Farmhouse 1211

Chapter 1211: Was it you who did it?

She said, "She went to find Gu Youyou, and it was Gu Youyou who helped her escape."

Yes, if they put it that way, they would believe it.

King Jin listened in silence, witnessing the Empress's obviously rapidly aging face, and ultimately could not bear to say more. He nodded gently, indicating his agreement.

Upon learning that Lin Qianqing had run away in the middle of the night, the Ducal Residence was thrown into a rage. While sending people out to search, he rushed to the Crown Prince Residence to accuse Gu Youyou of wrongdoing.

Gu Youyou herself was utterly baffled. Just as she received the news, people from the Ducal Residence were already at her door.

Now, she had been framed by the Empress and King Jin, who had directly tossed her into the hot seat.

"This old servant pays respect to the Crown Prince and his wife!"

"You may dispense with formalities, Ducal Protector. What brings you to my residence today?"

The Ducal Protector glanced at Gu Youyou and snorted coldly, "Old men like me don't visit without a reason. Today, I've come to the Crown Prince Residence to ask Her Highness a question."

Gu Youyou smiled faintly and said, "Venerable Ducal Protector, you have lived to a ripe old age, no easy feat. Out of respect for an elder, if you have any questions, please ask, and I will certainly answer."

"Very well!" The Ducal Protector snorted coldly, "The wife of King Jin visited you a few days ago, did she not?"

"Yes, she did!" Gu Youyou did not deny it, saying, "She was poisoned, after all. She had been visiting me frequently lately. This is no secret."

"So, you helped her leave Beijing?" The Ducal Protector had long lost his teeth due to his age. When others get angry, they gnash their teeth, but with no teeth, his anger only caused his face to wrinkle into a bundle, which looked somewhat comical.

Gu Youyou kept a forced smile and replied in surprise, "Ducal Protector, what do you mean by that? Why would I want her to leave Beijing?"

Even if she had been the one to send her away, he had no reasons to accuse her, and besides, she hadn't done it at all.

At the same time, Gu Youyou was also genuinely puzzled. She had always known that Lin Qianqing didn't want to stay in Prince Jin Residence, and given a reason or an opportunity, she would definitely run.

But the fact that she had really run away without any sign was truly astounding to her.

"Why? You and I both know the reason, so why pretend to be clueless?" the Ducal Protector said vehemently.

But this time he had truly wronged Gu Youyou; she really didn't know why.

Jin Zijin glanced at Gu Youyou and said nonchalantly to the Ducal Protector, "Please stick to the matter at hand, Ducal Protector. We don't have time to entertain your riddles. If you are here to cause trouble, I believe you've come to the wrong place."

Everyone in the royal court feared him; even the Emperor showed him a certain degree of deference. But that did not mean Jin Zijin feared him.

Jin Zijin did not show him the slightest respect. He was allowed into the residence merely to see what he really wanted.

"You..." The Ducal Protector, unable to contain his anger and elderly as he was, his eyesight failing, could not discern the expressions of Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin. Yet, listening to their tone, he perceived nothing but disdain for himself.

For how many years had he grown accustomed to others looking up to him? When had anyone ever spoken to him this way?

Even Zhang Cheng, who had some recent disagreements with him, dared to argue a few points, but never dared to speak to him in such a manner and tone.

This made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

"Fine... you won't admit it, will you? Then just watch me capture her and bring her back, and please do not interfere," he said resolutely.

Jin Zijin snorted coldly, "That is your business, what does it have to do with me?"

Chapter 1212: A Different Kind of Bandit

"That's for the best!" The Protectorate Duke got up huffily, letting the servants support him as he left the Crown Prince Residence.

"Ah, why did he leave just like that? He didn't even make things clear." Gu Youyou said with a hint of regret and added anxiously, "Did Lin Qianqing really run away? What on earth happened?"

Jin Zijin squinted and pondered for a moment before saying, "It seems that there is something odd about the Prince Jin Residence. I'll have Xiao Jinyan check it out."

"Alright."

"But your cousin... should you secretly give her a hand?"

Gu Youyou nodded and said, "Yes, of course. She has always wanted to escape, and now that she has, there's no need to get caught and brought back again, right?"

"That makes sense. I'll arrange it."

It was precisely because Gu Youyou ultimately intervened in Lin Qianqing's escape that the Protectorate Duke, who initially had his doubts, became utterly convinced of King Jin's account.

In his view, Lin Qianqing's escape was either a frame-up by King Jin or something that Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin had a hand in.

But he had no evidence, and there was no way he could accuse them of anything.

Moreover, the secrets hidden behind this incident were not to be shared with outsiders. Thus, despite knowing that Jin Zijin had sent men to thwart him, he could only swallow the bitter pill in silence.

...

The arrangements by Jin Zijin naturally favored escaping further south, as the Yue Family's influence lay in the south. Even with an extended reach, no one could stretch their arm as far as Lingnan.

Yet at the boundary of Lingnan, they still encountered a massive ambush set by the Ducal Residence.

Xiao Qinqin had also met her most severe blow here during her escape in the past, resulting in the death of all the loyal followers by her side.

As for the reason, nobody knew back then.

This no-man's land at the border was rampant with bandits. But these bandits were not really bandits—they were forces arranged by the Ducal Residence many years ago, and it had been years since. Following Xiao Qinqin's incident, this was only the second time they had been activated.

"Catch that woman, and the boss will promote the one who does to second-in-command."

"Brothers, charge..."

After days of fleeing, the carriage Lin Qianqing took when she left Beijing was long gone. She was now posing as the mute daughter of the Rucheng Pancake Shop, heading to Lingnan to seek refuge with relatives.

Seeing the bandits shouting atop the hill in front, Lin Qianqing bit her lip, clutching the bundle in her arms tightly.

Once upon a time, she had more than once dreamt of leaving Beijing, running far away. But having really run away, the hardships of this journey and the sights and sounds she experienced along the way made her realize the difficulty of the commoner’s life. It was not at all as simple as she had imagined.

Yet if she were to do it all over again, she would make the same choice. To go through an intense life of experiences was always better than being trapped in a quiet life of obscurity.

Life is like that, gains come with losses.

"Little mute girl, when we start fighting later, you must protect yourself. Find the chance to run and don’t worry about us. Head towards Lingnan, past the hill ahead, and you’ll be safe."

Lin Qianqing bit her teeth and nodded with determination.

The group she was with were kind-hearted people she had met on the road. After an ambush, all the people King Jin had arranged for her had died, and it was these people who had saved her.

They told her that they were merchants heading to Lingnan, and since it was on the way, they suggested that she follow them and send them off on their way.

Of course, Lin Qianqing had no idea that these people were sent by Jin Zijin to be by her side.

A man with a furrowed brow said, "These people don’t seem like ordinary bandits; their purpose is very clear."

Chapter 1213: Zhang Family Offers Itself

"They’re here already, stop talking and get up!"

Everyone no longer had the time to puzzle over whether these were ordinary bandits.

Perhaps today, they would all perish here.

Lin Qianqing, clutching a bundle, inched backward, dodging through the fighting crowd, and seized the chance to run toward the mountain hollow.

But since she was their target and with so many people around, how could they possibly let her escape?

The number of her protectors was dwindling, and as the bandits increased, some soon started chasing after her.

Because this path was a common thoroughfare leading to Lingnan, it was often frequented by merchants.

Yet, from afar, they heard the sounds of combat, who would dare to continue on?

They all hurriedly retreated the way they came.

"Bandits don’t normally rob this road, so what’s going on today?"

"Aye, when have bandits ever not robbed? That’s just when they’re not hungry. They must be starving mad now, why wouldn’t they rob?"

"Exactly, and besides, this region is always chaotic. Ah, forget it, let’s go back and talk, we can return tomorrow."

But at this moment, a tall man mounted a horse, put on a hood, grasped the reins tightly, and galloped fiercely through the bandit horde.

Since the hills nearby were abundant with paths, the bandits had surged down the slopes. Apart from a few lead bandits who rode on horseback to pose and observe, none had ridden horses yet.

As he charged on his steed, he immediately drew everyone’s attention.

Riding straight toward the trail in the hollow, he sped past Lin Qianqing, his horse knocking over several bandits in pursuit of her. In one swift move, he grabbed her and tossed her onto the back of his horse.

Startled, Lin Qianqing gazed at the man on the horse with both shock and fear.

"It’s you? I recognize you."

The man, expressionless, simply said: "I also recognize you!"

Having said that, he turned the horse around, holding a long halberd, he struck back in a return thrust.

The bandits, seeing their prize slip away, were so furious their noses almost bent out of shape.

The leading bandit bellowed loudly: "Quick, stop him, kill that man, and grab the woman."

With a cold and disdainful look, the man tightened his grip on the reins and sped up even more.

...

After the Eldest Miss Zhang and Madam Zhang met with disaster, Zhang Cheng and the rest of the Zhang Family were able to escape unscathed. Aside from Zhang Cheng becoming the Second Officer from being the First Officer, the Zhang Family suffered no consequences.

The Zhang Family truly had their way.

With the rift now between the Zhang Family and the Ducal Residence, whether they would sever ties completely was yet to be seen. Meanwhile, Zhang Cheng had begun to consider other Princes.

Now, the most valuable player undoubtedly was the eldest Prince who had recently entered the scene.

Officially supported only by the Xiao Family, the origins of his connections with the Dao Sect were too obscure for outsiders to judge. Moreover, he was the legitimate eldest son with only one Consort and now also had a son.

It was only natural for Zhang Cheng to set his sights on him first.

"Eldest Prince, I, with all due disrespect, present my daughter for consideration. She once participated in the selection of the Prince's Consort. Although she did not win first place, she secured second. It would truly be beneath her to be a mere Consort to the Eldest Prince."

Gu Youyou, hiding behind a screen, listened to Zhang Cheng's words and couldn't help wanting to applaud him.

Those words clearly implied his daughter was more than worthy of the title of Consort to the Eldest Prince, yet he still managed to include a humble comment.

To speak such insincere words without blushing or flinching, truly requires a thick skin.

Chapter 1214: Marrying Your Daughter Ends the Family Line

Huh, wait a minute, whether it's above his station or not, Jin Zijin's romantic options must be nipped in the bud.

Gu Youyou clenched her fists tightly.

Jin Zijin glanced at Zhang Cheng indifferently and said, "It's not a matter of whether it's above my station or not, but..." He put on a troubled expression, leaving Zhang Cheng's heart tumbling in uncertainty.

He had thought that by taking the initiative to show goodwill towards Jin Zijin, with the Zhang Family's influence in the court, the eldest son would definitely be eager to reciprocate.

But there he was, with an awkward old face broaching the topic of marriage, looking all uncomfortable.

It's not that he outright refused, but his weird demeanor was inexplicable.

Gu Youyou, hidden behind the screen, was equally surprised at what Jin Zijin intended to do. To reject, yet not cleanly or decisively, what was he trying to do?

Oh my god...

If he dares to bring Zhang Shiyu into his residence, she'll definitely have Searcy gift her a packet of poison to tear her insides apart.

"Eldest Prince, do you perhaps have any concerns?" Zhang Cheng asked cautiously.

Stroking his chin, Jin Zijin said, "I am of advanced years, and I was once a Taoist, cultivating a life of chastity and abstinence. Wouldn't it be a waste for your daughter to be with me?"

Zhang Cheng stumbled, almost falling off his chair.

He thought to himself: You, living a life of chastity and abstinence? Then who helped you father that son?

He steadied himself, taking a few breaths to calm his emotions.

Gu Youyou's commentary was in line with Zhang Cheng's, she was all too clear about just how 'chaste and abstinent' he really was.

When it comes to thick skin, few could outmatch Zhang Cheng.

He quickly composed himself and said to Jin Zijin: "Not lustful? That's a good thing. Just on this account alone, you surpass both King Jin and Prince Qin. I am also aware of your lack of lust, Your Highness. It has been so long since Your Highness and the main consort's wedding, yet not even a single concubine in your mansion—it's truly admirable.

However, with Your Highness's status, having only one woman in the inner palace inevitably leads to loneliness. The main consort, focusing all her attention on the young Prince, might inadvertently neglect Your Highness. In my opinion, this is the perfect time for Your Highness to take a Consort. It would benefit both you and the main consort greatly.

Spreading the Imperial Family's seed is also a responsibility that cannot be eschewed by Your Highness!"

He pleaded earnestly, swelling with pride at his own words.

However, Jin Zijin was shaking his head repeatedly, "No, no, taking your daughter from the Zhang Family to spread the Imperial Family's seed? More like putting an end to my lineage. I'm too old for this, and having a son hasn't been easy, I can't afford more trouble."

Jin Zijin mercilessly mocked him, leaving Zhang Cheng at a loss for words.

Does anyone talk like this?

There's a saying, don't hit someone in the face, and don't expose their shortcomings when you're ridiculing them.

This is both hitting in the face and exposing shortcomings!

Even if you have to reject, couldn’t you be a little more tactful?

This left Zhang Cheng infuriated to no end, but he dared not lash out. He opened his mouth, then again, but could not utter a word.

Gu Youyou, hiding behind the screen, couldn’t hold it in any longer and laughed out loud without restraint.

Zhang Cheng’s face turned even darker upon hearing this.

If he couldn’t see what was happening now, he would be a fool.

There he was, shamelessly offering his daughter to someone as a Consort, only to be made a laughingstock by the couple.

No matter how thick-skinned, he couldn’t sit there any longer. He angrily exclaimed, "Eldest Prince, I came to you with respect, sincerely discussing the marriage between my daughter and you. But you have crossed the line. If you disagree, so be it, but why use that issue to stab me in the heart?"

Chapter 1215: Discovered the Secret of Prince Jin Residence

"You..." Zhang Cheng’s face turned iron blue, his fingers trembling. He stood up fiercely, flinging his sleeves and huffed, "Fine, your great Crown Prince is capable, I want to see how you can hold your ground in the Imperial City alone. Let me tell you, the Ducal Residence is not to be trifled with, nobody knows their affairs better than I do."

"As you please!" Jin Zijin remained unmoved.

"Hmph, just you wait and see!"

Zhang Cheng stomped off in a huff, and then Gu Youyou came out.

She asked, "Did you provoke him too much?"

Jin Zijin replied indifferently, "What's there to fear? Let's see how his daughter gets married off."

Soon, they indeed saw the joke on Zhang Cheng.

After being rejected and humiliated by Jin Zijin, he ran to Prince Qin to pledge his loyalty.

But Prince Qin did not see him, and Xie Qinyun, with her maid, drove him out.

It was said that Prince Qin's wife was critically ill, so Prince Qin Residence had long fallen into the hands of Xie Qinyun.

Returning home, he cursed and fumed, calling her a shrew.

And when he sought the Empress to discuss sending another daughter into Prince Jin's Residence, the Empress got so angry she threw a vase at him on the spot.

Barely had Madam Zuo in Prince Jin Residence conceived, and you want to send another daughter? Do you have no shame left?

By now, even ordinary families were reluctant to marry into Zhang Cheng's family; Zhang Family's talented daughters were once quite valuable, but now they're seen as cheap goods unwanted even by minor households.

...

After the King of Xining's rebellious plot was squashed, such a vast region as Xining had to be managed by someone. The Xiao Family's brothers were all occupied, so the Grand Master of Xiao Family personally took charge, moving the Grand Master Residence over.

Xiao Jinyan recently had been busily running errands for Jin Zijin, having just returned from Xining half a day earlier, and now he was summoned by Jin Zijin to scale walls into Prince Jin Residence.

Fortunately, his luck held, and on the first night, he caught on to something amiss.

Jin Wei openly went into Prince Jin Residence to sleep with Prince Jin's woman, which scared him terribly, and he ran to Jin Zijin before dawn could break.

In the middle of the night, Jin Zijin heard some noise and got up to the yard.

"What's the big deal in Prince Jin Residence that you're so anxious to see me for?"

Xiao Jinyan lowered his voice and said, "It's a big deal, and a strange one at that."

Jin Zijin looked at him and invited him into a quiet room.

After drinking a cup of cold tea, Xiao Jinyan slowly explained the situation.

"I saw Jin Wei going to Prince Jin Residence, and he was there to sleep with Prince Jin's woman."

"Hmm?"

"Moreover, Prince Jin actually knew about it, and he switched places with him at midnight, creating the illusion that it was Prince Jin who slept with the woman. Tell me, what in the world are they doing?"

Jin Zijin raised an eyebrow and said, "Aren't you quite familiar with Jin Wei? It seems that you used to be in a good relationship."

Xiao Jinyan waved his hand and replied, "It's still good, I get close to the people from the Ducal Residence all for you. Hey, my relationship with Jin Wei has nothing to do with him cuckolding Prince Jin. What are they really up to?"

Jin Zijin stroked his chin, pondering for a moment and said, "Keep an eye on it, this matter... Youyou probably knows."

"Her?" Xiao Jinyan scoffed, "What could she possibly know? Aside from making money."

Jin Zijin didn’t appreciate those words, he coldly chased Xiao Jinyan out.

"Get out, don’t come to my place before dawn."

After going back, Jin Zijin discovered that Gu Youyou had already woken up, sitting at the bedside waiting for him.

"What happened?" Gu Youyou asked directly.

Chapter 1216: Analysis

Jin Zijin was stunned for a moment, and then quickly came to a realization.

Youyou’s sensory abilities and hearing are no worse than his own, although she has never mentioned it, he is very clear about it.

That’s why he never allows Xiao Jinyan to come here in the middle of the night, as her sleep is not good, and once she wakes up, it’s hard for her to fall back asleep.

"You already know? Xiao Jinyan has been here."

Gu Youyou, groggy, hummed in acknowledgment and scratched her head sloppily, asking, "What is he doing here at this hour?"

Jin Zijin said, "He just came back from Prince Jin Residence, guess what he saw?"

"What?" Gu Youyou asked curiously.

Jin Zijin crawled back into the quilt and pulled Gu Youyou in as well, just like before, they hid under the quilt and talked about serious matters.

"Jin Wei would go to King Jin's residence at night, secretly meeting King Jin's woman. Of course, it might not be a private meeting; King Jin knows about it. In the middle of the night, he would replace Jin Wei without anyone knowing that Jin Wei was in Prince Jin Residence, including those women who Jin Wei sleeps with."

"What...?" Gu Youyou felt as if ten thousand grass-mud horses were running over her head, then her entire worldview collapsed.

Although this shocking news was incredible, she thought about it and soon understood the reason behind it.

She said, "King Jin really has an illness, a sterility illness. To create the illusion that King Jin has no such disease, they came up with this trick. Then the child that Madam Zuo in the Prince Jin Residence is carrying... is also Jin Wei's?"

Upon hearing the name Jin Wei, Gu Youyou felt chills.

When she first came to Beijing, Lin Qianqing had a high regard for Jin Wei, thinking she herself couldn't marry Jin Wei, she introduced Gu Youyou to Jin Wei with the mindset of 'not letting outsiders benefit'.

Luckily, they didn't like each other.

Otherwise, being favored by such a person would be disgusting enough.

Jin Zijin said, "That should be the case. Jin Yan will observe a few more nights."

King Jin is sterile, so they arranged for Jin Wei to act as a substitute.

And Lin Qianqing’s escape must be related to this matter.

Gu Youyou couldn’t help but feel sympathy, saying, "So Qianqing chose to run away at this time, maybe because she knew this secret? How could she accept such an absurd arrangement, so she must have run away."

Jin Zijin nodded and said, "It’s because of this that she ran, but it wasn’t of her own accord."

"Huh?" Gu Youyou asked curiously, "Then why is that?"

"She couldn’t run away if no one helped her; she couldn’t escape on her own. My people reported back, she was protected by someone."

"How is she now?"

Gu Youyou grew even more concerned about her safety.

Jin Zijin said, "She’s fine, my people have taken her on, and will safely send her to Lingnan."

"That’s good." Gu Youyou breathed a sigh of relief.

"People from the Ducal Residence naturally won’t let her go easily, Lin Qianqing, the mother of King Jin’s legitimate son, would be most beneficial to them. As for the person who helped her escape... I guess it’s mostly King Jin."

"King Jin?" That green-hat freak?

"No man would willingly allow such things to happen to himself, King Jin was impelled."

Jin Zijin bitterly smiled and said, "I was wondering why he’s been behaving in the past few months, his personality seems to have changed, and he’s become more astute."

Gu Youyou sighed incessantly, suddenly feeling some sympathy for King Jin.

Thinking that before he reached a point of utter ruthlessness, he still had the awareness to send Lin Qianqing away under such circumstances, she quietly gave him some credit.

Chapter 1217: She Noticed It Too

Jin Zijin sighed, "Lin Qianqing is different from other women; after all, she is the wife whom King Jin married formally, with whom he has shared wedding vows before heaven and earth. This is his last shred of dignity."

Yet, some people would not even leave him that last shred of dignity. Jin Zijin speculated that King Jin was unlikely to remain compliant, and he was somewhat looking forward to King Jin’s reaction.

No one can cover their tracks completely, not even the formidable Yu Jizi, let alone the Ducal Residence.

But the centuries-old foundation of the Ducal Residence, and the intricate and intertwined relationships beneath it, seemed even harder to deal with than Yu Jizi, who worked alone.

...

As Madam’s belly grew day by day, she became increasingly despondent.

Her maid, Long Liu, kept sighing, saying, "The Prince really is something. How come he stopped visiting after Madam got pregnant? It would be nice even if he just came to sit for a while, or at least sent over some nourishing gifts.

"Alas! Madam, you don’t know the kind of rumors that are circulating out there. They say the Prince was good to you before only because you were the only one in this residence who could have a child. Now that everyone’s poison has been cured, and they all can give birth, why would the Prince remember there’s a Madam living in a small courtyard here?"

Madam remained silent, gently caressing her belly.

She didn’t expect King Jin to come because she had discovered a terrifying truth: the man who had shared her bed at night might not be King Jin at all.

She had gone to ask, and since the day he learned of her pregnancy, King Jin had started drinking.

The servants said King Jin was overjoyed, drinking all the fine wine he had saved over the years until it was gone.

But she distinctly remembered that he bore no scent of alcohol when he visited her, and although he didn’t speak upon hearing the news of her pregnancy, he seemed very surprised.

Yet, the servants insisted that King Jin had long known about her pregnancy and had drunk a lot because of it.

When she saw him in the morning, he did indeed seem to have drunk heavily, his body reeking of alcohol.

So... the man at night must have been someone else, a different person.

This was a shocking revelation, and she could imagine what would happen if this secret was exposed—she would be executed immediately.

So, she kept this secret to herself, hoping the man from that night would reappear.

"Madam, why aren’t you talking?"

Long Liu had been talking to herself for quite a while, yet Madam had not reacted at all, instead staring off into space.

She felt exasperated, wishing she could take Madam’s place.

Long Liu thought that Madam had only herself to blame for her suffering; she never fought for herself, so how could she just rely on luck to keep favoring her?

Now that all the women in Prince Jin Residence could bear children, who would remember there was a Madam living in a remote courtyard?

"Ah! Long Liu, go check the kitchen and see what’s edible." After speaking to herself for a while, and with Madam steeped in her own silence, not making a sound, Long Liu had no choice but to sigh and head towards the kitchen.

...

Xiao Jinyan climbed over the wall of Prince Jin Residence for several consecutive nights, almost certain of what they were doing. Beyond shock, he found these people incredibly audacious for meddling with the Imperial Family’s lineage. Although they all bore the surname Jin, how could the Ducal Residence compare to the Imperial Family?

Today, as he wandered through a tea house, he happened to run into Jin Wei, who had been sneaking into Prince Jin Residence night after night.

Ever since Jin Zijin’s identity had been revealed, they hadn’t seen much of each other, and it had been a long time since they had drank together. Jin Wei looked somewhat estranged when he saw him.

Chapter 1218: Just Give the Deer Antler and Tiger Whip

Xiao Jinyan approached Jin Wei with a teasing mindset, so there was no air of estrangement, only an overflowing enthusiasm.

"Yo, check out the young master here, haven’t seen you in a while, how come you look... so listless?"

Seeing the playful smile on Xiao Jinyan’s face, Jin Wei’s expression turned dark in an instant.

Before he could say anything, Xiao Jinyan leaned in closer with a chuckle, lowering his voice and said, "You haven't been overdoing it in Yanliu Lane, have you? If your kidneys can't take it, I'll have someone send over some deer antler and tiger penis to your residence tomorrow, guaranteed to keep you up for ten rounds a night without fail."

Although his voice wasn't loud, there were quite a few people in the teahouse, and since these two young men were famous playboys of Beijing, always radiating an aura wherever they went, a few of the tea drinkers nearby heard them.

Hearing Xiao Jinyan's joke, everyone burst into laughter.

Of course, everyone just took Xiao Jinyan's words as a jest, laughed it off, and that was that.

But who would have thought that upon hearing it, Jin Wei would puff up like an indignant rooster, his hackles instantly raised. He grabbed Xiao Jinyan's collar and barked, "What did you say?"

Nobody expected Jin Wei to take such a joke seriously, and to get so riled up, the laughter ceased abruptly, their faces showing surprise.

Could it be said that Jin Wei is someone who can't take a joke? What's gotten into him today?

Xiao Jinyan, of course, knew why he was upset, but he couldn't show that. Pretending to be innocent, he chuckled and said, "Wei, what are you doing? We're brothers; if you have something to say, just say it. I was just making a little joke, that's all."

Jin Wei snapped out of it and quickly let go of Xiao Jinyan's collar.

Right, it was just a casual remark, yet he took it to heart.

No, it had hit a nerve.

"Don't make such jokes, they're not funny at all!" Jin Wei said, pausing for a moment.

Xiao Jinyan, wearing a look of concern, asked, "What's really going on? You look a bit off. If you're sick, you should get it treated early. You're young; don't let it develop into a serious problem."

Jin Wei brushed off his hand, saying, "I'm fine, let's go upstairs."

Whether it's Xiao Jinyan approaching Jin Wei for the Xiao Family's sake, or Jin Wei approaching Xiao Jinyan for the Ducal Residence, they indeed had a good public relationship; drinking wine, having tea together, and strolling down Yanliu Lane was not a one-or-two-time affair.

Xiao Jinyan felt a measure of sympathy upon seeing Jin Wei's state.

He said, "Setting aside the affairs of the Ducal Residence and the Grand Master Residence, our private friendship is indeed good. If there's anything on your mind, just spill it. Maybe I can help you out."

He could see that the business of Jin Wei wearing King Jin's green hat wasn't consensual. Just by looking at his face, as if his mother had died, it was clear he was reluctant.

But at the same time, he also knew that such matter, Jin Wei would not talk to him about, nor could he.

Jin Wei heaved a long sigh and after a spell of silence said, "Just send over the deer antler and tiger penis from your residence to me. I'm indeed suffering from kidney deficiency."

Xiao Jinyan: "..."

Awkward and unsure of what to say, he looked at Jin Wei with sympathy, patting his shoulder while feigning nonchalance.

"Alright, I'll have someone send it over. A man's needs must be satisfied, but there has to be a limit. Just make sure you know that," he said.

Jin Wei could only smile wryly and shake his head. Know his limits? He did, but others didn't have a clue.

The mistake was being born under an unlucky star.

...

Chapter 1219: Wipe Out the Bandits

Jin Zijin had people dispatched to rendezvous with Lin Qianqing, who have now returned. The bandits' target was clearly Lin Qianqing, so after she was kidnapped, they lost interest in attacking anyone else and pursued her instead.

Of course, in the end, they didn't catch up with her.

This, however, presented an opportunity for the others to escape; though injured, they were still alive and able to return and report to Jin Zijin.

"Have you discovered who kidnapped Miss Lin?"

The Hidden Guard shook his head and said, "He was wearing a black hood, so we couldn't see his face. However, Miss Lin didn't seem to resist, as if she recognized the person."

Gu Youyou was startled and said, "Could it be arranged by my uncle?"

"Your uncle didn't know she was going to leave." Jin Zijin pondered for a moment before adding, "It's hard to say, though. If she reaches a safe place, she should find a way to send a message back to reassure us. Youyou, your business reaches far and wide, have someone keep an eye out."

Gu Youyou agreed it made sense and nodded gently.

Jin Zijin told the Hidden Guard, "You all continue the search for Miss Lin's whereabouts and report back immediately upon receiving any news."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Jin Zijin furrowed his brow in contemplation, then picked up a pen and rapidly wrote a letter.

That lawless border area would be fine if it was indeed unregulated, but there's an air of mystery about it that he cannot tolerate.

Gu Youyou looked down to see what he was writing and casually asked, "What's wrong?"

Jin Zijin replied, "I'm writing to Marquess Yue, asking him to dispatch troops to exterminate those bandits."

"I've heard that those bandits have been entrenched in those mountains for many years, subsisting on their own hunting and farming without much raiding."

Jin Zijin paused and said, "Yes, they wouldn't be known for raiding, but as soon as they do come down the mountains..." He didn't finish his sentence and continued to write the letter.

Meanwhile, they had pretty much figured out what shady things the Ducal Residence had been doing secretly, and Gu Youyou thought these people were mad.

If one is sick, they should seek treatment. If they are incurable, they should not resort to deception. To do such crazy things without fear of eventual exposure and uncontrollable consequences.

Jin Zijin simply said, "If they seek their own destruction, there's no stopping them."

Gu Youyou suddenly recalled a saying: Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. She felt that at this moment, the Ducal Residence was precisely in that state.

Jin Xuyao awoke and was ignored in his little bed for a long time; eventually, he started to cry loudly.

Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin's conversation stopped, and she hurriedly got up to go to the inner room to pick up her son.

"Oh dear, the diapers are wet!" Gu Youyou felt a handful of soaked cloth.

Super Dad Jin Zijin promptly took a clean diaper from a chest and changed the child.

Xiang Chun in the courtyard also heard Jin Xuyao crying, she put down her work and rushed into the room, only to discover that their Highness had already finished all the work usually done by the servants, and was now preparing food for the little prince with a bowl.

Gu Youyou's face turned red with embarrassment and said to Xiang Chun, "You can leave for now, I'll call you if I need anything."

Jin Zijin was very particular; his decree against nursing in a certain way was not a mere joke. He personally supervised, milked, and fed, firmly barring his son from touching what he shouldn't.

Xiang Chun was both touched and heartbroken.

Their master and mistress were so down-to-earth; they could do and manage anything. With them being like this, it left a bunch of idle people in the mansion.

...

Chapter 1220: Encountering That Beggar Again

Cuiya carried the little master out to sunbathe on the street, laughing and chatting with the mistress of the restaurant across the street. The mistress had just been delighted with a new chubby grandson, about the same age as Jie Yi, which made her feel even closer to Miss Du because of the children.

"Your mistress didn't come out today? You took the little master out to enjoy the sun?"

"Yes, my mistress has been quite busy these days, so many people are depending on her for a living. She really works hard."

"Miss Du is truly capable, outdoing so many men." Mistress Fang sighed and then added, "She's also had a tough life, marrying into the Jie Family only to suffer grievances. Just as she was about to enjoy better days, she became a widow."

Miss Du's problems with the Jie Family were no secret; everyone knew that they hadn't divorced but had merely quarreled.

Miss Du is a spirited woman who cannot stand such grievances, so she moved out, determined to be independent. It was said that she and her husband had already reconciled on the road to Xining, planning to return to the Jie Family after the war—but then the news of Jie Zhonglin's death in battle came. Now her plight is even worse than if they'd divorced.

She is now a widow.

Cuiya naturally knew the ins and outs of the situation but didn't want to comment, so she changed the subject.

"Hey, Mistress Fang, let's go up front to buy some dough figurines. My young master can grab things now. Doctor Gu said that children at this age should be encouraged to grab things to make their fingers nimble and their minds sharper. Those dough figurines are so interesting, the children definitely love them."

"Doctor Gu said that?" Mistress Fang hurriedly asked.

"Yes, it was Doctor Gu who said so."

"Oh, then let's buy a few."

They took Doctor Gu Youyou's advice without any doubt, such as taking children out to sunbathe which was all because it was advised by Gu Youyou.

Mistress Fang from the restaurant across the street was always watching how Miss Du took care of children. She followed suit, hoping to raise a smart grandson.

Cuiya and Mistress Fang each took a dough figurine to tease the children with, which made the little ones laugh heartily, but their mood was spoiled by a few beggars causing trouble at the street corner.

A beggar was suddenly pushed to the ground by a few others, nearly toppling Mistress Fang.

Mistress Fang, holding her grandson, quickly dodged to the side, her heart still racing with fright.

"Goodness, the beggars these days are outrageous. Have they no sense of decency? Fighting is forbidden in Jinxiu City, believe it or not, I'll have you taken to the Governor's Office!"

The beggars remained unmoved, not even glancing at Mistress Fang, continuing to bully the beggar who was on the ground.

Because beggars like them wouldn't even be accepted at the Governor's Office – they took up space in jail and wasted food; and if one died, someone still had to arrange for their burial.

And the life of a beggar is worse than that of criminals; they have no shelter to shield them from weather, no food, and when they die, no one cares. Their bodies are tossed into Random Burial Mound, and wild dogs might not even deign to eat them.

Cuiya carrying Jie Yi moved aside and pulled Mistress Fang, saying, "Let it be, don't let the beggars hurt the children."

The beggars didn't pay any attention to them at all, continuing to bellow and curse at the beggar on the ground while trying to snatch something from his embrace.

"Hand it over, or do you want to lose the other arm too?"

Only then did Cuiya notice that the beggar on the ground, holding onto something tightly, was missing an arm. It seemed to be the same pitiful beggar they had encountered on the day they buried Du Wanqing.