**Farmhouse 1271**

Chapter 1271: Seeking Tian Jizi

"Alright, focus properly. Stop bringing up random nonsense." She couldn't take things seriously and still had the energy to worry about other matters?

Gu Youyou was simply accustomed to discussing serious issues with him while in bed; perhaps this bad habit was beyond fixing.

She winced slightly in pain and said, "Then what should I say?"

Jin Zijin: "..."

He fiercely kissed those incessantly chattering red lips, silencing all her words.

The next morning, she woke up close to noon.

Gu Youyou reached out to feel the empty space beside her and sat up suddenly.

She glanced at the drip timer in the room and, feeling dejected, covered her face with her hands.

He must have left quite a while ago. Although she found overly sentimental farewells distasteful, she didn't like this scenario any better—waking up to find him already gone.

After getting dressed, she saw Xiang Chun in the courtyard, holding Jin Xuyao's little hand, teaching him to walk.

He was just one year old and could already walk by himself. But Xiang Chun always worried that he might fall, never daring to leave him more than three steps away as he walked. Her overly cautious demeanor was both amusing and frustrating to watch.

Gu Youyou said calmly, "You don’t need to protect him like that. He’s wearing such thick clothes—if he falls, it won’t hurt."

Xiang Chun pursed her lips in dismay, feeling bad for the little prince.

She thought that Gu Youyou must be the most cold-hearted mother on earth. Ever since the little prince learned to crawl, Gu Youyou would often leave him on the floor to crawl on his own while she reclined with her legs crossed, snacking on seeds and watching leisurely.

Now that he could walk—what a tiny child!—she still wouldn’t help him herself or ask the maids to assist, simply letting him wander on his own. If he fell, wouldn’t it be heartbreaking?

Gu Youyou furrowed her brow in resignation and walked into the courtyard, saying to Xiang Chun, "You see, he walks perfectly fine, doesn’t he? Relax, it’s no big deal. Go to the kitchen and get me something to eat—I’m starving."

Only then did Xiang Chun snap out of it, realizing that Gu Youyou had just gotten out of bed and hadn’t eaten breakfast or lunch yet.

For now, the two meals had to be combined.

"Alright, I’ll go right away, mistress."

Even as she left, Xiang Chun couldn’t help but glance several more times at Jin Xuyao.

Jin Xuyao loved touching Gu Youyou’s soft, silky long hair. When she crouched beside him, he’d wobble over to her, throw himself into her arms, grab her long hair, and rub it against his face.

It wasn’t just Gu Youyou’s hair he adored—anything fluffy or furry was his favorite.

Gu Youyou thought to herself that if he were born in modern times, he’d probably be like a little girl, obsessed with plush toys.

This made her somewhat worried—what if her son grew up to be overly delicate? But then again, neither his mother nor father was like that, so perhaps it wouldn't be the case.

Before long, Gu Youyou's lunch arrived, accompanied by Abao.

Although Abao was technically Gu Youyou's dog, Yue Rujing had been the one taking care of it the most. Since Yue Rujing had gone south earlier in the year, Abao was left to stay with Gu Youyou.

Having just filled his belly, Abao returned, entered the courtyard, and began rubbing himself against Gu Youyou nonstop—using his rump to shove Jin Xuyao, who was also snuggling against Gu Youyou.

This left Gu Youyou laughing and crying at the same time.

Apparently, Abao believed Jin Xuyao was competing with him for attention.

However, Jin Xuyao couldn't comprehend any of this. Seeing Abao arrive, he was so excited he shouted loudly, drooling all over his face. Regardless of how much Abao resisted, Jin Xuyao remained determined to hug the dog's leg.

Watching these warm and harmonious scenes finally helped Gu Youyou move past the sadness of Jin Zijin's departure.

...

Chapter 1272: Sorry Jin Fengzhao

The Emperor resolved the matter with the Ducal Residence family and was overjoyed, feeling as though a great mountain pressing on him had finally been moved.

For him, it was an urgent matter to name the son born of his beloved woman as the Crown Prince. He had already gleefully drafted the imperial edict, only waiting to announce it at court the next morning.

Yet, unexpectedly, Zijin did not attend the morning court at all.

When someone inquired about it, they discovered that he had already left at dawn.

It was said he had received important news and found traces of the Heavenly Master.

The timing of Zijin's departure was exquisitely calculated, enraging the Emperor to the point he almost fainted from fury.

Returning to Qianqing Palace, the Emperor rambled incessantly, like an ordinary person unable to contain their frustrations.

"He still refuses, doesn't he? He's clearly doing it on purpose. Wan Decheng, what do you think should be done?"

What else could Wan Decheng say? Naturally, he offered words of comfort.

He said, "Your Majesty, perhaps you are overthinking this. The Crown Prince was personally raised by the Heavenly Master, so their bond runs deep. Ever since that incident, the Heavenly Master and the State Preceptor have been missing for so long—how could the Crown Prince not be anxious? Now that there's a lead on the Heavenly Master, of course, he would rush off at the first moment. Otherwise, wouldn't that disappoint the Heavenly Master?"

"No, no, he resents me..." the Emperor shook his head and said.

Wan Decheng sighed as well and replied, "The Crown Prince will understand eventually. Back then, Your Majesty had no other choice, it was just that..."

"Just that Qinqin still died!"

He had swapped heaven for earth, using a daughter to take his place...

A daughter...

Recalling the events of the past, the Emperor rose and retrieved a Brocade Book from a small cabinet. He gazed at it for a moment with lowered eyes, then closed the book again.

He handed the Brocade Book to Wan Decheng and said, "Zijin was right; the fault wasn't hers. Take this to her. Falling leaves return to their roots, and she, too, wishes to find hers."

Wan Decheng was utterly astonished. He hurriedly accepted the Brocade Book handed over by the Emperor.

Only after reading its contents did he finally understand who the "her" mentioned by the Emperor referred to.

It was the Princess who had once been the most favored in the palace. Back then, he didn't know that this Princess wasn't the Emperor's biological child, and he had treated her as if worshiping an ancestor.

Now, that person had long faded from everyone's view. Thinking of her again now felt unexpectedly distant.

"This old servant will bring the Brocade Book to the Princess... to..." He suddenly didn't know how to address Jin Fengzhao.

It was said that Jin Fengzhao had been demoted by General Xiao to the status of a lowly concubine, and even an ordinary maid in General Xiao's household lived better than she did now.

Reflecting on her current situation, not only did Wan Decheng feel a pang of sorrow, but even the Emperor, who was known for his cold heart, felt a deep ache.

Even though she wasn't his biological child, and even though he had harbored ulterior motives from the moment he brought her back, always regarding her as a mere tool...

Even the coldest of hearts isn't entirely devoid of feeling.

Having been called "Father Emperor" for so many years, and having personally raised her for the sake of maintaining the facade, how could there truly be no emotion at all?

The Emperor sighed and said, "Send her some things. I've heard she hasn't been living well. Arrange for her to properly search for her parents. It is I who wronged her."

...

Wan Decheng, the Emperor's attendant, arrived at General Xiao's residence seeking an audience with Jin Fengzhao. He brought along many items, which threw the women of the household into a state of panic.

"What does the Emperor mean by this? Didn't he already remove Jin Fengzhao's name from the Imperial Family?"

"That's right! And yet it's Eunuch Wan who's come, and he's brought so many things. I took a peek—Eunuch Wan seemed extremely respectful toward that woman, laughing and chatting as the two entered her room together."

Chapter 1273: The Elder Princess is About to Prosper Again

"Did you hear how Eunuch Wan addressed her?"

"Princess."

"Ah…"

The group of women was stunned with fear. Although Jin Fengzhao was not the Emperor's biological daughter, she was still considered an adopted daughter, after all.

An adopted daughter of the Emperor is no less of a princess.

Earlier, when the Emperor, enraged, expelled Jin Fengzhao, everyone thought she was done for. For the Emperor to spare her life was already considered merciful, which is why everyone dared to step on her and bully her.

But what if the Emperor recognized her again? What if she became a princess once more?

Then wouldn't she trample them in return?

Thinking of those years when Jin Fengzhao flaunted herself, the women were almost scared out of their wits.

"Quickly! We need to inform the General as soon as possible, or it'll be too late."

Eunuch Wan followed Jin Fengzhao into the courtyard where she resided, stunned by the dilapidated scene before him.

This could hardly be called a courtyard. It was merely a secluded corner in the General Residence crudely fenced off. Inside, there was only a single room resembling a woodshed. Outside the room, there was even a small vegetable patch, and the rest was completely empty.

It looked like the soil had just been loosened. Was she planning to grow her own food?

Eunuch Wan asked in astonishment, "Has the Princess taken to planting vegetables herself now?"

Jin Fengzhao replied softly, "I suppose I was always just a farmer's daughter at heart. I vaguely remember my family used to till the land. But I didn't know how, so I learned from the villagers in the outskirts. What I've learned is quite unrefined."

She let out a self-deprecating laugh.

Eunuch Wan didn't know how to respond, but a trace of anger rose within him.

“No matter what, Your Highness and General Xiao were still husband and wife. How could he treat you like this after your fall from favor?”

Jin Fengzhao sighed, “Without the Emperor, how could I have ever become his wife? Given what I did to him in the past, it’s only natural that he resents me.”

“Ah, you… What’s there for this old servant to even say?”

Jin Fengzhao smiled faintly and said, “This isn’t so bad. At least he hasn’t divorced me. If he had cast me aside, I wouldn’t even know where to go. I might not even find a place to call home.”

Environment and status truly do have the power to change a person. Seeing this version of Jin Fengzhao, Eunuch Wan was silent for a long time.

The Emperor had bestowed her with many items, yet this shabby room couldn’t even hold them all—there wasn’t even enough space to stand once a few were placed inside.

He paused for a moment before sighing, “I will report the Princess’s situation here to the Emperor. I’m sure His Majesty will arrange a better place for you. General Xiao has no regard for your presence here, and staying with him only invites further mistreatment.”

A flicker of light flashed in Jin Fengzhao’s eyes but vanished as quickly as it appeared.

She asked, “Will His Majesty still see me?”

Deep down, she knew the Emperor wouldn’t see her again, but she couldn’t help harboring a faint hope.

Eunuch Wan, as a shrewd man, was clear on this as well. If the Emperor truly wanted to see her, there would’ve been no need to send him to deliver anything; she would’ve been summoned back to the palace long ago.

He said, “This old servant dares not guess the Emperor’s will. Princess, do not lose heart. Look after yourself well.”

With that, he took out the Emperor’s Brocade Book and handed it to her.

“What is this?” Jin Fengzhao took it, her face filled with surprise.

Eunuch Wan replied, “This is something the Emperor asked me to deliver to you. It contains news about your biological parents.”

Jin Fengzhao accepted the Brocade Book, clutching it tightly in her hands.

As for the Emperor, she genuinely didn’t know how to feel about him.

When she endured unthinkable grievances in this courtyard, she hated him, hated him to the core. But as she gradually adapted and her heart slowly grew calm, a hint of gratitude seemed to creep in.

Chapter 1274: Going to Nanzhao

Everyone’s destiny is different. Being a princess for thirty years has already been a great fortune for her.

Perhaps this is her fate.

"Thank the Emperor for me," she said.

...

Jin Zijin traveled all the way to Lingnan, where spring had already returned to the land and farmers were busy planting early crops.

Hurriedly, he sought out the Marquess Yue to inquire about Yue Rujing’s situation.

"Ajing went to the Nanzhao Country long ago. News came recently that the Heavenly Master’s traces were spotted near Xiera."

"Xiera?" Jin Zijin murmured in a low voice, cupped his hands toward the Marquess Yue, and said, "Thank you. Zijin will head to Xiera now to join Ajing."

"Ah! There’s no need to rush this moment. You’ve been traveling for so many days; rest well for one night before proceeding."

"No," Jin Zijin refused. "The sooner Master’s affairs are resolved, the better; avoiding delays can prevent complications."

"You!" Marquess Yue sighed and remarked, "The Ducal Residence has already fallen, and you’ve cleaned up most of the Dao Family. What is there to worry about anymore? You should relax a little and stop being so hard on yourself."

Jin Zijin solemnly thanked Marquess Yue and said, "Over these years, I truly owe my gratitude to you, Marquess, for your care. Your kindness to Zijin will never be forgotten. However, Master’s affairs are urgent, and Zijin indeed cannot afford to rest."

Marquess Yue, seeing that he truly could not hold him back, could only give up.

He prepared some supplies that might be useful for traveling to the Nanzhao Country and arranged for someone familiar with the route to escort him.

...

"Your Highness, after crossing the mountain ahead, you’ll reach Xiera. The roads over there will be easier to travel, and it’s a place with more people around. Please change into this set of clothes to avoid unnecessary trouble." The person Marquess Yue assigned to guide Jin Zijin took out a set of Nanzhao clothing from a bundle.

A short jacket, pants with tied cuffs, and a hat.

Jin Zijin nodded and changed into the outfit.

The guide handed another bundle to Jin Zijin, saying, "Xiera tends to be warmer than here. The thick clothes you have aren’t suitable anymore. These are some lightweight garments the Marquess instructed me to prepare."

Jin Zijin accepted it and packed it into his bag.

Nanzhao Country has mostly steep mountains and emerald waters, making it hard for horses to run. Passing the reins to the guide, he said, "This is far enough. You can return to report to Marquess Yue now."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

After tidying up his belongings, Jin Zijin looked toward the towering mountains ahead and resumed his journey.

By dusk, he finally crossed the mountain and reached Xiera.

Xiera is considered one of the more prosperous places in Nanzhao Country. The villages here are densely packed, and there are even markets similar to those in Zhuzhao Country.

Amid the twilight, a young man with a bare upper body strode toward him, wiping sweat from his face with a cloth as he walked. He looked as though he had just finished some strenuous labor.

Looking ahead, there was a household repairing their house, and it seemed he had just come from there.

"Senior Brother, you’ve finally arrived..."

As he walked closer, Jin Zijin realized the shirtless man was Yue Rujing.

He couldn’t understand how Yue Rujing had managed to survive like this. His skin was tanned and shining, and if it weren’t for hearing him speak, Jin Zijin wouldn’t have recognized him.

"How did you turn into this?" Jin Zijin looked surprised.

He had changed so drastically that even his own mother wouldn’t recognize him—his outfit, and his face smeared with traces of soot.

Yue Rujing, full of grievances, said, "The people here are very xenophobic. To gather more information, I’ve been doing hard labor for them for the past few months."

Chapter 1275: Pursuing Tian Jizi

"Oh, tough day, huh?" Jin Zijin said indifferently.

Yue Rujing was so moved he almost cried. Although his senior brother’s expression didn’t seem particularly sincere, and it carried a hint of teasing, just seeing his senior brother and hearing his voice was enough to overwhelm him.

"Not tough at all! As long as we can find Master, no hardship is too great!"

Jin Zijin asked awkwardly, "So, have you tracked down Master’s whereabouts?"

"Yes!" Yue Rujing replied eagerly, "Word is that two months ago, a remarkably skilled Witch Doctor arrived at this village, healing many people. White robe, white hair, looking like a Fairy—if this isn’t Master, who else could it be?"

Judging by Yue Rujing’s description, it did indeed sound like Master.

However...

"It could also be Yu Jizi."

"Hah! Impossible," Yue Rujing said confidently. "If it were Yu Jizi, it would've been a black robe, white hair, and harming rather than saving people!"

Jin Zijin, however, wasn't so sure. When Yu Jizi pretends to be a good person, no one can top his act—it's hard to say.

Yu Jizi and Tian Jizi had disappeared simultaneously; either of them being here was possible.

But this wasn't the key point—for them, finding anyone would be momentous.

Even if they found Yu Jizi, it would at least give them some clues toward locating Master.

"Any idea where that Witch Doctor went?"

Yue Rujing disdainfully brushed his sleeves, pointing to a nearby house under construction. "That family might have some clues. I'm busting my back working here just to get them to spill the details."

Jin Zijin took a deep breath, his expression somewhat complicated.

So the urgent message was not about finding Master, but about recruiting someone to help with manual labor?

Jin Zijin wasn't going to do it.

He asked, "Where are you staying?"

Yue Rujing pointed to the other side of the crescent-shaped manor. "See the one with bamboo walls? That's the only guesthouse in the yard. Just mention my name and you'll be fine."

Jin Zijin nodded. "Alright, you carry on building houses; I've been traveling for over a month—I need rest."

Yue Rujing: "..."

Jin Zijin walked a few steps, then came back, saying, "I think if you claim to be the Witch Doctor's disciple and offer free treatment to their sick family members, they'll likely tell you everything you need to know."

"Ah, you're right!" Yue Rujing exclaimed in sudden realization.

Then his face turned green.

"But it's too late now. I've been here for so long that they all know me. I told them someone in my household was sick, and I'm looking for the Witch Doctor for treatment. If I suddenly change my story and say I'm the Witch Doctor's disciple, they'll probably beat me up and throw me out as a fraud. How would I ever get them to share the Witch Doctor's whereabouts?"

Jin Zijin nodded in agreement. "Exactly, so you'd best get back to fixing their house."

Yue Rujing looked hurt and utterly dejected.

"Senior brother, then why did you even bother reminding me?"

Jin Zijin shot him a cryptic 'figure-it-out-yourself' look and turned to stride toward the guesthouse.

Yue Rujing worked late into the night before finally finishing. Fortunately, his effort didn't go unrewarded; that family willingly disclosed the Witch Doctor's whereabouts to him.

"Senior brother, they said Master went to Yunhe Mountain to gather a specific herb. This herb blooms for only a brief period at dawn, and it must be harvested during its blooming phase for the medicinal potency to be at its peak. In a few days, it'll be the blooming season again. So now we have two choices:

either we wait here—according to the villagers, Master will return once he's harvested enough of the herb—or we head to Yunhe Mountain ourselves. What do you think?"

Chapter 1276: Reshuffling the Cards

Jin Zijin pondered for a moment and said, "Let's head to Yunhe Mountain early tomorrow morning. Whether it's really Master or not is uncertain, and whether he will return…" He thought it was unlikely—this was merely the villagers' wishful thinking.

Yue Rujing frowned and said, "But Yunhe Mountain is so vast, it might not be easy to find him."

"We'll inquire along the way through Yunhe Mountain; we'll find him eventually."

Yue Rujing nodded and said, "That makes sense."

So he inquired as he went and eventually tracked the trail to Xiera.

…

Jin Zijin had successfully rendezvoused with Yue Rujing, while back in Beijing, things were hardly quiet.

With the downfall of the Ducal Residence, Zhuzhao Country's court underwent a necessary reshuffling. Various factions took the opportunity to seize the power left behind by the Ducal Residence to expand their own influence.

After this incident, people began to realize that the Emperor, who appeared harmless on the surface, was actually deeply suspicious. Even when consolidating power, he refrained from doing so too overtly, resulting in the timid officials gaining little advantage.

As for the bolder individuals, it boiled down to Chancellor Zhang and Minister Jie.

Chancellor Zhang was promoted this time and reinstated to his position as Zhang Chancellor.

Minister Jie, on the other hand, had always wanted his youngest son to inherit his legacy. Taking advantage of the occasion, he brought Jie Zhonglin, whose health had already been restored, into the court and appointed him to a rank-four official post. Though the position wasn't high, it was a lucrative one.

However, this move displeased Chancellor Zhang, who despised that Jie Zhonglin had used connections and even referred to him as a cripple.

Now that the Protector Duke was dead, the only one left in the court brave enough to publicly argue with Chancellor Zhang was Minister Jie. Minister Jie immediately brought up the circumstances of the Xining battle two years ago, stating that his son's crippling injury was an emblem of honor. It was for the sake of securing critical intelligence for the Western Expedition Army that he suffered this fate. Now, missing an arm, Zhonglin could no longer serve in the military and had no choice but to accept a modest rank-four position.

The others found this reasoning compelling. After all, back when Jie Zhonglin was in East Sea, his rank as a military official was already rank-four. How could his contributions result in a demotion simply because of an injury sustained in service?

Ultimately, Chancellor Zhang failed to win the argument and had to let it go.

Meanwhile, Lin Xingyi, whom the Emperor had always valued, found himself in an awkward position during these events. Being the Ducal Residence's son-in-law—directly related by marriage—was already a precarious status. The fact that his family wasn't completely wiped out was considered an act of mercy by the Emperor.

With such a delicate identity, Lin Xingyi had no say in the entire Ducal Residence incident and could only minimize his presence as much as possible.

He didn't even dare bring up the matter of his son's career prospects.

When he returned home and saw Madam Lin, who had grown so frail it was heart-wrenching, he felt even more agitated.

“What’s done is done. If you can’t let it go, no one can save you.”

Madam Lin had been bedridden for days. Due to the Ducal Residence affair, her position in the Lin household had plummeted, leaving her with no energy to oversee the women in the inner courtyard. As a result, those women blatantly ignored the rules she had set, parading around the house flamboyantly, which only added to her frustration.

Seeing Lin Xingyi, she didn’t know whether to feel grateful or resentful.

Grateful that he still showed some loyalty and hadn’t divorced her during this trying time. Resentful that he had remained indifferent when the Ducal Residence was in trouble, disregarding familial ties.

But none of it could be blamed entirely on him. As people said, the Ducal Residence brought this downfall upon itself.

She said, “I no longer care about anything. I just want to know where Qianqing is—if she’s still alive. I just want to see her one last time before I die!”

She didn’t know how much longer she could hold on. Ever since hearing of the Ducal Residence’s collapse, all her sisters who had married into other families had consecutively taken their own lives.

Chapter 1277: Facing the Facts

They say it’s suicide, but she doesn’t believe it. She only thinks these men are heartless, and most of those sisters were likely forced to their deaths by husbands trying to sever ties with the Ducal Residence and prove their loyalty to the Emperor.

When the Ducal Residence held immense power, they were revered within their homes, and their husbands feared them greatly. The men harbored resentment for years. Now that the Ducal Residence has fallen, how could they possibly fare well?

Though Lin Xingyi hadn’t done anything to her, she still felt her death might not be far off.

Lin Xingyi let out a soft sigh and decided to sit down to have a proper talk with her.

"I have never considered your identity or your natal family to matter in our relationship. The hurdle here is in your own mind. If you fall gravely ill, many might rejoice, but I certainly wouldn't be one of them."

Madam Lin only felt a sourness welling in her heart and said, "Haven't you always thought I was too overbearing? Oppressing the concubines in your household? Otherwise, you might have had more sons by now."

"When have I ever said you oppressed the concubines?" Lin Xingyi asked, puzzled.

"Then what is with their behavior now? Multiple times a day, groups come into my quarters to flaunt their power."

"Such a thing happened?" Lin Xingyi took a sharp breath. No wonder he'd been feeling more irritable lately, as though the household was no longer as peaceful as it used to be.

"Alright, I understand now. Just focus on recuperating. As for Qianqing, she's fine and should be returning soon. Since King Jin has been confined to the Zongrenfu, she will likely be sent back to her natal family."

Hearing Lin Xingyi's words, Madam Lin finally showed a trace of liveliness on her face and exclaimed, "Really? Qianqing is coming back soon?"

"Of course it's true. The Emperor has shown us some measure of mercy," Lin Xingyi sighed. "But the Emperor has conditions. He wants you to write a letter to the Beiping Army Camp to persuade General Jin to submit."

Madam Lin's expression turned bitter as she said, "What use is it for me to write? When the Ducal Residence was ransacked, it was done without hesitation. Hundreds of lives—all gone. My parents, my elder brother, and his wife... I wasn't even allowed to collect their bodies. How am I supposed to write such a letter?"

Lin Xingyi gazed at her calmly and sighed, "I didn't tell you sooner because you've been unwell. The Emperor has allowed them to be laid to rest, and I've already buried them. However, the Emperor's

condition is that the Beiping Army must surrender. Although he phrased it that way, he first issued the decree to let the Ducal Residence's people be buried. The Emperor has shown his sincerity; the rest is up to you."

"Me? What can I possibly do? If I write the letter, they'll only curse me as a traitor, someone who loves her life too much to care. How can I write such a thing?" Faced with Lin Xingyi's exhortations, Madam Lin became visibly agitated.

"How can they be so cruel? They wipe out my entire family and then ask me to write a letter of surrender?"

"The Ducal Residence plotted treason for years; their fate was of their own making. According to the law, you and I shouldn't even be alive. Wake up; the Ducal Residence is finished."

Lin Xingyi became agitated as well. If not for the Emperor arranging the marriage, he never would have married Jin Yuan.

But since the marriage had been made, he took responsibility for it. Over the years, though he couldn't say he was entirely satisfied, Lin Xingyi still believed he had treated her fairly.

It was Jin Yuan who, time and again, blindly obeyed her natal family, dragging him into countless incidents as their pawn.

Madam Lin began to sob uncontrollably, crying out, "Will you only be satisfied if you drive me to death as well? I understand now. People like us are all destined to die. The only reason you're not pressuring me to death right now is that you want that letter from me. I finally see it now. No wonder all my sisters are dead. It's all because of men like you forcing us!"

Chapter 1278: Searching for Roots

Lin Xingyi paused for a moment, rendered speechless by her words.

From another perspective, his actions were indeed somewhat excessive. But what choice did he have? His loyalty lay with the Emperor; as a subject, bestowed with the ruler's grace, shouldn't he shoulder the ruler's burdens?

Had she ever considered him, or spared a thought for this country?

If the Beiping Army continued to oppose the Imperial Court, they'd merely become the next King of Xining.

And the ones who would suffer would still be the commoners.

Lin Xingyi said flatly, "Fine, I won't force you. Take your time and think carefully about whether to go to war. If we truly must fight the Beiping Army, I, Lin Xingyi, will be the first to volunteer for the battlefield."

He swept out of the room, his sleeves flicking gracefully behind him. Madam Lin lay alone on the bed, her heart heavy with sorrow. Before long, she broke out into sobs.

"How did things escalate to this point?"

Overnight, her family had been torn apart. Lin Xingyi, a mere scholar, was clamoring to march to war — what kind of battle could he fight? If he died, who would protect Qianqing?

Once Qianqing was sent back to her maternal family, wouldn't she be tormented to death by the women in the rear courtyard?

No, she couldn't allow herself to stay ill this way. Even less could she take the easy way out and end her life. She was a mother, and her children depended on her protection.

...

Jin Fengzhao, holding the Brocade Book gifted by the Emperor, finally tracked down that family. They had settled in a small town, living there as landlords with several acres of fertile farmland, enjoying a comfortable life.

They had concealed their names for thirty years, fully integrating into the fabric of life in this quaint town.

The carriage arranged by Eunuch Wan was naturally exceedingly luxurious. It came to a halt before the gate of the He family.

The servant guarding the entrance, someone fairly worldly by local standards, had never seen such an extravagant carriage before. He approached haltingly, his knees almost buckling with nervousness.

"May I ask whom you are seeking?"

A maid stepped forward and spoke to the servant, "My lady is a distant relative of your master, passing through this town and stopping by for a visit."

Distant relative — upon hearing this, the servant lit up with excitement.

He knew his master was a wealthy merchant who had relocated to this town. Naturally, before settling here, wealthy merchants tended to have many affluent relatives.

"Please wait here, Miss. I'll inform my master immediately."

The servant bolted into the courtyard, where a fifty-something stout man was frolicking with a scantily-clad young and beautiful woman. The scene had a certain illicit allure, but the servant found it utterly repellent.

He quickly said, "Master, there's a young lady outside requesting to see you, claiming she's a distant relative."

"Distant relative?"

The stout man pushed the young woman aside and stood up, thinking to himself: Where would someone like me have distant relatives? After the incident all those years ago, he had fled with his wife

and Silver Coin without alerting anyone. All connections with distant relatives had naturally been severed — how could there be any left?

He asked, "What does she look like?"

The servant replied, "She's a young lady... hmm, appears to be a young woman, though her attendants address her as 'Miss.' She seems very wealthy, with dozens of attendants. Her carriage is a large one, pulled by two horses."

Upon hearing this description, the stout man felt puzzlement rise within him.

He froze for a moment before suddenly being struck by a realization, his face showing utter shock.

"Does the Miss look about thirty years of age?"

The servant replied, "Yes, roughly thirty."

The stout man understood now — he had guessed who had come.

All kinds of emotions swelled within him at that instant.

It was because of that daughter that he had achieved the wealth and prestige he enjoyed today.

Chapter 1279: Searching for Roots

He used the money from selling his daughter to buy land and became a landlord. Over these years, the landlord's profits were quite good. He subsequently bought more land and became the largest landlord in the area. All the wealth and status he enjoyed in this life were thanks to that daughter.

If someone could afford such a large sum to buy a child, it must be a wealthy family. However, he couldn't figure out which household would be so eccentric as to spend so much money to buy a daughter?

Shouldn’t they buy a son to inherit the family estate instead?

But hearing the servant say that the daughter’s clothing and accessories were extravagant, his greedy heart began to stir once more.

Could it be that some wealthy tycoon, on a whim, decided to let their daughter inherit their vast family estate?

Yes, yes, it must be that.

He grinned through a heap of fat and quickly said to the servant, “Hurry, take me to meet that young lady!”

When Landlord He saw the grand carriage outside his own courtyard, his heart overflowed with joy. On the spot, he broke into tears and cried to Jin Fengzhao.

“Fengfeng, is it my Fengfeng who has returned? Do you still remember your father? You were only three years old when you were taken away…”

With this cry from the landlord, everyone finally understood that this particularly wealthy-looking young lady was their own family’s miss.

Taken away at three years old, no wonder no one had heard of her before.

But faced with her father, Jin Fengzhao was at a loss.

Some blurry memories lingered in her mind—her father was a fat man.

Looking at the old fat man in front of her, he really seemed to fit the image.

She asked, “Are you He Zhishan?”

This was the name their family adopted after moving to this town. The Emperor had been sending people to keep track of their whereabouts, so this name was written in the Brocade Book.

Landlord He paused for a moment and said, “Yes, yes, your father didn’t dare to use our original name. After arriving in this town, we changed our surname to ‘He.'”

She had hurried here, and the day was already late. Landlord He looked up at the sky and said, “Fengfeng, come inside with your father first. Let’s talk slowly as father and daughter.”

Sitting in Landlord He’s home, the family quickly gathered around—dozens of people. Luckily, Landlord He was wealthy enough that the house didn’t feel crowded at all.

Landlord He beamed with joy as he introduced her to everyone, “This is my daughter. Thirty years ago…because of certain reasons, she had to be raised in someone else’s home. Now she’s back, and our family can finally be complete.”

When Jin Fengzhao left home, she was too young to remember much about the family members. Now, she was listening attentively as Landlord He introduced each one.

“Fengfeng, this is your eldest brother. Do you remember him? He’s two years older than you. When you left, he couldn’t bear to part with you.”

Jin Fengzhao nodded and said, “I have some memory of him. Big Brother!”

“Ah, younger sister,” the eldest brother quickly responded.

“This is your second brother, He Pingsheng. When you left, he hadn’t been born yet.”

This second brother had inherited Landlord He's plump figure, his face shiny with oil, dressed entirely in luxurious silks and satins. Compared to the eldest brother, who was thin and dressed simply, the second brother looked far more like the son of a wealthy landlord.

At this moment, Landlord He pulled out a middle-aged woman who had aged well and introduced her to Jin Fengzhao: "This is your mother, Chen Family."

"Fengfeng!" That Chen Family member called out urgently.

Jin Fengzhao hesitated. In her memory, her mother had been a slim, dark-skinned woman, always busy with endless chores. Was this well-kept lady truly the wife of a landlord?

The eldest brother shot an awkward look and said, "Younger sister, she's not our mother. Father married her later—she's a concubine."

As soon as these words were spoken, their landlord father's face sank, and he glared at the eldest son very unhappily.

Chapter 1280: A Warning to Dismount

"So it turns out you're a stepmother," Jin Fengzhao's face darkened as she fixed her gaze on Master He and asked, "Father, then where is my real mother?"

Master He forced a smile and said, "Your mother is not in good health; she's resting in her room. I didn't have anyone call her out."

"Then I'll go see her myself." Jin Fengzhao stood up.

Master He froze for a moment, then quickly said, "Ah, ah, you're tired from the journey. Why don't you sit down and rest? I'll have someone call your mother out right this moment."

Master He subtly signaled to the butler next to him, and the butler tactfully left the room.

Having weathered countless storms in the Imperial Palace, what hadn't Jin Fengzhao seen?

She instantly sensed something fishy and insisted on following them to see for herself.

Master He and the Chen Family concubine both tried repeatedly to dissuade her, but to no avail.

Master He was left stunned, completely unprepared for how unyielding Jin Fengzhao was.

At the same time, he couldn’t help but wonder where exactly this daughter of his had grown up all these years, with such a fiery temperament to boot.

They passed through a twisting, winding corridor and eventually arrived at a remote, desolate courtyard.

Seeing this courtyard, clearly more rundown and isolated than the rest of the house, Jin Fengzhao immediately understood.

She pushed open the courtyard door. Inside, an emaciated old woman was washing clothes, and Jin Fengzhao’s eyes instantly brimmed with tears.

She was just as unwelcome as the legitimate wife, just like this old woman.

"This is Mother, isn’t she?" she murmured.

Her older brother nodded and then shouted loudly to the old woman, "Mother!"

The old woman paused for a moment before turning around.

Her brother said to Jin Fengzhao, "Mother has aged, and she’s a little hard of hearing. If you don’t shout, she can’t hear."

Then, her brother pointed at Jin Fengzhao and yelled loudly to the old woman, "Mother, this is younger sister, the eldest daughter, Fengfeng. She's come back."

"Fengfeng?" The old woman looked at Jin Fengzhao in astonishment.

Jin Fengzhao immediately broke down in tears, crying out loudly, "Mother!"

Fragments of childhood memories resurfaced — fleeting and unclear. One scene in particular: her portly father standing over her mother, who was laboring incessantly, hurling abusive words. What exactly he had shouted, she no longer remembered; what stuck was how terrifying his anger had been and how pitiful her mother looked as she was berated. Both she and her brother had been left trembling in fear.

After an emotional reunion with her mother, Jin Fengzhao wept enough to let out her sorrows. Only then did she turn back coldly to glare at Master He and his beloved concubine.

"Is this how you treat Mother?"

Master He awkwardly smiled and said, "She's just a rural woman, born to do labor. If you force her not to work, she wouldn't be willing."

"She's a rural person — and aren't you one as well?"

Jin Fengzhao's words left him speechless.

But the concubine beside him wouldn't take it lying down and let out a derisive snort. "Who knows where you came from anyway? You call yourself his daughter, and the master has acknowledged you. So what? Does a daughter dare to criticize her father?"

When it came to playing the authority card, no one could outshine Jin Fengzhao.

She swept her cold gaze toward the concubine and ordered the maid behind her, "Slap her."

The maid responded with a slight nod and promptly stepped forward, delivering several crisp slaps to the concubine's face, leaving her completely stunned. At the same time, the entire room was frozen in shock.

Master He opened his mouth to speak but stopped himself.

He still hadn't figured out the full story of this daughter. But the aura she exuded was clearly something far out of the ordinary, unlike anything regular folk like him could measure up to.

If her background turned out to be something monumental, offending her, even accidentally, could end terribly.

The concubine's face swelled red from the slaps, but though she wanted to lash back, she held her tongue. Seeing her own husband cowering before this girl, how could she dare to? Ultimately, it wasn't just the physical slaps — it was Jin Fengzhao's oppressive presence that had utterly cowed her.

These past years, how had she never heard anything about the family having such an imposing young lady?