Farmhouse 1251

Chapter 1251: Revealing the Truth

Xie Qinyun: "..."

You glutton.

"At least act like the legitimate wife of the Imperial Family. Can you save some face for your Prince? Look at you, only focused on the food. The Emperor and Empress are right up there. Aren't you worried about leaving a good impression?"

Gu Youyou couldn't be bothered to respond. What's the point?

She was merely preparing for the worst.

The banquet had already begun, but strangely enough, neither King Jin nor his eldest son were present, despite being the main characters of the event. The eldest son's birth mother was even more of a mystery, hidden in some obscure corner. Servants were running the show from start to finish.

Even the Empress was helping coordinate.

So while the banquet seemed normal on the surface, the absence of King Jin left every guest wearing a complex expression.

Both the Emperor and Empress were acting strangely today. Not only did King Jin fail to appear, but even his eldest son hadn't been brought out. Yet, they both carried on as if nothing was amiss, keeping the atmosphere in check by skillfully making light conversation to sustain the bizarre mood.

Midway through the banquet, King Jin finally emerged.

His features bore traces of exhaustion, even sorrow, completely lacking the jubilance one would expect from a father celebrating the birth of an eldest son.

The child wasn’t in his arms either. Instead, a green-clad maid behind him carried the baby, her hands trembling. She stole a quick glance at the grand spectacle before her but immediately lowered her head. Her body shook like a leaf in the wind.

Old and far-sighted, the Duke of Huguo couldn’t make out the exact expressions of King Jin and the maid, but he could sense from the sudden shift in the banquet’s atmosphere that something was distinctly off.

What had happened?

Gu Youyou swallowed her final bite of food and placed her chopsticks down.

She narrowed her eyes and looked ahead. The play was about to begin.

Ignoring the strange gazes from those around him, King Jin walked directly to stand before the Emperor and Empress, and suddenly dropped to his knees.

The Emperor’s smile vanished as his gaze grew sharp. He asked in a low voice, "Xiaoran, why are you only showing yourself now?"

Kneeling before the Emperor, King Jin bowed low and hit his head against the ground, his expression filled with both resolve and regret.

He said, "Father, your son has committed a grave offense. An act so shameful it tarnishes the honor of the Imperial Family and drags me into the depths of damnation."

The entire room fell deathly silent, all eyes fixed on the Emperor sitting high above and King Jin kneeling before him.

Expressions were bewildered, none having the faintest idea of what was going on.

Today had been anticipated as a joyous occasion for King Jin. For so long it was said he lacked an heir, and now, finally, he had one. Even if the child was illegitimate, it still brought King Jin some glory.

So why confess to wrongdoing now, of all times?

And in front of so many people?

Could he not wait for a private moment, when the Emperor was in better spirits? Especially since what he mentioned was disgrace—something about tarnishing the Imperial Family's honor.

The Duke of Huguo, sensing the gravity of the situation, began to suspect the words "tarnishing the Imperial Family's honor" referred to something as scandalous as illegitimacy.

He was struck with alarm, thinking to himself: Has King Jin lost his mind? How can something like this be said aloud?

He quickly stepped forward, bowing toward the Emperor as he pleaded, "Your Majesty, King Jin, this is a day for celebration. If there's any unpleasant matter, let it be discussed on another day. Why ruin such a wonderful occasion and dampen everyone's spirits?"

The Emperor glanced at the Duke of Huguo, but instead of responding, he asked King Jin in a calm yet probing tone, "What matter is so urgent that you must raise it now, in public?"

King Jin kept his head lowered, not meeting anyone's gaze.

He replied, "I chose today to reveal it because... this child is not of my blood."

Chapter 1252: King Jin Has Gone Mad

As soon as these words were spoken, the entire hall erupted in an uproar.

Today's banquet was arranged especially for King Jin's eldest son, yet King Jin emerged with a face like death and declared that the child was not his own flesh and blood?

Not King Jin's flesh and blood? Then whose was it?

The people of the Ducal Residence, stunned, turned to look at the Duke Protector.

The Duke Protector stumbled back a step, steadied by the person behind him who quickly supported him.

He looked toward the Empress, seated high beside the Emperor.

But the Empress sat majestically still, utterly unmoving, appearing much like a puppet.

It was only then that everyone noticed the Emperor had maintained his posture for quite some time now, and the normally kind-faced Empress—who always wore a radiant smile even amid grand occasions—now had an expression akin to someone mourning their own child, which was downright terrifying.

Anyone present, who had even a shred of sense, could tell that today was bound to uncover a monumental scandal.

"King Jin, what on earth is this? What do you mean this child is not your flesh and blood? Have you gone mad today?" The Emperor asked in a look of genuine shock, his expression so earnest it truly seemed as if he had just learned about this revelation.

Gu Youyou thought to herself: The Emperor's acting skills truly deserve an award.

This family, each more adept at performing than the next—life is but a stage, entirely reliant on showmanship. Having traveled back in time, she now fully understood the meaning of true theatrics.

"What… what does he mean by this?" Xie Qinyun lightly tugged at Gu Youyou's sleeve to ask.

"See for yourself," Gu Youyou whispered in reply.

King Jin kept his head lowered, avoiding the Emperor's gaze entirely. His shoulders, pressed against the ground, trembled slightly.

He said, "Your son was cursed by vile conspirators in his youth, rendering him incapable of fathering a child. This child… this child is merely the spawn of a wicked plot designed by those conspirators to seize the throne!"

King Jin's words sent shockwaves rippling through the crowd, each wave more devastating than the last.

"And the traitor who conspired against your son for their treasonous ambitions is here among us." Raising his head at last, he straightened his body and pointed toward the Duke Protector, who was being supported by another.

All eyes followed King Jin's outstretched finger, landing squarely on the Duke Protector.

These allegations weren't the sort of jokes cracked idly during a gathering—hardly a trivial jest!

The Duke Protector committing such audacity? Had he not been one of King Jin's staunchest allies all along? There had to be some mistake, surely?

The Duke Protector's face darkened to a ghastly blue, his expression one of utter shock. Yet within moments, his demeanor shifted to one of deep troubled concern.

He shouted, "King Jin has succumbed to madness! This old servant did not wish to expose these affairs, but now, facing such outrageous claims in front of so many witnesses, I have no choice…"

With tears streaming down his face, the Duke Protector pushed away the one supporting him, tottering weakly as he approached the Emperor. Falling to his knees before the Emperor, his voice quavered as he sobbed bitterly, "Your Majesty, King Jin has not been himself ever since Consort Zhang's demise. This matter implicates my guilt—this old servant made the audacious decision to keep it hidden and privately arranged for a doctor to examine him. That doctor diagnosed King Jin as having lost his sanity due to the trauma he had suffered."

“Even the princess consort could not endure this and fled the household. After she left, King Jin only grew more erratic, his mind spiraling further, until his madness became increasingly severe…”

Gu Youyou silently clicked her tongue in disbelief. This old guy spun lies with such ease—his face didn’t even flush for a moment!

This lot truly took the cake.

The crowd was utterly astonished, their gazes swiftly shifting back to King Jin.

King Jin, mad? Certainly, King Jin had been acting strangely lately, and upon closer reconsideration, it truly had begun after the incident involving Consort Zhang. At the time, everyone had simply attributed it to King Jin’s gloomy mood—after all, it was a family catastrophe of considerable magnitude. Yet no one had considered that King Jin might have been unable to cope and had succumbed to insanity.

Chapter 1253: Identify the Cause of the Illness

Could it be true?

King Jin turned his head to look at the Ducal Residence Master kneeling beside him, his face filled with anger, as if he could strangle the man, glaring at him furiously.

This was once the elder he respected the most, yet now revealed such a disgraceful face.

He snorted coldly and said, "I think you’re the one who’s gone mad. Insane for the throne."

The onlookers also felt that what King Jin said made some sense. What if he truly harbored ambition to seize the throne? Who wouldn’t desire the throne? But to go so far as to plot against the Empress and King Jin for it—that would indeed be too cruel.

The Ducal Residence Master was unmoved. Tears and snot running down his face, he lamented, "Xiaoran, I am your great-grandfather! What nonsense are you spouting? How many days does this old bag of bones have left to live? The Emperor is still in excellent health; he’ll surely outlive this decrepit body of mine!"

"If I truly had a mind to seize the throne, I would've done it when I was younger. Why would I wait until now? At this age, even if I committed the gravest of sins and seized the country, how many days could I possibly enjoy as Emperor...?"

At this point, he hurriedly kowtowed to the Emperor, saying, "Ah, I'm old now, useless. Your Majesty, you must forgive this old servant's outburst. My mouth slipped and spoke words it shouldn't have. I deserve to be punished!"

After speaking, he slapped his own mouth twice.

The crowd found themselves agreeing—after all, the Ducal Residence Master was so old now. Why wouldn't he have seized the throne earlier?

Back when the Emperor had yet to solidify his power, that would have been the perfect time.

After all, for the Emperor to ascend to the throne, the Ducal Residence Master's contributions were invaluable. Without his support back then, perhaps the Third Prince or the Fifth Prince would have become Emperor instead.

The uninformed onlookers shifted their opinions like reeds swaying in the wind, their gazes darting back and forth between King Jin and the Ducal Residence Master.

The words spoken by both were too shocking, leaving them trembling weakly in their legs.

King Jin turned his head away, no longer looking at the Ducal Residence Master. Instead, he began to recount, detail by detail, what he had uncovered on the day Consort Zhang met her accident—the reasons for his condition, and his inability to father children.

This included how Nanny Li manipulated the Empress into persuading him to agree to using another man's seed, how the Ducal Residence arranged for his cousin Jin Wei, who bore some resemblance to him, to climb over the walls of the Prince Jin Residence in the dead of night, and how, in the darkness, they switched identities to deceive everyone and produce this child...

Of course, regarding the wound he discovered on his person, he altered certain parts of the story.

Gu Youyou ultimately had helped him. She was a woman, and more importantly, his sister-in-law. He couldn’t drag her into this and tarnish her reputation.

He credited this revelation to the late Imperial Physician Cui, claiming that it was Imperial Physician Cui who uncovered the secret. To silence him, they forced him to choose a suitable moment to take his own life.

Several invited Imperial Physicians broke into cold sweats. Only now did they realize why Imperial Physician Cui’s expression was so off when he came out of that room, and why he soon fell to his death from a carriage. His death had been so sudden.

It turned out he had been silenced.

At the same time, fear gripped their hearts.

They could only think themselves fortunate. If they were the ones called into that room to examine King Jin that day, it would have been them who died.

The crowd was astounded, feeling as if they were listening to a fantastical tale—it was terrifying.

"Nonsense! You’re spouting nonsense!" The Ducal Residence Master exclaimed in agitation. "Xiaoran, how can your illness have driven you to this extent? This isn’t a game—you’re spouting baseless claims that could lead to all our deaths, as well as your mother’s and yours!"

"That son is truly yours! How could you say such things? Look, look! See how much this child resembles King Jin. How could it be fake?"

Chapter 1254: Blood Recognition

Everyone craned their necks, but unfortunately, they couldn’t see anything.

Then they thought, Protector General, with your presbyopia, you can't even clearly see the face of someone standing right in front of you. How can you claim this newborn child resembles King Jin?

The Emperor appeared calm, the most composed person in the room.

Of course, everyone was used to it. No matter what happened, the Emperor always remained calm, as if he was born with this one expression. No one found it surprising anymore.

The Emperor said, "Bring the child for me to take a look."

The maid, Long Liu, trembling like a leaf, stood pale as a sheet. Hearing the Emperor's command, she took several deep breaths to gather her strength before stepping forward to present the month-old child before him.

The Emperor glanced at the child and suddenly let out a chuckle, "Heh."

Then he cast a meaningful look at King Jin and the Protector General.

The Emperor's "heh" left everyone utterly baffled.

The greatest skill of the Emperor was making people unable to guess his thoughts. Naturally, no one understood what he meant by this.

Was it a resemblance, or was it not?

"Why don't we try the blood-drip test to determine if this child is truly Xiaoran's flesh and blood?"

The Protector General's expression shifted slightly, but he nodded, saying, "Fine, then let's do the blood-drip test. Only, this poor child, to have such a muddleheaded father, truly suffers."

The Protector General's poise confused the onlookers even more.

But the Protector General's confidence in proceeding with the blood-drip test stemmed from the fact that he had tested it at home. For children of distant familial relations, the blood would mix; King Jin's blood and Jin Wei's blood had already proven compatible. He believed that Jin Wei's child's blood would surely mix with King Jin's as well.

He truly was not afraid of this blood-drip test.

Gu Youyou saw the unwavering confidence in the Protector General's eyes and felt puzzled, but she wasn't worried in the slightest. She had already prepared for this moment.

More than anyone, she understood that the blood-drip test was unreliable. But what if by sheer dumb luck, the blood types matched, and the child's blood mingled with King Jin's? If that were to happen, even King Jin himself might start doubting reality.

After all, he was entirely certain that he had never laid a finger on Madam Zuo.

That's why Gu Youyou had made preparations long in advance, ensuring that the child's blood would not mix with King Jin's.

She gave Jin Zijin a quick wink, and Jin Zijin immediately set things in motion.

Before long, someone brought forward two bowls of Qingshui. The elderly eunuch Wan Gonggong by the Emperor's side took out silver needles and pricked both King Jin's finger and the baby's finger for their blood.

The Emperor's eyes were fixed on the two drops of blood, but he saw that they did not mix.

As for the child, the pain of having their hand pricked startled them awake from sleep, and they began to wail uncontrollably.

Suddenly, Long Liu also burst into tears, standing to the side sobbing while soothing the child.

After observing the results, the Emperor let out a cold snort and ordered Wan Gonggong to present the blood sample to the Protector General.

The Protector General stared at the two unmixed drops of blood in the bowl, his eyes widening in disbelief. He exclaimed, "No... Impossible! This child clearly... How... How can this be?"

The Emperor said coldly, "Protector General, do you have anything else to say?"

"I..."

The Emperor barked loudly, "Guards, bring me Jin Wei!"

The Emperor's face darkened as he fixed the Protector General with a piercing glare, his voice sharp as a blade. "I'll make sure you're utterly convinced. Soon enough, we'll see whether this child's blood mixes with Jin Wei's."

The Protector General was completely dumbfounded. How could this be? Jin Yushu was legitimate, King Jin was Jin Yushu's legitimate offspring, and their ancestors shared the same lineage with the Emperor's ancestors. They came from the same bloodline—how could their blood not mix?

Chapter 1255: I Am Also Guilty

I tried it myself at home—children between cousins are supposed to be compatible. What on earth is going on here? Could this all just be coincidence?

Before long, a guard returned to report to the Emperor: "Your Majesty, Jin Wei has fled."

"Fled?" The Emperor shot to his feet, visibly agitated.

Jin Wei came today too. He had issued strict orders that no one could leave Prince Jin Residence today, and had already coordinated with Jin Zijin to assign people to watch over everyone. How could Jin Wei have managed to escape?

"Your Majesty, before the banquet began, Jin Wei claimed he was unwell, so he..." The guard trailed off, but the Emperor understood the implication.

He had fled long ago, taking advantage of the time when guests were coming and going, before proper defenses were set up.

Jin Zijin furrowed his brow. Without Jin Wei around, it could be proven that this child wasn't King Jin's, but it wouldn't be enough to confirm he was Jin Wei's from the Ducal Residence either. This complicates matters greatly.

Was he truly ill or only pretending?

If Jin Wei had sensed something was going to happen today ahead of time, Jin Zijin found it rather unlikely.

If he had known trouble was coming, surely the Ducal Residence would've been prepared. They wouldn't have let things escalate to this point. That old fox, the Duke Protector, would've feigned illness and refused to attend in the first place. How could he have shown up so cheerfully for the full-moon banquet?

"Then go to the Ducal Residence and apprehend Jin Wei," the Emperor commanded firmly.

The Duke Protector slumped to the ground, drenched in sweat and trembling with fear.

Today, King Jin unexpectedly betrayed him, catching him completely off guard.

What had gone wrong? What critical misstep had pushed King Jin onto this path?

If Imperial Physician Cui had uncovered something and brought the truth to light, the Duke Protector could never accept it.

If King Jin had known about this all along, why would the Empress have been drawn into agreeing to such an absurd plan to "borrow the seed"?

Seated beside the Emperor, the Empress said nothing, remaining unmoving, like a statue.

The Duke Protector scoffed coldly, "What utter nonsense, Xiaoran! If you had known from the start that we were plotting against you and exploiting you, how could you have agreed to something so outrageous?"

King Jin broke down into tears, fell to his knees before the Emperor, and pleaded, "Father, this was indeed my grave mistake. In a moment of weakness, blinded by power, I committed an unforgivable wrong. My obsession with seizing the throne by any means consumed me. I thought that once I firmly held that position, I could repay today's humiliation in full.

But over these past days, I've thought a great deal. I truly cannot bear it—letting them plant Jin Wei's illegitimate offspring one after another in my residence.

It was I who freed Lin Qianqing. She is my lawful wife from the wedding night. I couldn't stand by and allow her to be dishonored, so I arranged for her to be escorted out of Beijing. Father, punish me however you see fit, but I beg you not to send anyone after Lin Qianqing or hold Lord Lin accountable!"

King Jin's emotional cries and falling tears moved even the silent Empress, who finally shed her own tears.

Meanwhile, a maid nearby, carrying a child, sobbed uncontrollably, while below the guests whispered among themselves in heated discussion. The scene quickly grew chaotic.

Irritated, the Emperor barked at Long Liu, "Take the child away for now. Bring him back when Jin Wei is captured."

Long Liu was promptly escorted away by two guards. As soon as she entered the secluded courtyard, the guards locked the gates behind her.

Several guards stood vigil outside the courtyard, while inside, there was only Madam Zuo, still recovering postpartum, and Long Liu cradling the child.

"How are things progressing?" Madam Zuo, who had recently fallen ill again, asked weakly. She had long known the child was not King Jin's and had anticipated eventual trouble, so wasn't surprised that the courtyard had been sealed.

Chapter 1256: This Time It's Over for Sure

But because she already knew that the child was not King Jin's, the thought of all kinds of terrible possibilities, coupled with her weakened body after childbirth, or perhaps lovesickness for the man from that night, she fell ill and never recovered.

Long Liu began crying loudly: "Madam, our lives are so pitiful!"

"The Zuo Residence was bitter, and now you've married into the Prince Jin Residence, yet it's still bitter. Why do they do this? Their scheming and plotting, whether to seize the throne or not, what does it have to do with us? Madam, why must they drag innocent people like us into the water..."

"What on earth happened?" Madam Zuo was still unclear about the matters.

Long Liu was already sobbing uncontrollably, "Madam, we're doomed this time, but at least we won't have to suffer anymore..."

She was already in utter despair, thinking that dying would be better—it would spare her the torment of living in constant fear. If she died, perhaps in her next life, she might be reincarnated into a better destiny.

Even if it's still the fate of a maid, at least let her serve a more capable master. Madam Zuo had been bullied all her life, her own personality too soft, following such a master was truly bad luck.

But when it came to the thought of dying, she was still terrified, didn't the saying go, 'Better a miserable life than a glorious death'?

Now, Long Liu's heart was filled with contradiction.

Madam Zuo looked on with dull eyes as the maid placed the child by the bedside, then buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

She was already numb, and asked indifferently: "Are we about to die? That might actually be better."

Long Liu froze for a moment, then raised her tear-streaked face to say to Madam Zuo: "We truly are about to die. Just now, they asked me to bring the young master to the front hall to perform the blood test in front of the Prince..."

"What was the result?"

Hearing that, Madam Zuo grew agitated and abruptly sat upright.

"The result..." Long Liu cried bitterly, "The result was that the child isn't the Prince's. Madam, who was the man that night in your room if it wasn't the Prince? Long Liu clearly attends to you every morning, preparing clothes for both you and the Prince..."

"Not the Prince's?" Madam Zuo muttered softly.

Knowing inwardly was one thing, but having it confirmed was an entirely different matter.

Her emotions were complicated now, unsure whether to feel joy or sorrow.

The man from that night was so gentle and tender, unlike King Jin's morning-after indifference; it brought her a hint of secret delight.

He must have truly liked her, or at least liked her during their shared moments of passion. In her life, alienated by all, surely there was at least one person who truly cared for her? So she thought.

"Madam, what's wrong?" Seeing Madam Zuo dazed, Long Liu anxiously asked again.

Although Long Liu often felt resentful toward Madam Zuo’s weakness, having grown up together with her, endured hardships together, and faced countless scorn from others together, the bond between them was undeniable.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Madam Zuo replied faintly.

"Then why aren’t you afraid? The child isn’t the Prince’s, so you... you..."

Madam Zuo picked up the child from the bed. The baby had stopped crying and was now staring up at her with wide, curious eyes.

This was her son, so adorable, so tiny.

It didn’t matter if she died, but this child had only been in the world for a month. There were so many beautiful things he hadn’t seen yet. As his mother, how could she bear to let him lose his chance to live?

So yes, she was afraid.

But what could she do? She couldn’t even control her own life, let alone the fate of such a small child.

Chapter 1257: Jin Wei Disappeared

To think, how innocent she and her child were. She only wanted to live a peaceful life, simply seeking to protect herself. But... they wouldn’t give her that chance.

How cruel King Jin was—taking her as a concubine, ignoring her after doing so, and that was not enough. He even schemed against her, sending someone to defile her, branding her with a shameful label.

As Madam Zuo was lost in her chaotic thoughts, she suddenly sensed a noise coming from under the bed.

Long Liu heard it too. She stopped crying, lifted the bed curtains, and looked underneath.

There, the floorboards seemed to bulge upward, as if something was about to emerge.

Her eyes widened in shock. She immediately helped Madam Zuo down from the bed. Together, the mistress and servant clutched the barely month-old baby, retreating fearfully to the wall opposite. They stared at the trembling space beneath the bed.

When it rains, it pours. Their lives had already hit rock bottom, so what more terrifying thing could come now, trying to scare them?

...

The guards sent to the Ducal Residence soon returned with news: they hadn't found Jin Wei. He hadn't even gone back there.

Then where could he have gone?

The Emperor looked furious. The Duke of the Nation was relying on his seniority, causing a scene and feigning ignorance. He was using every trick in the book, refusing to confess that he had orchestrated the framing of King Jin all those years ago.

As for the father of the child, he staunchly denied it as well. He even went so far as to say that King Jin and Jin Wei got along too well in private, that young men often played recklessly together, trading women for fun. He claimed it wasn't the first or second time, and he was too ashamed to admit it before.

So even if the child was truly Jin Wei's, it still couldn't prove he had conspired in the plot to usurp the throne.

Line after absurd line of reasoning left everyone flabbergasted and speechless.

Gu Youyou thought: No wonder the Empress refused to give in, even when the truth was obvious. With evidence staring her in the face, she still came up with countless justifications to deny it. Clearly, this shamelessness ran in the ducal family.

She couldn't wait to see how he would continue arguing when the full truth was uncovered and laid bare before them all.

But the fact that Jin Wei had gone missing was a serious matter.

Jin Wei was a key player in all this.

"Could he have run off ahead of time? Or maybe he found the situation too stifling and sneaked out to drink away his sorrows?" Xie Qinyun said in a low voice to Gu Youyou.

If Jin Wei had been pushed into a desperate corner, she thought, it wasn't entirely impossible.

Gu Youyou froze for a moment, furrowing her brow.

Previously, she had heard Jin Zijin mention that Xiao Jinyan had learned from his channels that Jin Wei was truly unwilling to get involved. It was said that when he was sent to climb over the walls of the Prince Jin Residence, he looked utterly miserable, like he had nothing left to live for—bearing an expression strikingly similar to that of King Jin.

Hearing Xie Qinyun's suggestion, Gu Youyou found it plausible as well.

She turned to Jin Zijin and said, "Should we send someone to check the taverns?"

Jin Zijin narrowed his eyes and suddenly said, "No, he's not at the taverns."

"Oh? Then where..." Gu Youyou began.

"I know." Without waiting for her to finish, Jin Zijin left briskly, his face dark.

Prince Qin caught a glance of him and hurriedly followed.

Meanwhile, by the Emperor's side, the Duke of the Nation, King Jin, and the Empress were locked in a heated argument. Everyone's focus remained on them, so no one noticed the First Prince and Prince Qin slipping away.

Xie Qinyun stood in stunned silence for a brief moment before hastily lifting her skirt and chasing after them.

Gu Youyou grabbed her arm and asked, "Hey, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to watch the commotion!"

Gu Youyou rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Spare me. Are you trying to tarnish your Prince's reputation? Just stay put and behave."

Meanwhile, from beneath Madam Zuo's bed, a person covered in dust had already crawled out of the hole in the floor.

Chapter 1258: Escaped Through the Secret Passage

Long Liu froze, about to scream, but Madam Zuo suddenly covered her mouth, leaving only muffled sounds.

Jin Wei, disheveled and exhausted, stood still and looked intensely at Madam Zuo.

He said, "It's you?"

Madam Zuo trembled as if struck by lightning.

She opened her mouth and struggled to speak, “It’s you?”

“Yes!” Jin Wei’s voice seemed to crawl out of his throat, countless fleeting images of her face flashing through his mind. So it’s really her?

Jin Wei stepped forward and raised his hand, gently touching Madam Zuo’s cheek.

He closed his eyes, relying on his heart to feel what his hands touched.

The world plunged into darkness, and that familiar sensation returned to his palm, to the depths of his heart.

The face from his memory—it was her. So this is what she looks like.

At the same time, Madam Zuo also recognized the man from that night. It was him, the man standing before her now. His body was similar to King Jin’s, and his appearance held a faint resemblance too. But his hands were different—calloused from toil, with fingers slightly longer than King Jin’s.

It’s him.

Madam Zuo’s tears streamed down her face in an instant.

He had come. He must have learned the truth and come to take her away.

So there really was someone in this world who cared for her. Her life wasn’t entirely in vain.

Jin Wei choked with emotion and said, “Don’t cry. Leave now, anywhere will do.”

“Yes, let’s go.” Madam Zuo nodded furiously, overwhelmed.

Her maid, Long Liu, finally understood. She realized that this man was indeed Madam Zuo's true husband, the biological father of the young master.

He was in no way inferior to King Jin. Though he seemed a bit worn, the way he looked at Madam Zuo lacked any trace of cold indifference.

This gaze—utterly different from how everyone else viewed them.

Jin Wei pushed the bed aside, allowing Madam Zuo and Long Liu to carry the child into the hidden passage below.

Long Liu was filled with astonishment and joy. They didn't have to die; they could escape this confined, stifling mansion and witness the outside world?

Even if it was a life on the run, she felt it would be better than perishing in a lonely corner like this.

It was a pity she hadn't prepared—if she'd known about their escape earlier, she would've packed something useful.

She wondered vaguely about the status of this man's family. If only he came from wealth and privilege, that would be ideal.

After watching Madam Zuo and Long Liu descend into the hidden passage, Jin Wei returned the bed to its original position and followed them down.

Not long after they left, someone strode into the remote courtyard.

Jin Zijin and Prince Qin entered Madam Zuo's residence almost simultaneously, accompanied by guards stationed at the entrance who quickly followed to offer assistance.

Inside the courtyard, the main room's doors were tightly shut. The interior was utterly silent, devoid of any sound.

The unsettling stillness felt deeply unusual.

Jin Zijin's expression darkened, and he kicked open the doors with force.

The room was completely empty. There was no trace of anyone.

Prince Qin exclaimed in disbelief, "Brother, there's no one inside the room?"

He gave a glance to the guards nearby.

The guards, stunned, saluted Prince Qin before beginning a thorough search of the room.

There were only three conjoined rooms in the courtyard, each sparsely furnished with simple belongings. The guards quickly scoured all corners but found no one.

Yet they were certain that Madam Zuo, Long Liu, and the child had been inside. They had been standing watch outside all this time, and with walls this high, it was impossible for the trio to escape with a child in tow.

Jin Zijin took a step forward, and his foot suddenly landed on something.

He looked down and saw a piece of dull yellow soil beneath his shoe.

This soil was the same color as the wooden floor inside the room—unnoticeable if one didn't inspect carefully.

But outside, everything was covered in snow. How could such soil appear here?

Jin Zijin used his finger to scrape off the mud from the sole of his shoe and found that the mud was fresh, freshly unearthed, and still moist.

He furrowed his brows deeply and said coldly, "Move the bed aside."

Several guards hurried over to the large bed and together lifted it aside.

Underneath the bed, a large hole capable of allowing an adult to pass through appeared conspicuously.

The guards stationed at the door were both shocked and angry, wondering why, despite their vigilance outside, the two women inside managed to dig such a hole.

But it didn’t make sense; it couldn’t have happened so quickly, and there was no soil left behind. Could someone have dug the hole from outside to take them away?

"Get down!" Jin Zijin instructed the guards.

Now wasn’t the time to consider who dug the hole, but rather to capture the people first.

Jin Zijin kept a stern face and said to Prince Qin, "Stay here and watch."

After saying this, he left with a stern expression.

He took a few people to find the other end of the tunnel, and as they found it, two guards who had gone down first were also emerging from that end.

This was beside the Qingshui River at the back of the Prince Jin Residence, and the hole was hidden behind a large rock, next to a sizable willow tree. Without careful examination, it was indeed difficult to notice.

Seeing a large pile of snow nearby, which was dirtier than the surrounding snow, he guessed that the excavated soil was probably buried in this snow pile.

The guards who crawled out of the tunnel took deep breaths of fresh air, nearly suffocated while crawling through it.

"Your Majesty, the Crown Prince, there’s no one here; they’ve already fled..."

Jin Zijin glanced around and squatted down not far from the entrance. Despite being covered by heavy snow, traces of footprints could still be seen, indicating that they couldn’t have run far in such heavy snow.

He turned his head to ask the guards, "In which direction is this?"

"Here..." the guards thought for a moment and exclaimed, "The nearest is the northern city gate."

The northern city gate, towards the Beiping Army Camp?

Jin Zijin squinted his eyes and shouted loudly, "Pursue them!"

If Jin Wei safely reached the Beiping Army Camp, capturing him would no longer be easy.

They had secretly set up today’s trap, concealing it from the Beiping Army Camp.

...

Elsewhere, the Duke defender, eloquently in debate, had reached a critical point in the confrontation, engaging not only with King Jin. King Jin realized that despite being in the right, and even if he were covered in mouths, he might not win against the Duke; he was already losing.

At this moment, he was contending with Jie Huanzhi.

"Duke, there’s no use in further argument. You demanded evidence, so why not invite the Imperial Physician to examine His Highness, King Jin? If the examination results align with what King Jin claims, will you not admit that the incident years ago was deliberately orchestrated by you to render him infertile, aiming for today’s situation?"

"Humph, ridiculous!" The Duke snorted coldly, "Since you all dare to conspire against me today, you must have thoroughly prepared. Your so-called evidence must have been fabricated in advance."

"Yet, the fact remains that the child isn’t King Jin’s biological offspring, correct? Do you think His Highness would willingly tarnish his own reputation to slander you?"

The Duke looked toward the Emperor, insisting, "Your Majesty, I believe that I wholeheartedly supported your ascent to the throne back then, and my contributions were significant. I also understand that overshadowing the master is the greatest taboo for a minister. However, given my age, there’s no need for you to falsely accuse me of treasonous intentions to eliminate a powerful minister."

Chapter 1260: Escape

"Everyone at home knows that Yushu is the elder minister’s most beloved younger generation, yet you cruelly dragged her into this, setting a trap like this to turn her against the elder minister. Your Majesty, do you not feel any pangs of conscience?"

Even the usually composed Emperor couldn’t help but twitch the corner of his lips.

The Protector Duke continued, "For you to act in this manner, surely it’s because you think I’m old and useless now. The land is peaceful, and you no longer need this bag of old bones. Ah, discarding the millstone once the grain is ground—are you just looking for an excuse to have me killed now that I serve no purpose?"

This time, he confronted the Emperor directly.

The Emperor, having spent years maneuvering among ministers, still had many loyal confidants who understood the difficulty of his position and naturally spoke in his defense.

Lin Xingyi said, "Protector Duke, your words are too heavy. The Emperor devotes his heart and soul to governance; how could he recklessly disturb the order of the court and frame the loyal and virtuous?"

"Indeed, the Emperor is a wise ruler, not a tyrant."

"Protector Duke, do not think you can act as you please just because the Ducal Residence holds great power!"

Everyone began to speak out against him, yet strangely, Minister Zhang, who had recently been at odds with him, did not utter a word, his brow deeply furrowed.

Someone who could rise to his position was no fool; how could he not see today's feast as a trap set for the Protector Duke?

He merely thought to himself that if the Emperor wished to deal with the Ducal Residence now, there was no guarantee he wouldn't deal with him in the future. What rose from his heart was nothing more than the sorrow of shared survival—"When the hare dies, the fox grieves."

Upon deeper reflection, however, he realized he had underestimated the Emperor.

It turned out that the Emperor wasn't merely aiming for a balance of powers to maintain the peace as a pacific ruler.

From the moment he began stirring up discord between the Zhang Family and the Ducal Residence, the Emperor must have already been planning for today.

Of course, if the Ducal Residence had truly committed such an outrageous act, then there would be nothing for him to say.

Protector Duke, may fate be kind to you in your old age.

...

Jin Wei had already escorted Madam Zuo, her maidservant, and their son out of the city.

Along the way, there were supporters at every turn, each rendezvous flawlessly arranged. Clearly, this was not a spur-of-the-moment decision to take Madam Zuo away, but something he had secretly planned far in advance.

Inside a northern-style sleigh pulled by horses, Madam Zuo was both startled and delighted, her frail, sickly body making her appear as fragile as glass, arousing a pang of pity in those who looked at her.

And yet, she herself was bursting with joy.

She had never imagined that someone like her could experience something so thrilling. Whether they escaped or not, it was worth it.

Jin Wei sat beside her, holding their young son in his arms.

After playing with the child for a while, he turned to Madam Zuo and said, "You've been through so much. This journey ahead of us will likely take a long time. Your health isn't good—try to get some rest."

"I'm not tired."

"The ride will get bumpy when the horses start running. Lean on me."

Though they were in the midst of fleeing for their lives, they couldn't suppress the smiles on their faces.

A kind of happiness that came from deep within their hearts.

Jin Wei had indeed been planning to escape with Madam Zuo for a long time, ever since he had been ordered to share a bed with different women from the Prince Jin Residence.

He felt as though they didn’t even see him as a person. He was human, a man with dignity, and every time he embraced a different woman, he felt nothing but disgust.

The pretense of a man could, at times, be even more unbearable than that of a woman.

He didn’t want to live that kind of life. To end it, he had made up his mind to escape.

The world was vast, and escaping on his own wouldn’t have been difficult for him. The challenge lay in escaping with Madam Zuo.

Because the longer he was apart from Madam Zuo, the more he missed her.