tell many mysterious stories about his special ability, including such things as portable spaces from his previous life's fantasy novels.

This kind of thing was an invincible cheat. When Su Liang mentioned it, he complained about why he didn't have any golden fingers, and that it would be so cool if he had a space...

The problem they were discussing now was how Situ Xie would smuggle a large amount of food and supplies from Yin Country back to Liang Country in the inland north, which would be impossible to conceal when passing through Qian Country.

Because this was an impossible task, Su Liang thought of Storage Space. Like Gu Ling seeing the "black fog", both were inexplicable by science.

Situ Xie letting Ji Yuebai deliver the supplies to the sea could also avoid being followed, no matter what kind of operation he planned to carry out afterward.

Gu Ling's brows furrowed tighter. First, various signs indicated that another Transmigrator was investigating them, and now Su Liang suspected the existence of a magical Storage Space. If the latter was also true, and if the owner of the latter was the former...

"I'm just putting forth a guess; it could also be that I'm overthinking it," Su Liang patted Gu Ling's shoulder, "Let's wait and see."

Chapter 380: 380. Lantern Festival Assassination Incident (Midnight)

In late December, they began to prepare the New Year's goods at home, and also received the New Year's goods sent from the north and the south one after another.

Qiao Jing bought some smoked meat and other goods from the north. He still remembered Su Liang saying she liked the smoked meat from a shop in Nanping City, so Qiao Jing made Qiao Cong specially buy quite a lot to send to the capital city.

From the south, the goods were prepared by Lian Shun, one portion to the Lin's family, another to Su Mansion, mostly the specialties of the south. Besides the New Year's goods, there were also a large pile of gifts from Nian Jincheng and Lian Shun prepared for Gu Xiaonuan.

Previously, Nian Jincheng and Lian Shun had a bet on whether Su Liang was pregnant with a boy or a girl, with the loser forfeiting the chance to be the child's godfather. It turned out that Lian Shun, who was the first to offer to be Gu Xiaonuan's godfather, guessed incorrectly.

But he did not accept the outcome. The letter he sent showed him completely taking on the role of Gu Xiaonuan's godfather and seeming as though he would grow wings to fly to the capital city to hold Gu Xiaonuan if he could.

Lian Shun did not mention Ying Ying, but some things have already been left unsaid between them. If there was news, Su Liang would definitely inform him. If she did not say anything, it meant there was no news, and asking would be of no use.

Su Liang had Song Qi prepare the New Year's goods at the beginning of the month to be sent to Xuanbei City and Jiaye City.

The couplets were written by Gu Ling, who also cut out many window decorations.

On the 28th day of the 12th lunar month, Cen Man and Lao Mu watched the child while Su Liang and Gu Ling put up the couplets together.

After Su Liang recovered from childbirth, she wanted to move around, but for now, she was unable to do any vigorous exercises, so she looked for some things to do.

Gu Ling mixed the glue, Gu Ling was responsible for pasting, and Su Liang was responsible for handing him the couplets and checking if they were pasted properly.

"Is Xiaonuan crying?" Gu Ling suddenly stopped and asked Su Liang.

Su Liang listened carefully and shook her head. "No. I think you, master, are suffering from separation anxiety. The moment you part with the child, you keep thinking about her and feel that others cannot take good care of her."

"Is there such a disease?" Gu Ling furrowed his brows.

"Yes, a psychological problem," Su Liang said. "You will get used to it. We can't always keep an eye on her."

"But Xiaonuan is really crying," Gu Ling said.

Su Liang looked helpless, "Master you...". She stopped mid-sentence when she too heard the crying coming from Yuanming Pavilion. Her baby's cry was indeed piercing.

Following that, Lao Mu's voice calling for her could be heard, "Xiaoliang! Nuannuan is hungry!"

Su Liang immediately dropped the couplet in her hand and rushed over.

Gu Ling also followed along, the couplet that was not yet firmly attached was blown by the wind and stuck to the face of Qi Yan who was coming over to help...

As Su Liang held Gu Xiaonuan to feed her, she complained that she had just fed her not too long ago.

Gu Xiaonuan ended up not eating, laughing cheerfully, kicking and waving her arms in Su Liang's arms, her bright eyes full of mirth, as if she was saying that it was fun.

Su Liang handed Gu Xiaonuan to Gu Ling, "Your daughter is a little liar."

Gu Ling held his daughter with a gentle look of amusement, shaking her slightly, "Is she really that smart?"

Su Liang: It seems like in the future it will only be up to her to discipline the child when necessary.

Her mindset is now different from when she first gave birth to the child. It's probably because Gu Ling is too good of a father, making Su Liang feel that she can only be a strict mother, holding her rationale in check.

However, just now when Su Liang heard that Gu Xiaonuan was hungry and rushed back to the Yuanming Pavilion, it revealed that her rationality also had its limits.

After playing with Gu Xiaonuan for a while, Gu Ling and Su Liang continued pasting the couplets, only for them to hear Gu Xiaonuan crying again just as they left Yuanming Pavilion.

Su Liang complained, “Master, it seems that your prenatal education was useless, I remember you told her the story of the boy who cried wolf.”

Gu Ling chuckled lightly, “If she could understand and remember at that time, I would be afraid.” Perhaps she could be another transmigrator.

After going through a few more attempts that day, Su Liang and Gu Ling discovered that as long as either of them was with Gu Xiaonuan, she wouldn’t fuss. However, if neither was with her, she would occasionally cry out.

But Su Liang wanted to put up the couplets and Gu Ling wanted to be with Su Liang to do that. So, it turned into a family of three putting up the couplets. Gu Ling held Gu Xiaonuan in one arm, and pasted the couplets with the other hand. Even though it was slower, it had its own kind of fun.

Gu Xiaonuan was bundled up tightly, but it couldn’t conceal her excitement about being outdoors, as she giggled non-stop.

When they finished pasting the couplets, Gu Xiaonuan was in a daze and fell asleep, and Gu Ling placed her in the cradle.

Gu Ling felt inspired, laid out a sheet of paper, ground the ink, and painted a picture. In the painting was the warm scene of the three of them pasting the couplets, but he was facing his back because he couldn’t see his own expression and had never painted his own portrait.

Gu Xiaonuan really liked red things. The Chinese knot Gu Ling personally made and hung on the head of the bed had now been moved to the top of the cradle.

On the twenty-ninth, they steamed buns.

Gu Ling and Su Liang had not cooked together in a long time. While Gu Xiaonuan was sleeping, they busily made flower buns in the kitchen.

Gu Ling kneaded the dough, a bit of flour on his face. When Su Liang saw that, she drew closer to help wipe it off, but ended up being held around the waist by Gu Ling, and he lowered his head and kissed her.

Both had been abstaining for a long time, their lips and tongues intertwining, filled with longing, and they didn’t hear when the water in the pot started boiling.

In the end, it was Gu Xiaonuan’s crying that separated them.

Su Liang’s face flushed slightly, “Great God, it’s been more than half a month since my confinement period ended. I am clean now, so it should be alright. How about tonight...”

Gu Ling’s gaze shifted lower, falling on the spot below Su Liang’s neck, “I’d very much like to.”

“No buts, let’s just happily settle on that,” Su Liang took off her apron, washed her hands, and went to soothe the child.

Gu Ling let out a long sigh, not noticing until he turned his head that the water in the pot was boiling. If he didn't start eating meat again, he really wouldn't be able to hold on.

By the time Su Liang reentered the kitchen, flower rolls had already been placed in the steamer. Gu Ling had a good habit; he cleaned as he cooked, so the kitchen would still be clean when he finished.

When the flower rolls were ready, Su Liang noticed one with an odd shape. Upon closer inspection, it was actually shaped like a bamboo shoot...

"Is this specially made for Gu Xiaonuan?" Su Liang thought that when Gu Xiaonuan grew up, she must tell her that her beloved father once thought of nickname her 'Xiaosun' (Little Bamboo Shoot).

"It's made for you. Bamboo shoot bean bun." Gu Ling parted it, revealing the filling inside. He didn't add extra sugar to the bean bun, and used mashed sweet potato to sweeten it.

Su Liang tasted it; hot, aromatic, sweet, and delicious.

They had agreed to start eating meat that night, but when their passion intensified, Gu Xiaonuan's howling nearly drove Gu Ling to despair. Perhaps she had slept too much during the day. That night, Gu Xiaonuan was full of energy and only fell asleep halfway through the night. Su Liang was too tired, and their 'exercise plan' had to be temporarily postponed.

When Gu Ling woke up the next day, he decided that in order to ensure their daughter slept soundly at night, she couldn't sleep too much during the day. She needed to develop a regular lifestyle from a young age to have a good body.

As such, on New Year's Eve, Gu Ling and Su Liang very seriously spent a long time playing with Gu Xiaonuan.

Snow began falling again in the evening, and the family of three had New Year's Eve dinner with the people in the mansion. The meal was prepared by Nangong Qian and Qiuyue. Cen Man also cooked a couple of dishes, and Gu Ling cooked a fish. Su Liang had been unable to eat fish for a long time during her pregnancy, the mere smell of it causing her to feel nauseous, but today she said she wanted to eat it.

After the New Year's Eve meal, Gu Ling and Su Liang first bathed their daughter, then took turns accompanying her, allowing the other person to bathe.

When Su Liang returned to the bedroom after bathing in the study, as soon as she entered the door, she saw Gu Ling's deep eyes.

Then, both of them were waiting for Gu Xiaonuan to quickly fall asleep. Fortunately, their 'plan' succeeded. Gu Xiaonuan closed her eyes after feeding, and soon fell fast asleep.

Gu Ling put Gu Xiaonuan in the cradle, covered her with a light-blocking curtain, and turned around to press Su Liang into the bed...

Gu Ling said that they should keep vigil tonight and not sleep.

Su Liang thought, that sounded reasonable.

The snow was swirling outside the window, while the room was brimming with the warmth of spring.

The old year ends amidst the sound of firecrackers.

Old Mu put on his new clothes early in the morning and ran to the doorstep to set off firecrackers.

Having only slept a short while, Gu Ling, awoken by the distant sound of firecrackers, did some ‘morning exercise’ with the half-asleep Su Liang. Then, feeling refreshed, he got up to change their daughter’s diaper.

Su Liang was too exhausted and slept until noon. In the meantime, Gu Xiaonuan had already received several red envelopes.

By the time Su Liang got up, bathed, and changed into her New Year’s clothes, she went downstairs to find Gu Ling holding Gu Xiaonuan and watching the snow outside the window.

The father and daughter both turned to look at Su Liang. The two similar faces, one as beautiful as a celestial being, the other as pretty as a sprite, made people have to marvel at the creator’s prejudice.

Gu Xiaonuan waved her small hand at Su Liang, which was her way of expressing her fondness for someone.

Su Liang, smiling, walked over. The family of three was dressed in matching outfits, the patterns on their collars and sleeve edges identical.

Cen Man arrived at the door and thought this scene was just beautiful.

“Happy New Year, master.” Su Liang bowed, and Cen Man happily gave her the pre-prepared ‘New Year’s money’. It was not silver, but her favorite concealed weapon.

Old Mu came over with a sizable wooden box, mysteriously urging Su Liang to guess what was inside.

“I guess it’s a piece of wood,” said Su Liang.

Old Mu was at a loss for words, “Guess properly.”

Su Liang insisted she had no clue. Now, Old Mu’s interest lies in tinkering with some bizarre things with Gu Ling, many of which were beyond Su Liang’s imagination.

However, this time Old Mu’s gift to Su Liang was not one of those things, but something Su Liang described a while ago. Old Mu made it.

He slowly opened the wooden box to reveal a maneki-neko (beckoning cat) ornament. He touched a mechanism on the back of the ornament, and the cat’s one paw began to wave at Su Liang.

Su Liang was amazed. The fortune cats from her previous life were all powered by batteries. She had only asked Old Mu and Gu Ling if it was possible to use purely mechanical means to achieve what she described – she didn’t expect Old Mu to actually make it. And he had done it behind Gu Ling’s back, all by himself, just to surprise Su Liang.

However, there’s a slight gap between Old Mu’s aesthetic sense and Gu Ling’s. The expression on the cat’s face is a bit peculiar – dark and light – which made people laugh. Su Liang loved it.

“Thank you, Master. You’re so amazing,” Su Liang hugged the bamboo shoot, allowing Gu Xiaonuan to touch it like a Maneki-neko. Gu Xiaonuan began to laugh.

Having recently given birth, Su Liang tactfully rejected the palace’s banquet invitation, imagining it to be quite boring. Her current greatest joys are raising her child and exercising with Gu Ling.

Duanmu Chen had long grown accustomed to this, and didn’t mind; he just planned to visit his goddaughter at the Su Mansion once the weather was better. Bringing the baby into the palace for him to see was out of the question for now.

By the second day of the year, Su Liang, having no family to visit, stayed home with Gu Ling to take care of the baby.

Interestingly, on this very day, the envoys from the royal families of the Liang and Yin countries, sent to visit their princesses, arrived at the capital. The princesses were unable to return to their families, so it was as if their own families had come to visit them.

Duanmu Chen graciously allowed Situ Yao and Ji Yueyan to meet their visitors, also preparing gifts in return.

As outsiders couldn’t stay within the palace for long, the visitors left on the same day.

However, before they had departed, Duanmu Chen already knew the contents of their conversations.

Ji Yueyan’s side had nothing notable; it was all routine. The visitors asked whether she had adapted to the environment of Qian Country, how her health was, and so forth. Ji Yueyan’s mother had passed away long ago and her father had also recently died. The emperor of the Yin Country had become her unfamiliar half-brother, Ji Yuebai. Nothing there was worth her lamenting.

The “secret talk” with Situ Yao held much more of Duanmu Chen’s attention. Perhaps aware of potential eavesdroppers, the queries were quite cryptic. Situ Yao didn’t mention any negligence on part of Duanmu Chen, only stating that she was doing well and that her family need not worry.

But, the listening masters were certain they heard the sound of Situ Yao’s tears.

Why would she cry if she’s doing well? Could it simply be longing for her homeland and relatives? However, Duanmu Chen didn’t actually neglect Situ Yao. Even during her pregnancy, he occasionally visited her. The initial tacit understanding and intimate feelings between them just weren’t the same anymore.

After hearing the report, Duanmu Chen took no action. Whether Situ Yao had awakened or become more shrewd, he was only concerned with the outcome. She was his woman and would give birth to his child. As long as she didn’t make any inappropriate comments or actions for Liang Country in the future, he would treat her well.

Soon it was the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the New Year.

A grand lantern fair took place throughout the city. Whether Gu Ling and Su Liang would attend depended on Gu Xiaonuan. It was unsafe to bring a baby into such a large crowd and they feared it would scare her, but the little one was still unused to her parents not being around.

Zhengzheng had been begging Gu Ling to make him a small airplane-shaped lantern, which Gu Ling then agreed to.

By evening, Lu Yu came with Zhengzheng, and received the lantern from Gu Ling.

Having lit it, Zhengzheng was overjoyed. "Master is so amazing! This looks so cool!" The little airplane, hung by a string seemed like it was truly flying.

Zhengzheng really wanted to see the lanterns with Gu Xiaonuan, but Su Liang said that her sister was still too young to go.

Reluctantly understanding, Zhengzheng said, "My mother said the same thing. I'll just tell her all about it tomorrow!"

Su Liang agreed, even though Gu Xiaonuan at her current stage couldn't understand what was being said.

Gu Ling made other lanterns too: a rabbit-shaped lantern for Su Liang, and surprisingly another bamboo shoot-shaped lantern for Gu Xiaonuan...

Gu Ling stated that he couldn't think of anything more suitable to give to his daughter, so he just went along with Su Liang's previous name for the little God, the bamboo shoot, assuming it had some strange connection to Gu Xiaonuan.

Su Liang commented that it didn't matter if it was a bamboo shoot, it was pretty cute after all.

Old Mu and Cen Man accompanied Nangong Qian to the lantern festival, with Qiuyue tagging along. As soon as they reached the crowded streets, Nangong Qian started coughing from the crush of the crowd and the scent of fireworks in the air. Old Mu quickly led them into the Wan Family Restaurant, where a private room had been reserved for them.

Once inside, they found that the Lin's family was already there, so they joined them. The Lin's had brought their children to enjoy the festivity, but as they are quite young, Lin Shuzhi didn't think it would be safe to bring them downstairs.

After a while, Lian Shun's parents also came, bringing Lian Shan with them. Yuan Pei trailed behind them.

As only Nangong Qian and Lian Shan were unmarried ladies of similar age, they sat together, conversing. They had previously met at the Su Mansion.

Lian Shun's father started a game of chess with Lin Shuzhi while Cen Man chatted with Madam Lin.

Bored, Old Mu gazed down at the street, hoping to see a nice lantern that he could bring home for his beloved disciple. However, he soon spotted a pickpocket amidst the crowd.

Having nothing better to do, Old Mu directly jumped down from the second floor, nabbed the thief who was about to run off, handed back the stolen pouch, and called the patrolling soldiers to bound him away.

Afterward, Old Mu returned to the restaurant and continued to watch for thieves from above, feeling it to be a noble duty.

While observing the moving crowd, Old Mu spotted Lu Yu and Zhengzheng. Zhengzheng was seated on Lu Yu's shoulders with a delicate painted mask covering the top half of his face. He was excitedly holding an oddly-shaped lantern, looking around. Many people in the streets wore masks,

which was also part of the festival tradition. Lu Yu was wearing a larger sized mask, just like his son's.

Old Mu's gaze followed them until they were about to disappear into the distance, his eyes suddenly noticing two suspicious figures moving through the crowd towards Lu Yu. Although dressed ordinarily, their arms' positions caught Old Mu's attention as they were poised as if prepared to draw knives from their sleeves.

"Old Cen!" A glint appeared in Old Mu's eyes and he called out to Cen Man before again jumping out of the window.

Cen Man, unaware of what was happening, nevertheless followed Old Mu out immediately.

The others rushed to the window to see what was happening.

After a while, a commotion broke out in the crowd. Due to the sheer size of the crowd and chaos, it was unclear what was happening until cries of "Murder!" rang out.

But soon the brief disturbance was quelled. A person had indeed died, but most people didn't see it happen. By the time they were informed, order had been restored, and the parties involved had "disappeared".

Cen Man escorted Lu Yu and Zhengzheng back to the restaurant, while Old Mu dragged the two bodies into a dark alley. When the government soldiers arrived, Old Mu asserted that he was Su Liang's master. After they sought instructions from their superiors, they allowed Old Mu to handle the matter on his own and stated they would assist if needed in the future.

The two men were indeed assassins. However, they were not killed by Old Mu. He had merely stopped them, after Cen Man had injured them with a hidden weapon, they chose to commit suicide rather than be captured.

Using the light emanating from the entrance of the alley, Old Mu searched the bodies of the two assassins but found nothing that could identify them. Their appearance was very ordinary and their weapons were cheap products easily purchased from roadside stalls. As for their martial arts skill level, it was impossible to tell now that they were dead.

Lu Yu was worried about Wan Hui and his child at home, he wanted to entrust Zhengzheng to Cen Man and go home to check.

Thinking that Old Mu might come over as well, Cen Man relayed this to Nangong Qian and escorted Lu Yu and his son back home.

Old Mu enlisted the help of the government soldiers he had previously contacted, instructing them to help transfer the corpses to the Su Mansion. He then went to the restaurant to get Nangong Qian and they went home together.

Su Liang and Gu Ling were about to go to sleep, when Old Mu called for Gu Ling from below Yuanming Pavilion.

"I'll go and see what it is." Gu Ling dressed and went downstairs.

Upon learning that Lu Yu and Zhengzheng had experienced an assassination attempt, Gu Ling immediately furrowed his brow, "Who was it?"

Old Mu shook his head, "I don't know." After saying this, he took Gu Ling to see the two corpses. Gu Ling couldn't find any clues either, instructing Qi Yan to dispose of the bodies before dawn. "Old Cen hasn't returned from taking Zhengzheng home, I'm not sure if anything happened to the Wan family." Old Mu sighed.

While they were talking, Cen Man returned, reporting that everything was peaceful at the Wan family and there had been no unusual occurrences during the night.

Gu Ling told them to rest, then returned to Yuanming Pavilion.

He first checked on Gu Xiaonuan, who was sleeping soundly.

Gu Ling went to the bedside, removed his shoes and outerwear, and lay down on the outer edge of the bed. Su Liang then asked him what had happened.

After Gu Ling finished explaining, Su Liang seemed thoughtful, "Lu Yu and Zhengzheng often travel outside, and their home location is not a secret. The fact that the assassins chose to strike on a crowded main street tonight, could it mean that the person behind this isn't very certain, and could only take advantage of such an opportunity? Could it be that there are still surviving members of the Li family who intend to kill Lu Yu and kidnap Zhengzheng?"

Zhengzheng's birth father is the former biggest porcelain merchant in Qian Country, the third young master of the Li family, who had tried every means to kidnap Zhengzheng when he was alive.

"If it were the people from the Li family, they shouldn't be death soldiers." Gu Ling didn't think this was likely.

"You're right." Su Liang shook her head, "It's even less likely to be traffickers."

But if it was someone who wanted to get to Su Liang and Gu Ling, and thought to kidnap Zhengzheng because he was close to them... Su Liang didn't think their enemies would be that weak.

At this moment, in a courtyard of the Nian mansion in the capital city of Qian Country, which had been vacant for a long time, a lamp was lit.

This place had once been confiscated, when the sisters Nian Ruxue and Nian Ruting were exposed for deceiving the emperor, the Nian family was exiled.

On the day of the incident, Nian Ruxue disappeared and had never been seen again. Later, when Nian Ruting was rescued by Su Liang during the rescue mission for Nian Jincheng, she was meant to die, but she was kept by Yan Shiqi and later ended up in Duanmu Yi's hands. Since Duanmu Yi's attempt to disgust Gu Ling with Nian Ruting failed, he told Duanmu Chen that he had executed her.

Later, Nian Jincheng reclaimed everything after Gu Ling reclaimed his identity. He also became the owner of this mansion, but he never lived here again and all the servants were dismissed.

"Tingting, those two failures you deployed, they're useless!" An exquisitely-dressed middle-aged woman waved off the dust from the chair and sat down.

Another woman in the room slowly walked to another chair, also sitting down without dusting it off, her voice raspy, "Once upon a time, Nian Ruxue loved to sit here."

If Su Liang was there, she would recognize her instantly. This woman was Nian Ruting, the former Nian family member who was infatuated with Gu Ling. And the middle-aged woman, Ren Dong would recognize, she was her master, Shaoyao.

The fact that Nian Ruting was still alive was unknown even to Duanmu Yi. Because at that time he did indeed order Nian Ruting's execution, but it was Shaoyao who was assigned to it. At that time, Shaoyao was disgruntled with Ren Dong and on a whim, she spared Nian Ruting's life and took her as a disciple.

Shaoyao looked displeased, "Tingting, your master is speaking to you."

Nian Ruting caressed the armrest of the chair, totally ignoring Shaoyao, "My life was ruined by Nian Ruxue. She must still be alive, just don't know which gutter she's hiding in."

Shaoyao's expression darkened with anger. She had taken in Nian Ruting in the hopes that she would be grateful and obedient, the thing she could least tolerate was rebellious disciples.

Seeing this, Shaoyao stood up and slapped Nian Ruting hard, "Have you woken up now?"

Nian Ruting didn't seem to be in pain. She pulled at her injured lips and laughed instead, "Master, I heard your question. Those two are useless indeed, their only strength is their loyalty to me, willing to die at my command. Tonight was just a trial, I originally wanted to kill that boy and make Su Liang suffer. It was a great opportunity, but well, it just didn't succeed."

"Why do you insist on causing trouble for Su Liang even though you said that your sister Nian Ruxue is the one you hate most?" Shaoyao scoffed.

Nian Ruting sneered, "Master, I said that Nian Ruxue ruined my life and I hate her, but I didn't say that I hate her the most. Even though she ruined my life and everything I wanted was taken by Su Liang, after all, isn't your new master also an enemy of Su Liang? If you want to win the favor of your new master, the best gift is Su Liang's head."

Shaoyao coldly stared at Nian Ruting, "Don't think about using me! My master wants not only Su Liang's life, but also the life of Gu Ling whom you have been thinking about all the time!"

The color drained from Nian Ruting's face, "Why is he always so dismissive of me? We are destined to be together, we were supposed to be betrothed. It's all because of Nian Ruxue and Su Liang, those two vicious women!"

"Enough with your nonsense!" Shaoyao snapped impatiently, "I came here not for you. Behave yourself! Don't act rashly without my order! I don't want to see a stupid action like the one tonight happening again!"