**Farmhouse 1261**

Chapter 1261: Captured and Brought Back

He inquired about the situation of Madam Zuo of the Prince Jin Residence and learned that she was not living well. King Jin had no feelings for her. Except for the child in her womb, she was essentially nothing.

He could easily imagine that once King Jin achieved his goal, it was only a matter of time before he killed her.

So, he decided to take Madam Zuo and the child and escape together. His woman, his son—why should he leave them to someone else?

That's how today's scene came to be.

It was pure coincidence to have arrived at this moment. Even now, he didn't realize that today's full moon banquet was, in fact, a trap set with malicious intent.

He thought, as long as they could escape to the north, they'd be fine. His family had several uncles living there, and he had a good relationship with his Fifth Uncle. If he asked for help, it shouldn't be too difficult to send them to the northernmost country.

As long as they were far away from Zhuzhao Country—far from the Emperor's reach—they'd no longer need to deal with such absurdities.

But how could the affairs of the world ever be as simple as one imagines?

Behind them came the sound of galloping horses. At the edge of the snowstorm, countless figures on horseback were rushing toward them.

Jin Wei froze for a moment and muttered to himself, "How did they catch up so quickly?"

At this hour, everyone should still be seated at the banquet. Who would bother to look for the neglected Madam Zuo in her courtyard?

“Ah, they’re chasing us?” Madam Zuo’s smile instantly froze. She grabbed Jin Wei’s arm in panic and worry.

She said, “They won’t let us go. Today’s full moon banquet was deliberately arranged to expose that our son is not King Jin’s bloodline.”

“What?” Jin Wei was stunned.

But before he could ask further, the pursuers had already caught up.

Hooks attached to ropes flew toward them, catching his sleigh. With several men pulling hard, the sleigh was instantly torn apart.

Jin Wei, holding the child in one arm and wrapping his other arm around Madam Zuo’s waist, leaped off the sleigh, landing hard in the snow.

Jin Zijin, leading several men, swiftly surrounded them.

Jin Wei had set out with only minimal preparation, bringing just two or three attendants. They were quickly subdued by the guards.

Everything happened so fast—so fast that it felt utterly unreal.

Just moments ago, they had been talking about the future in the carriage, and in the next instant, they were cast into the biting wind, reduced to prisoners.

Madam Zuo shed tears at the corners of her eyes, lamenting, “Fate ultimately did not favor me after all.”

She looked toward the man beside her and, amidst her sorrow and bitterness, finally revealed a faint smile.

At least, as she left this world, she was not alone. At life's end, the heavens had given her someone to accompany her on the journey to the underworld.

Jin Wei stood up from the snow, his face full of astonishment.

"The Crown Prince?"

Jin Zijin sat on horseback and said calmly, "Return."

Jin Wei gave a bitter laugh. Did he still have a choice?

An hour later, Jin Wei, Madam Zuo, and their child were all taken back to the full moon banquet.

Prince Qin had already reported to the Emperor about Madam Zuo escaping through the tunnel with the child. But no one expected that the person who had helped her escape was actually Jin Wei.

What could this be called, if not their own inadvertent confession?

Jie Huanzhi scoffed toward the Duke Protector and said, "What more do you have to say now? When catching a thief, you need evidence; when catching adulterers, you need them in the act. Don't tell me you're going to claim once more that this was all the Emperor's arrangement to make them flee in guilt?"

The Duke Protector froze, speechless as he took in the scene.

"Great Grandfather!" Jin Wei bowed humbly toward him.

The Duke Protector was momentarily stunned, but quickly recovered.

Suddenly, he erupted, striking Jin Wei hard across the face.

“You unfilial wretch! You’ve disgraced our entire family! Of all the women you could fall for, you chose your cousin King Jin’s woman. And… and you even produced this illegitimate child! How am I supposed to show my old face in public now?”

Chapter 1262: Killed the Child with Their Own Hands

Jin Wei gave a bitter smile; he knew he had been abandoned by this family.

For such a thing to have happened, only if he took the blame, admitting it was his own fault, could the Ducal Residence be wholly absolved.

Being born into such a family, it seemed glamorous, but only they knew that each of them was a tool, a tool serving the family.

Jin Wei sighed softly, "Jin Wei made a mistake. Sorry to the family, I can only die to atone..."

Before the words were finished, Jin Wei had already pulled out a dagger and unerringly stabbed towards his own heart.

This stab happened so quickly that no one could react in time.

By the time Jin Zijin not far away rushed to snatch the dagger from his hand, it was already too late.

Madam Zuo, standing beside Jin Wei holding a child, was stunned, almost forgetting to breathe.

Amid the exclamations of the crowd, Gu Youyou swiftly pushed through, rushing towards Jin Wei.

With her keen eyes, she noticed the dagger had directly pierced Jin Wei’s heart; although he still had a breath left now, there was no saving him.

As soon as the dagger is pulled out, he would immediately die.

"What are you standing there for? Save him, quick!" Someone pushed Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou staggered, almost falling onto Jin Wei; had she fallen, the dagger would have immediately claimed his life.

Fortunately, Jin Zijin grabbed her quickly.

Gu Youyou turned around, unable to discern in the chaos who had pushed her.

Someone hoped Jin Wei would die immediately, unable to utter a single word.

Gu Youyou gave a bitter smile; it was unnecessary to push her because, even without it, Jin Wei wouldn’t have survived.

"Gu Youyou, save him quickly..." The Empress was extremely agitated.

This was an important witness, not even a single useful word had been spoken, how could he die?

Gu Youyou lifted her head to look at the Empress, but she shook her head towards the Emperor, saying, "The dagger pierced directly into his heart, he can’t be saved."

"How can he not be saved, aren’t you the Divine Doctor?" the Empress shouted.

"Hurry and pull out the dagger, don’t you see he’s still bleeding?"

"Pull it out and he’ll die immediately."

Gu Youyou turned her face away, not bothered to heed her.

Madam Zuo blinked, and tears burst forth like a flood from her eyes.

Her world went silent, and all she heard was that sentence from Gu Youyou.

Pierced directly into the heart; he can't be saved.

Can't be saved...

Her legs gave out, and she fell to the ground.

The baby in her arms seemed to sense the despair emanating from the mother, wailing heart-wrenchingly.

Jin Wei looked at her with his mouth open, blood gushing out of it; he wanted to say something, but no words came out.

Tears slid from the corners of his eyes, quickly merging with the blood.

People were still astonished and disputing, who noticed this pair of unfortunate lovers on the ground?

Madam Zuo pulled out the hairpin from her head, suddenly stabbing it into the baby's body in her arms.

The baby whimpered a few times and then went silent.

The scene turned silent again, everyone stopped arguing and looked at Madam Zuo in shock.

This usually extremely low-key woman who seemed so frail had actually killed her barely month-old son with her own hands.

There’s a saying that even a tiger doesn’t eat its cubs, but this woman...

Jin Wei widened his eyes at her, and, with unknown strength, suddenly reached out and grabbed Madam Zuo’s arm.

Madam Zuo, with tears streaming down, cried, "Since he’s going to die anyway, he might as well die by my hand. Since I gave him life, I might as well be the one to end it."

She gently placed the child’s body next to Jin Wei and reached out to grab the dagger lodged in Jin Wei’s body.

Chapter 1263: Three Deaths

Everyone held their breath, staring at her in stunned silence.

Madam Zuo’s face was streaked with tears, her gaze sweeping over the crowd with despair and bitter hatred.

To walk this earth, under an unjust Heaven, encountering the cold and warmth of human nature, the fickleness of the world, the scheming plots and treachery—these had shattered her final thread of faith in continuing to live.

She still remembered what her mother had told her before passing away: that no matter what, she had to go on living. No matter how bitter life became, she must endure it and never entertain the thought of hanging herself, because as long as one remained alive, there was hope.

She had promised her mother—but she could no longer keep that promise.

One of her hands clasped tightly with Jin Wei’s, while with the other, she forcefully drew out the dagger.

Jin Wei groaned softly, and at last, life left his body.

At that moment, the dagger, still warm with Jin Wei’s blood, once again pierced through Madam Zuo’s chest.

She slumped over his body, holding their child close, a faint smile appearing on her lips.

Perhaps out of pity for this woman, no one stepped forward to stop her.

If she didn't take her own life, what awaited her in the Ministry of Punishment's Prison was a fate worse than death—torture so cruel that her frail body could never endure it.

It would only lead to a more wretched demise.

The three lifeless bodies—two adults and one child—were soon carried out of the residence. Jin Wei and Madam Zuo's hands were clasped so tightly that it took two guards great effort to separate them.

One of them thought to himself: committing such an atrocity must surely bring retribution; what terrible luck to be assigned such a task.

When they were dumped onto the snow outside, the guards, perhaps out of a faint sense of goodwill, placed Jin Wei's and Madam Zuo's bodies together, with the child between them.

"How pitiful. Young Master Wei was an extraordinary figure, and yet he met such a tragic end."

"Dying like this, he won't even be allowed into the family tomb, will he?"

"Of course not. If his corpse isn't desecrated, he's already fortunate. It's likely he'll be tossed straight into the Random Burial Mound."

The sudden deaths of three people sent ripples through the Prince Jin Residence, and the other madams soon learned the horrifying truth—that the man who had shared their beds these past days had not been His Highness King Jin at all, but the recently suicided Young Master Wei.

They were terrified out of their wits. The faint of heart were driven into hysteria, some even descending into madness outright.

One madam, who was pregnant, fainted on the spot.

The belly she had taken such pride in—it contained a bastard child...

This disgraceful affair was unprecedented, shocking everyone.

Duke of National Defense shifted all the blame onto the deceased Jin Wei, and brazenly declared, "If His Majesty wishes to convict this old minister, I have no complaints. It is indeed my fault for bringing shame upon the Imperial Family, for failing to properly oversee my household and its youth. I humbly await Your Majesty’s punishment."

Ha! He had orchestrated everything, harboring ambitions to usurp the throne, and yet now he would reduce his crime to mere negligence in supervision?

Even now, he continued spouting lies and justifications—truly ruthless and heartless.

The Emperor sneered coldly and roared in anger, "Men! Take the Duke of National Defense... to the prison!"

The Duke, still brimming with confidence, raised his head high and extended his arms, allowing the guards to bind him and escort him to the dungeons.

Half the empire’s power rested in his hands; he simply did not believe the Emperor dared to lay a finger on him.

Confronted by the roomful of kneeling subjects, the Emperor, consumed with rage, suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood.

The onlookers panicked, chaos erupting in the hall.

Eunuch Wan, frantic, screamed at the top of his lungs, "Someone! Call the Imperial Physician! Quickly! His Majesty has vomited blood out of anger!"

Gu Youyou moved to step forward, but Jin Zijin grabbed her arm to stop her.

"After an incident of this magnitude, how could the Emperor not cough up some blood to match the scene King Jin arranged?"

Gu Youyou was momentarily stunned and wondered: could it be that the Emperor did it on purpose?

Chapter 1264: Conviction

But why does she look so convincing?

“Let’s go. There’s still a lot to be done.”

Jin Zijin turned around and strode away.

He was very dissatisfied with how things were handled today. That old bastard dared to act brazenly, relying on the Emperor’s many concerns and scruples, certain nothing serious would be done to him.

If the tiger is released back to the mountains this time, it will be difficult to find another justification to deal with the Ducal Residence.

The Emperor and Empress came with joy but left disheartened.

The gates of Prince Jin Residence were sealed, the servants were dismissed and sold off, and the concubines, along with Prince Jin himself, were all imprisoned in Zongrenfu’s dungeon.

A heavy snowfall blanketed all the filth within Prince Jin Residence.

…

In the empty Qianqing Palace, the only person left serving by the Emperor's side was Eunuch Wan.

Eunuch Wan wept bitterly and said, "Your Majesty's body is no longer what it used to be. Why must you insist on holding on? Let the Crown Princess come and take a look. It's said her medical skills are different from the Imperial Physicians', perhaps she could heal you."

The Emperor squinted his eyes and said indifferently, "When people grow old, this day inevitably comes. If she finds out, Zijin will also know. At such a critical time, no one can know that I am ill."

"Alas…" Eunuch Wan let out a long sigh.

Thus, Imperial Physician Fang only told everyone that the Emperor's ailment was merely an episode of emotional distress and that rest for a few days would suffice.

"Go to the dungeon and check on that old bastard Jin Shien. Let's see how much longer he can hold on."

Eunuch Wan's face was full of hesitation as he said, "Your Majesty fainted earlier, so this old servant took it upon myself to instruct the prison guards not to torture the Protector Duke. He's quite advanced in age, and this old servant fears that a few blows might finish him off. At that time…"

The Emperor wearily waved his hand, stopping him from continuing, and said, "Go take a look. I'm afraid someone might make a move."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Following Jin Zijin back home, Gu Youyou still couldn't calm her nerves. She was acutely aware of how much effort Jin Zijin had poured into this battle. If this is the final outcome, it could truly drive one to madness.

Prince Jin Residence had been sealed, and Prince Jin himself had been moved into Zongrenfu, yet that old bastard was merely charged with negligence in proper instruction?

Then shouldn't the Emperor himself also be charged with negligence?

Because the crux of this matter was defined as Prince Jin and Jin Wei recklessly indulging themselves. Not only were they gifting women to each other, but their games went even further, taking them into each other's homes. To make it worse, their madness escalated into a bizarre spouse-swapping scheme—Jin Wei took his turn in the first half of the night, then switched back to Prince Jin in the latter half. What kind of insanity is this?

And now, what does this count as? Jin Wei killed himself, and that woman, after murdering her own son, also committed suicide. Is that how they decided to end the game?

But no one is truly foolish. If Jin Wei and Prince Jin's bond were really so close to this extent, Jin Wei wouldn't have dug a tunnel and escaped with Madam Zuo. She was a neglected woman anyway, already carrying Jin Wei's child. Why not just hand her over openly?

It's not as if it's unheard of for ministers to secretly exchange concubines.

So everyone knows that the Protector Duke is spouting nonsense, yet even the Emperor finds himself helpless to act.

The news of the Protector Duke's imprisonment would soon spread. By tomorrow's morning assembly, who knows how many of the Ducal Residence's lackeys will plead with the Emperor for his release? In the end, the Emperor would likely buckle under the pressure and let him go.

After returning from Prince Jin Residence, Jin Zijin remained silent. Suddenly, Gu Youyou shot up from her chair and exclaimed, "We can't sit idly by, Zijin. By tomorrow's morning court, when the officials start pressing the Emperor, His Majesty will be placed in a very passive position. We must compel the Protector Duke to confess before then. Otherwise, once things are addressed openly on the court, the matter will likely be reduced to merely a case of negligence in proper instruction."

Jin Zijin and King Jin had naturally prepared a mountain of witnesses and evidence, but Jin Wei’s sudden suicide had thrown everyone into disarray.

Even if he faced the courtroom tomorrow, he wouldn’t be afraid. But tomorrow, too many uncertainties awaited.

Gu Youyou, however, had seen through it all even more clearly. She anxiously said, "That old bastard is like a shameless rogue. Even if your evidence is ironclad, he won’t admit to anything. And your father will hesitate to act rashly, always fearing to upset the balance of power. If you don’t take action, King Jin’s game might be over just like that."

Jin Zijin froze for a moment, then looked up at Gu Youyou. "What do you suggest?"

Gu Youyou sneered coldly. "To deal with a rogue, you have to use a rogue’s methods. Think about it—what will it take to make him confess?"

Jin Zijin gave a bitter smile. "Even if I kill him, he wouldn’t confess. Admitting to this would mean extermination of his entire family."

"Then kill him," Gu Youyou’s face turned ruthless. "There’s an old saying, ’When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter.’ As long as he dies..."

Jin Zijin suddenly froze, his eyes narrowing slightly.

A moment later, he abruptly stood up, lunged toward Gu Youyou, embraced her fiercely, squeezed tightly, then let her go. He grabbed his coat and strode toward the door.

Gu Youyou was dumbfounded, completely unable to decipher his sequence of actions.

She ran to the door and shouted loudly, "The sky’s growing dark, and the snow’s coming down hard. Come back early!"

...

Inside the prison, Jin Shien was indeed brimming with confidence.

He sat upright in a pile of straw in the Ministry of Punishment's Prison, iron chains clinking on his wrists.

The prison guards didn't dare make any trouble for him.

The Ducal Residence's current head might have been put behind bars today, but the family itself was still intact. For all anyone knew, he might walk out of here tomorrow. Who could predict such matters with certainty?

A man of his status—these guards usually wouldn't even catch a glimpse of someone like him. Some of them even thought this might be an opportunity to curry favor. If they could win over someone like him, maybe they'd find a better position for themselves in the future. Anything would be better than languishing in this dark and gloomy prison as a lowly guard.

But could someone as powerful as the Ducal Residence's master truly be won over by mere prison guards?

The guards hesitated, shoving one another until finally, a skinny guard stepped forward. He walked to the cell holding the Ducal Residence's head and asked obsequiously, "Your Grace, the weather is cold, and the night promises to be harsh. How about I fetch you a quilt to make it more bearable?"

Jin Shien opened his eyes and glanced indifferently at the skinny guard, letting out a faint "Hmm."

The guard beamed with joy, nodding and bowing as he retreated. A moment later, he returned with a blue cloth quilt in hand.

The other guards looked at him with envy and regret. They thought bitterly to themselves—why hadn't they been bold enough? In this world, fortune favors the brave. If the Ducal Residence's head left this place and remembered the skinny guard's kindness, who knew? That guard might just end up with a lucrative position, soaring to new heights.

Ah, what a shame.

The skinny guard opened the cell door. As he cheerfully laid the quilt on the straw for Jin Shien, he said, "This quilt is freshly issued and has never been used. It’s a bit plain, but it’s clean. Please don’t mind, Your Grace."

"What’s your name?" Jin Shien seemed quite satisfied with the guard’s attentiveness.

The skinny guard, trembling with excitement, replied quickly, "Your Grace, my name is Li Si. My surname’s Li, and I’m the fourth-born in my family."

"Hmm, Li Si." Jin Shien nodded slightly, saying, "Very well. I will remember you."

"Oh, thank you greatly, Your Grace!"

Li Si was overjoyed, and after spreading the quilt, he left the cell humming a little tune as he walked away.

Chapter 1266: Act First, Report Later

But just as he turned a corner, the cheerful melody abruptly stopped, and Li Si stared wide-eyed at his chest, full of disbelief.

"I... I..." He couldn’t utter a complete sentence, still dreaming of a pie falling from the sky just for him to catch it, dreaming of great success, forever just dreaming.

A guard disdainfully kicked aside Li Si’s corpse and followed Jin Zijin into the depths of the dungeon.

Jin Shien was not affected in the slightest, comfortably lying on the soft bed Li Si had prepared for him, ready to sleep.

Upon hearing others enter the cell, he merely lifted his eyes gently.

But when he saw who had come, he couldn’t remain calm.

He suddenly sat up, his expression solemn.

"It’s you?"

A guard beside Zijin was still holding a blood-stained knife, with fresh blood dripping drop by drop, and Jin Shien’s face gradually darkened.

"You dare to kill someone here? If you dare to make a move on this old man..."

Zijin sneered and said, "And what if I do?"

Jin Shien was stunned; he truly couldn’t be sure what Zijin would do to him.

However, the power of the Ducal Residence was his backing; even the Emperor dared not touch him, knowing full well his ambitions, and still dared not move against him.

He said, "In the court, nearly half are my offspring, the Beiping Army, the East Sea Army, as long as it’s about me, they will spare no effort. If you touch this old man... you!"

Before he could finish, Zijin’s sword was already placed on Jin Shien’s shoulder.

Zijin said calmly, "You should know, if I did not dare act against you, I would not have come to this dungeon today."

"You... what do you want to do?" No matter how cleverly he spoke, it was useless against someone who didn’t play by the rules.

As the Protector of the Ducal Residence, who dared to touch him? The Emperor was waiting for him to plead guilty in court tomorrow. Who would dare kill him before that?

But Zijin dared.

He raised his hand, and the person behind him took out a sheet of paper, on which were listed the various crimes of the Protector, only lacking his confession and seal.

Jin Shien’s eyes widened, finally realizing fear.

"I won’t confess, give up that idea." He said coldly.

Zijin snorted dismissively and said, "I know you won’t confess, nor do I expect you to. You just need to put your fingerprint on it."

"No, I won’t put my fingerprint on it!" Jin Shien recoiled as if he had encountered a venomous snake.

"This is not up to you." said a guard beside Zijin.

Then, several people held down Jin Shien and forcibly pressed his fingerprint onto it.

Jin Shien was furious, cursing, "You forced me to put my fingerprint; I won’t acknowledge it. Tomorrow in court, just wait for me to accuse you..."

Zijin contentedly put away the paper, and said blandly, "Too bad, you won’t have the chance to be in court again."

He glanced at the guards, and they got busy, tearing apart the blue cloth quilt on the bed, ripping it into strips, tying them together, then hanging them on the beam in the cell, forcing Jin Shien’s head into it.

Jin Shien’s eyes widened, immense fear sweeping through him, yet he still spoke threateningly.

"If you dare to kill me, my children and grandchildren won't spare you; wait and see, they will surely avenge me..."

Soon he couldn't speak anymore, only able to make painful ah ah sounds.

Chapter 1267: The Dust Settles

The legs kicked wildly in the air, but before long, they completely lost their vitality.

This night was destined to be no ordinary night.

Once the snow began to fall in the north, it was endless. Starting in the afternoon, the snowfall had not ceased.

A large number of guards swarmed into the Ducal Residence, arresting all five hundred-plus members of the household, old and young alike, and imprisoning them. The Ducal Residence was raided in a single night—an event that no one had foreseen.

Everyone had thought that the court battle to decide the fate of the Ducal Residence would take place the next day—regardless of whether the house would fall and be raided, the results would only emerge tomorrow.

The faction loyal to the Ducal Residence and those plotting its downfall were both preparing to conserve their energy for the strategic fight ahead. Who could have predicted that someone would break from convention and make a move overnight, assassinating the Guardian Duke and directly leading troops to raid the Ducal Residence?

Eunuch Wan trembled in fear as he returned to the Imperial Palace to deliver his report. Entering Qianqing Palace, his teeth chattered so violently that he could not manage to speak a word for quite some time.

The Monarch glanced at him dispassionately and asked, "Is it truly so cold outside that it has frozen you like this?"

“Your… Your Majesty…” Eunuch Wan collapsed to his knees with a thud and stammered, “It’s not the cold that afflicts this servant, but… but your prediction, Your Majesty—it was correct! Someone truly acted ahead of schedule.”

The Monarch paused, slightly startled, then let out a faint sigh and said, “Jin Shien is dead?”

“Yes… Yes, dead. When this servant arrived, I found him hanging from the beam, having hanged himself.”

“Suicide out of guilt?” The Monarch raised an eyebrow.

Eunuch Wan shook his head nervously and said, “It doesn’t seem so. That frail old man couldn’t possibly climb to such a height, and there wasn’t even a stool beneath his feet.”

“Oh!” The Monarch responded indifferently, “Then, did you kindly provide him with a stool?”

Eunuch Wan was on the verge of tears. How could the Monarch be so uncannily farsighted?

With a mournful expression, he said, “Indeed, this servant thought that, since the man was dead anyway, we should at least have a proper explanation. Suicide by hanging would make a decent story. Not wanting to trouble Your Majesty with this matter, this servant arranged everything carefully before departing.”

“Hmm, well done.”

The Monarch reclined wearily on the soft couch and closed his eyes.

…

By dawn the following day, Beijing was in an uproar.

The Ducal Residence had been raided; in a single night, the entire household was eradicated.

Such a monumental event was bound to shock the city's inhabitants.

Jin Zijin stood beneath the eaves, looking up at the sky.

Snow had fallen for an entire night, likely sealing off the roads in every direction.

It seemed even heaven was intolerant of what had transpired.

Blocked roads were not a bad thing. Heavy snowfall was fortunate indeed—for this way, news of the Ducal Residence incident would not spread. By the time the roads reopened and the thaw of spring arrived after the New Year, everything would be settled.

By then, those who should be arrested will have been, and those who should be executed will also have met their fate. Any further dissent would amount to open rebellion.

And the King of Xining would serve as their cautionary tale.

In court, those who had initially planned to plead for the Guardian Duke's case before the Monarch were left dumbfounded. One after another, they exchanged helpless looks, cold sweat trickling down their foreheads despite the icy weather.

The thought crossed their minds: Ultimately, it is the Monarch who decides the fate of the realm. He may appear to be accommodating on the surface, upholding the broader picture, but that is because his bottom line has not been breached.

The Guardian Duke, it seems, was truly audacious. Ever since more than a decade ago—perhaps even earlier—he had plotted against the Monarch's throne.

Not only was he daring, but he was ruthless as well, employing methods that rendered King Jin incapable of leaving descendants, all in order to stage a coup and substitute bloodlines. Turning the Monarch's dynasty into one belonging to the Ducal Residence was sheer arrogance and delusional ambition!

Chapter 1268: It's Time for the Empress

With the death of the Duke Protector, the Ducal Residence was raided and confiscated. In the court today, the situation became overwhelmingly one-sided. No one spoke for the Ducal Residence anymore, and all the discussions revolved around how his crimes should be judged.

"According to the law, the Ducal Residence's crime constitutes treason, and the plan was still ongoing. This crime warrants the execution of nine generations."

"That is inappropriate. The Ducal Residence's influence has entrenched itself in the court for a century, with deeply intertwined connections to over half of the court officials. If we execute nine generations, more than half of those present here would be included among them.

The law is not without consideration for human sentiment. Such special circumstances should be handled specially. Your Majesty, I believe the nine generations can be spared; eradicating three generations would suffice."

Jie Huanzhi stepped forward, cupping his hands toward the Emperor and stated, "Your Majesty, as the year draws to a close, I believe a large-scale slaughter might destabilize the nation's foundation. Moreover, we just experienced floods and warfare last year. Making a major move at this time would be unwise. The Ducal Residence's attempt at treason is solely their crime and unrelated to others. If punishment is to be meted out, it should suffice to punish just the one household. In this way, the Emperor's graciousness can shine through."

"Hmm, Minister Jie speaks reasonably. With the year-end approaching, it is indeed not a good time to enact excessive bloodshed. The Ducal Residence's case weighs heavily on the state. I originally intended to oversee it personally to its conclusion, but I am aged and increasingly feel powerless. Therefore, I will entrust this matter to the eldest Prince to handle fully."

At this juncture, no one dared to voice dissent. Everyone was terrified by the Ducal Residence's case. In any case, whatever the Emperor declared was what it would be.

Three days later, the Ducal Residence was annihilated. Over five hundred members of the family were executed.

Jin Zijin handled the matter with sheer brutality. Using the heavy snowfall to block the flow of news, he eradicated everyone in the Ducal Residence before anything could leak out. And what if the news eventually spread? He held their charges in his hands. Would they dare deny it? To do so would be to openly rebel.

As for the Ducal Residence's lackeys, when the family still stood, they spared no effort to curry favor and collude with them. But once they were truly wiped out, no one remained loyal. Who would risk their lives to avenge the Ducal Residence? Everyone only cared about themselves, hastily severing their connections with the family to avoid being implicated.

On King Jin's side, because he proactively confessed and expressed genuine remorse, he was imprisoned in the Zongrenfu.

As for his Madams, those who were pregnant had their children aborted but were allowed to live. They were imprisoned in the Zongrenfu for life.

Those who were not pregnant were returned to their respective maiden families.

All things considered, they too were victims.

But the Imperial Family's face had to be preserved. Since there was no way to confirm which of these women had compromised themselves, they were all treated as if they had shamed King Jin. Even though he was imprisoned in the Zongrenfu, they were no longer deemed worthy to remain by his side.

Finally came the Empress.

When all was said and done, she suffered such a massive blow that she fell gravely ill and never recovered.

Mama Li, along with the Ducal Residence members, was dealt with. Those who served her were now gone. The vast Kunning Palace was no different from the Cold Palace.

"The Emperor has arrived..."

The eunuch’s voice stretched out, slightly grating. The Empress, lying in bed, opened her eyes.

Soon, the Emperor entered. The Empress glanced at him, then closed her eyes again, saying, "Your Majesty, this consort is unwell and afraid I cannot rise to pay my respects."

"I exempt you from the formalities," the Emperor said quietly.

He raised his hand slightly. Eunuch Wan led the others to tactfully withdraw, closing the doors behind them.

The Empress sneered and said, "Your Majesty, did you come in such haste to see if I’m dead yet? This consort remembers the promise I made to you—for the sake of sparing Xiaoran, I would take my own life to atone once the matter was settled. But now... now this consort doesn’t even have the strength to die. I beg Your Majesty to grant me a cup of poisoned wine to end this wretched existence."

Chapter 1269: How I Hate Her

The Emperor sat down on the stool opposite her, casually surveying this chamber.

It was still as opulent and grand as ever. The Golden Phoenix adorning the walls symbolized the Empress’s exalted identity, and every object in the hall was a rare treasure from the mortal world.

Yet now, this chamber felt boundlessly desolate.

This was what she had fought for all her life.

These things should have belonged to the woman he loved most.

His gaze returned to the bed, where an old woman lay with her eyes closed. Looking at her aged visage, he felt a surge of jealousy.

Why was this vicious woman allowed to grow old? Allowed to die amidst the splendor of this golden palace, while the woman he loved most—the wife he had married in a proper ceremony—was left to rot in the wilderness?

She had claimed all things that did not belong to her. Why?

Enraged, the Emperor grabbed a cup containing cold tea from the table and shattered it violently against the floor.

The Empress was forced to open her eyes once more.

She looked at him. In her memory, it was the first time he had gotten angry in front of her—angry enough that his face contorted.

So he could get angry. This is what he looked like when he was angry.

"You hate me?" From the Emperor's gaze, she read hatred.

No one was ever able to see clearly the emotions in his eyes. She had spent her life trying, only now finally perceiving it.

He hated her. Why did he hate her? Such intense hatred.

The Emperor had always hidden his emotions. No matter how sorrowful or angry, no matter how much hatred, he kept it buried deep within.

But now, within this Kunning Palace, with the doors shut, he could fully reveal his hatred for Jin Yushu.

How laughable that she had asked him if he hated her.

He hated. Of course, he hated.

In a low voice, the Emperor exclaimed, "Hate? Of course I hate. From the moment you entered the Crown Prince Residence, I've hated you for forcing me to feign civility with you."

The Empress froze for a moment, then let out a bitter laugh. "Then the Emperor must hate quite a few people."

She was fully aware that the Emperor's fondness for any of them was nothing more than a calculated act of manipulation. She had always known it, and cared little.

"I hate you for harming her, for driving her away, for forcing her into a tragic death in a foreign land..."

"Who?" The Empress stiffened suddenly, sensing that his hatred was not what she had expected.

Shocked, she asked, "Are you talking about Xiao Qinqin?"

Xiao Qinqin was no different from her—just another woman discarded like trash once this cold-hearted man had finished exploiting her.

"Hmph, what do you think?"

The Empress's heart sank bit by bit, and after a long while, she began to recover her composure.

She asked, "You treated Xiao Qinqin differently than you treated us?"

Her gaze fixed on him, waiting for his answer.

The Emperor responded, "You? You all? Do you think you can compare to her? She was the woman I have loved since childhood, the wife I married openly and properly. You all were nothing more than tools for me to use. On what basis could you compare yourselves to her?

Do you think I allowed you to outwit and eliminate all the women around me? That was simply my tacit approval—to use your hand to destroy every woman who once harmed her, putting them to death..."

The Empress widened her eyes in realization, for the first time seeing how terrifying this man truly was. So many women who had once helped him immensely, yet when they died, he didn't spare them even a glance.

At the time, she hadn't understood the Emperor's mindset of using her as well. She had thought she was his beloved, someone he couldn't bear to see suffer even the slightest grievance.

Thus, relying on her family's influence and the Emperor's favor, she had ruthlessly eliminated all the women who dared compete with her for his affection.

Only now did she realize it was nothing more than this cold-hearted man's ploy to avenge Xiao Qinqin.

Chapter 1270: The Empress's Conclusion

He is truly heartless, truly terrifying.

"What about Sheng Qiaoyue?"

Wasn't Sheng Qiaoyue supposed to be the one he loved the most? He married Xiao Qinqin because Sheng Qiaoyue was her dowry maid.

Could it be that everything was really just a scheme?

The Emperor's agitated heart slowly calmed down. He said to the Empress indifferently, "Qiaoyue? She's Qinqin's most loyal maid. Qinqin has always treated her as a younger sister, so naturally, I will look after her for Qinqin."

He sighed softly and said, “As for Tingyu? He is Consort Jiang’s son. Your plan to achieve two goals with one action not only killed Consort Jiang, but she also risked her life to give birth to the child. It was at that time I conveniently promoted Qiaoyue.”

The Empress froze for a moment, then gave a bitter smile. “Everything was arranged by you? In truth, you knew everything, yet you chose to watch indifferently, using my hand to eliminate dissent. Then, were you aware that the Ducal Residence harbored ambitions to usurp the throne long ago?”

“I knew.” He looked at her coldly and tossed a scroll to her. It was the same one he had shown Jin Zijin last time.

He said, “This is what my late father left behind. Unfortunately, he found out too late. By that time, the power of the Ducal Residence was already out of control. Furthermore, he was old and could never find a justified reason to uproot them.”

So he had known everything yet allowed her to reach this point.

A sour bitterness surged through her heart. She seemed to see scenes filled with corpses strewn across the land.

Her family had used her, and the husband she had stayed loyal to for most of her life had used her too.

She refused to let her family use her to usurp the throne, so she fulfilled this man instead.

It didn’t matter which side she turned to; her fate was the same.

At this point, she blamed no one. She only blamed fate’s injustice for letting her be born in the wrong place.

A suffocating feeling overwhelmed her, making it hard to breathe. She closed her eyes in pain and said in a hoarse, weak voice, “Let this matter end here. Xiaoran is innocent. Don’t let him know about these things. Spending the rest of his life in Zongrenfu is fine. At least… he won’t… have to… face…”

Before she could finish, she ran out of breath and closed her eyes forever.

The Emperor sat across from her in silence, unmoving, for an hour, for four hours… Until the evening came, and only then did he stand up, supporting his aching legs.

“Fine, I promise you!” This was the last thing he said as he left that chamber.

In the twenty-fifth year of Emperor Changqing’s reign, Empress Jin suddenly passed away. Due to her involvement in the Ducal Residence affair, she was considered guilty and should have been punished accordingly. However, the Emperor, moved by their many years of marriage, stripped her of her title as Empress and demoted her to Consort Jin Xianfei, then interred her in the imperial consort’s tombs.

In the Emperor’s heart, the only Empress qualified to be entombed alongside him would forever be one person. In life, he failed Xiao Qinqin; in death, he at least fulfilled this promise.

…

After the arrival of spring, as the ice and snow melted, the roads from Beijing to other places reopened.

It was urgent to head south to find Yu Jizi.

Jin Zijin was particularly excited tonight. After leaving home this time, who knew how long it would be before coming back?

“Go to sleep; it’s already very late. You need to set off early tomorrow.”

He grabbed her hand as she tried to push him away, raised it above her head, and pressed it down on the bed. He said, “Don’t worry. I’ll sleep in the carriage. I’ll sleep there.”

“…I’m afraid I won’t wake up in time to see you off in the morning.”

“I’d rather you obediently make sure I’m satisfied first.”

“Mmm, do you think Yue Rujing has found your master?”

Suddenly, he gave her too much, and an uncontrollable trembling coursed through her body, nearly shattering her sense of reason. She could only bring up random topics to divert her attention!