Farmhouse 1281

Chapter 1281: Settling Affairs at Home

Jin Fengzhao coldly said, "Father, you are no longer a countryside man. You are now a wealthy and influential man from a distinguished family, so you mustn't act so petty."

The patriarch He nodded repeatedly, with a hint of pride. "Yes, yes, Father is now the richest man in this town."

Jin Fengzhao nodded lightly, glanced at the Concubine, and continued, "Since you belong to a distinguished family, you must present yourself as such, or else people will think you're just a parvenu—rich, but lacking the air of a patrician."

"The air of a patrician?" The patriarch He had no idea what that meant; after all, he truly was a parvenu. He asked, "Fengfeng, what do you mean?"

"In a distinguished family, there is a rigid hierarchy between wife and concubines. A concubine, at the end of the day, is still a servant of the household. If you are pleased, you may reward her with something. If not, she is to be treated accordingly. Such unruly servants must be disciplined, or someday they will dare to climb over their master."

She exchanged a glance with the maid by her side. The maid promptly chimed in, "Master He, in distinguished families, hierarchy and household rules are strictly observed. The real masters of the house are only you and Madam, as well as the legitimate children born of you and Madam. Concubines and their children are not regarded as legitimate masters. The reason prominent families can maintain their wealth and legacy for centuries is because they value rules. If you spoil a concubine and neglect your wife, your prosperity will only last one or two generations. It's a bad omen."

The patriarch He looked at the Concubine, who was too shocked to speak, then at Jin Fengzhao, who stood with an air of superiority. For a moment, he was also too stunned to respond.

A mere parvenu, he had only sought momentary joy. How could he have understood so much about standing and propriety?

Jin Fengzhao helped the elderly Madam to sit on a stool, feeling that there was no need to ask further questions about this matter.

Her mother must have endured immense mistreatment, and as for her elder brother, he was certainly no better off than that fat, piggish younger half-brother.

Her time was limited, nor did she expect her father to suddenly understand morality, so she spoke bluntly.

"I came back to see all of you. Tomorrow, I will leave."

Upon hearing this, everyone collectively heaved a sigh of relief.

She then added, "The family's assets shall belong to my elder brother in the future. The second brother is a son by a concubine and has no inheritance rights. Father, do you plan to proceed as I have said? If not, I'll send someone to summon the County Magistrate to formalize a document and immediately shift the family's authority to my elder brother. After all, my visit here is not frequent, and I cannot keep constant watch over this."

The patriarch He nearly stumbled at these words. To summon the County Magistrate? She spoke as if summoning the Magistrate were no more trouble than ordering a servant in the household. Just whose household had raised her to have such audacity?

The patriarch He wiped away his cold sweat and still managed to ask the question.

"Fengfeng, where have you been living all these years? Let your father search for you."

Search? After running off with the money, what was there to search for!

Jin Fengzhao cast him an indifferent glance and replied, "I've been living in the North all these years, in a household with the surname Jin."

The North? A household with the surname Jin?

All the Jin families in the North were dignitaries. The Imperial Family itself bore the surname Jin. The patriarch He was now convinced that this daughter truly had the means to summon the County Magistrate.

No wonder the man back then was so generous. A young girl sold into servitude would normally fetch at most ten taels of silver, yet he had paid a sum sufficient for a lifetime of comfort to buy her. If he hadn't been someone with money to burn, who else would have done such a thing?

The patriarch He nodded repeatedly. "Very well, very well. Father understands now. In the past, Father was blind. From now on, I will know how to act."

Chapter 1282: The Last Bowl of Soup

"Master, what do you mean by this? Are you really going to believe her and leave everything in the family to the eldest son? Don't forget, you promised me before that everything in this family would be left to our son. You can't go back on your word…"

Wealthy Lord He's face darkened, and he angrily shoved the Concubine away, shouting, "When did I ever say such a thing? You vile woman, don't slander me. Get out!"

"Ah, you… you're heartless!" The Concubine started crying and making a scene.

Wealthy Lord He, both shocked and angry, roared, "What are you all standing around for? Drag this wretched woman out!"

After the Concubine was dragged away, he smiled apologetically and escorted the elderly woman out of the courtyard, repeatedly apologizing to Jin Fengzhao, saying he was merely a nouveau riche who didn't understand proper conduct, but that he would treat his wife and eldest son well from now on.

Regardless of how much truth or falsehood was in his words, Jin Fengzhao could only choose to trust him. She had found her thread; her life no longer had any regrets. After staying the night, she left all her wealth to her mother and elder brother, instructed them that she would return to visit them someday if she had the chance, and then departed in a carriage.

…

Jin Fengzhao returned to the Xiao Family General Residence, yet suddenly found herself unsure if she should step inside.

She recalled the common saying: “Marry a chicken, follow the chicken; marry a dog, follow the dog.” In the end, she decided to go in.

No matter how much he despised her, they had still been husband and wife.

Seeing that it was still early, she went to the kitchen and personally prepared a bowl of egg drop soup for Xiao Jinfei.

Jin Fengzhao had been raised by the Emperor himself, pampered and privileged. She never cooked before, but over the last few years, after enduring plenty of hardships, she began learning to make food herself.

Cooking anything else was too difficult, so the first thing she learned to make was egg drop soup.

Calculating that Xiao Jinfei would return soon, she carried the bowl of egg drop soup herself to Xiao Jinfei’s study.

In the past, the servants wouldn’t have allowed her to go in, but ever since Eunuch Wan visited last time, no one could be certain of the Emperor’s attitude toward her. They didn’t dare treat her like they used to.

If the Emperor were to acknowledge her as the Princess, even their General wouldn’t be able to stop her.

Jin Fengzhao made her way to Xiao Jinfei’s study, feeling utterly helpless. He was reading a military manual.

“Leave it there.”

Xiao Jinfei didn’t realize it was her, thinking it was a servant bringing his meal.

Jin Fengzhao paused, then stepped forward again toward him.

Only then did Xiao Jinfei raise his head to look.

Seeing that it was Jin Fengzhao, he immediately frowned and mocked her, saying sarcastically, “So, just because Eunuch Wan came by once, you’ve returned to your arrogant ways again? I thought you had learned your lesson over these years.”

Jin Fengzhao felt a sharp pang in her heart. She forced a smile and placed the bowl of egg drop soup on Xiao Jinfei’s desk.

Ignoring his biting remarks, she opened the lid of the soup and said to him, “I made this myself. Over all these years we’ve been together, I’ve never made anything for you with my own hands before.”

Xiao Jinfei stared at the bowl of soup, his expression betraying a subtle flicker of emotion.

Yet, as he looked at Jin Fengzhao’s face, his feelings turned to intense disgust.

He said, “How could I dare drink your soup? You’d better take it away.”

Jin Fengzhao froze for a moment, then lifted the bowl and drank a sip in front of him. She said, “It’s not poisoned. I only wanted to make you a bowl of soup, that’s all. You’re overthinking it.”

Xiao Jinfei paused for a moment. Somehow, he felt that Jin Fengzhao had changed.

Jin Fengzhao turned her face away and said softly, “I’ll leave this bowl of soup here. Drink it when you feel like it… or even if you don’t want to, just drink one sip. As long as you taste it, I’ll be satisfied. From now on… I won’t make soup for you ever again.”

Chapter 1283: She Is Superfluous

After giving her instructions, she walked out. Xiao Jinfei stared at her departing figure, dazed, feeling that something was off.

Jin Fengzhao returned to her residence and gazed blankly at the white silk placed on the table.

Having lived to this day, she was filled with confusion.

At this point, did she have any reason to exist? Everything at home had been arranged; there was nothing for her to worry about.

Her existence brought difficulty to the Emperor.

The Emperor might feel guilty about how he treated her but still couldn’t bring himself to face her. Ultimately, her presence was merely a burden to his conscience as a ruler.

And to Xiao Jinfei, this woman who had suddenly emerged was like an awkward melon growing in the middle of a cabbage field—jarring and out of place.

He loathed her, even hated her, yet due to the Emperor’s unclear attitude toward her, he hadn’t dared to divorce her.

Her existence also brought difficulty to him.

So... she felt that there was truly no need for her to continue living. Without her, everyone would be better off.

She stood up and grasped the piece of white silk in her hands.

The next morning brought the tragic news of Jin Fengzhao's suicide.

Xiao Jinfei was shocked—she killed herself?

He had thought that someone like her, even if she stirred up storms in this household, would never choose suicide. And yet, she did?

He threw on his clothes haphazardly and rushed to her courtyard.

In the secluded, dilapidated courtyard, three feet of white silk had hung her from the beam of the room.

Inside the house, there was a simple table holding an ink slab, a brush stained with ink, and a sheet of blank paper with not a single word written on it.

Perhaps before threading her neck into those three feet of white silk, she wanted to leave him some words. Maybe there were too many words bottled up within her, so many that she didn't know where to begin, and at the end, she wrote nothing at all.

Looking at her cold, lifeless corpse, Xiao Jinfei's mind buzzed as if exploding. At this moment, he finally realized that she was truly gone.

He had been forced to marry her at twelve years old. They had lived together for twenty years, taking up the majority of his life.

For him, she had been something more than just detestable—she had been a habit.

Perhaps he had grown accustomed to her strutting around the house, or perhaps he genuinely only felt hatred toward her.

But all of that, with her sudden death by hanging, seemed irrelevant now.

After a long daze, he murmured, "Dead is fine... I treated you poorly, and I hated you so much. Dead is fine, dead is fine..."

The servants lurking outside the courtyard saw Xiao Jinfei staggering out, his face pale beyond belief.

Returning to the study, he spotted the bowl of soup on the table.

She had said it wasn't poisoned. She had told him to drink a mouthful even if he didn't want to, saying she would never make soup for him again.

After twenty years of marriage, this had been the only thing she ever made for him.

Gripping the edge of the table for support, he picked up the bowl of egg drop soup, which had long since turned cold and even tasted slightly off. His fingers trembled as he tightened his grip on the bowl and drank it in one gulp.

In the twenty-sixth year of Changqing, the Princess Xiao Jin of the Jin Family met a sudden death. Before her passing, the Emperor had ordered the Zongrenfu to remove Jin Fengzhao's name, yet after her death, her identity was reinstated.

She was supposed to be buried in the Imperial Mausoleum as the Princess, but General Xiao Jinfei petitioned the Emperor to personally bury his wife within the Xiao Family ancestral tomb. Ultimately, the Emperor granted the request.

Fate had brought her full circle. In life, she had fought tooth and nail to marry into the Xiao Family, and in those two years within the Xiao Family, she had suffered endlessly. In death, she was destined to remain with the Xiao Family for eternity.

The eunuch Wan sighed, "Why did the Emperor agree to General Xiao's request? General Xiao has always treated the Princess poorly."

The Emperor let out a faint sigh, "It was her own decision."

"The Princess’s own decision?"

"Yes, she chose to hang herself within the Xiao Household and never came to the Imperial Palace to seek me."

...

Chapter 1284: Lin Qianqing is Back

Lin Qianqing returned, and Madam Lin struggled to lift herself from the bed, sitting in the room, where mother and daughter clung to each other, crying bitterly.

So many things had happened at home that even Old Madam Lin, who usually had a good temperament, looked much more haggard than before. Seeing them like this, her heart ached, and she wanted to cry, too.

She turned to her son and said, "Our family has been plagued by so many disasters these past few years. As the head of the household, you must hold this family together. Your wife is unwell and has no time to manage the household. Just look at the mess it’s in now. Yesterday, your concubines fought in the back courtyard and even ran to my quarters, asking me to decide things for them. At my age, I can’t handle such commotion."

"Is there really such a matter?" Lin Xingyi said in shock.

Old Madam Lin snorted coldly, "Without your wife keeping them in check, those foxy women are practically running wild. Haven’t you noticed?"

Lin Xingyi was rendered speechless.

He didn’t want Madam Lin to remain ill forever either, but matters of the Ducal Residence were not trivial. Such great concerns—if she couldn’t come to terms with them, no one could help her.

"I’ll go take a look," Lin Xingyi said, ready to leave.

"Hey, come back." Just as he stood, Old Madam Lin called him back.

"Why the sudden urgency? Not earlier, not later, but now? Qianqing just returned and hasn't had a chance to say a word to her father yet. She's a woman—have you considered how she'll live the rest of her life?"

Lin Qianqing's eyes reddened, and suddenly she knelt down.

She said, "Father, Mother, Grandmother, I want to go to the Zongrenfu to see His Highness King Jin."

"What are you going to see him for? If it weren't for his ingratitude, your maternal family wouldn't have faced such calamity." Madam Lin became visibly agitated at the mention of King Jin.

"What do you want from such a man? He can't give you children, and he committed such outrageous acts—his life is ruined. He'll never leave Zongrenfu."

Lin Xingyi sighed, "Even without King Jin, the Ducal Residence was bound to be confiscated sooner or later. They've been plotting treason for many years."

"Yes, I know you feel awful about it, but with crimes of such magnitude, that our family wasn't completely wiped out is already a blessing from our ancestors." Old Madam Lin's face was filled with helplessness. "If Qianqing wants to see King Jin, let her go. If it weren't for King Jin sending her away back then, she might've been defiled by Jin Wei, that beast. Wouldn't that have been even more tragic? No matter how bad King Jin is, he at least treated Qianqing decently and knew to protect her first when trouble arose."

"This... the wrongs they committed shouldn't be borne by our Qianqing. They have nothing to do with her; how can I..."

"Mother!" Lin Qianqing cried out, "Whether you agree or not, I'm going to see him."

Having spoken, Lin Qianqing fled in tears, leaving the others with faces full of sorrow.

Madam Lin wept, "What sin have we committed for our good days to turn into this?"

"Who else could be blamed? Isn’t it just some people’s insatiable greed?"

Madam Lin, at a loss, could only remain silent.

...

Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing were inquiring all the way about the Witch Doctor’s whereabouts, chasing their leads into Yunhe Mountain.

Jin Zijin was asking a local villager about the white-haired Witch Doctor, while Yue Rujing gazed expectantly at the fog-covered mountain peaks.

"The white-haired Witch Doctor indeed passed by. He entered the mountain ten days ago. I don’t know if he managed to find the medicine he’s searching for."

Jin Zijin thanked the villager, "Thank you for the information. My junior brother and I will head into the mountains now to seek our master."

Chapter 1285: Danger in the Mountains

“Ah, let him go, let him go. The mountain path is hard to traverse, and the Witch Doctor is quite elderly. We really fear that something might happen to him. Originally, two young men from the village said they’d accompany him, but the Witch Doctor insisted on going alone. Everyone couldn’t convince him otherwise, so in the end, he went up the mountain by himself.”

“Alright, farewell.”

Jin Zijin turned around and pulled Yue Rujing along.

“Are we heading up the mountain now? This mountain looks rather vast. Shouldn’t we make some preparations first?” Yue Rujing said.

Jin Zijin patted the backpack on his back.

This was a backpack made by Youyou, incredibly convenient.

“So Senior Brother had already prepared well in advance,” Yue Rujing remarked with a smile.

The two of them ventured deeper into the mountain, following the paths to find their target—this was Jin Zijin’s forte.

It was a skill he honed back when he had searched for Jin Ziyuan and his father in the back mountains of Lotus Village.

The Witch Doctor who entered the mountains didn’t deliberately hide his tracks, and finding the traces he left behind wasn’t particularly difficult.

Yue Rujing watched Jin Zijin demonstrate his tracking skill in awe and clicked his tongue in amazement. “Senior Brother, when did you become this impressive?”

Jin Zijin merely said flatly, “Six years in Lotus Village—I only picked up this one skill.”

“What about hunting?” After all, the game they had been eating along the way was hunted by Jin Zijin.

Jin Zijin chuckled and said, “Yes, hunting too.”

Those six years in Lotus Village had not been spent in vain; besides learning how to track and hunt, he had also returned with Youyou.

As the day wore on, the sky darkened. They had already been in the mountains for five days.

Jin Zijin picked out a dry cave to serve as their shelter for the night.

Yue Rujing cheerfully gathered some dry wood to start a fire, and before long, Jin Zijin had successfully hunted a rabbit.

This rabbit would be their dinner for the evening.

Yue Rujing retrieved some fruits he'd gathered in the mountain during the day—as a bonus, they had rabbit for dinner and fruit for dessert.

It had been a long time since Yue Rujing had spent a moment of closeness with Senior Brother like this, and he felt as if he'd traveled back to their days together at Qi Mountain. This sensation was wonderful.

"Ajing, grab the salt from the bag quickly."

Gu Youyou loved gourmet food, and Jin Zijin had perfected the art of roasting the perfect rabbit.

The aroma soon wafted from the rabbit, drifting out of the cave and spreading through the Yunhe Mountain forest.

This mountain, towering and vast with its undulating ridges, stretched up into the clouds. The rising mists beneath their feet resembled rivers of clouds flowing endlessly.

However, the fragrance traveled too far—it attracted a black bear from the mountain.

A massive, dark silhouette stood at the cave's entrance, its mouth drooling. Yue Rujing was so startled that he dropped the rabbit leg he'd been halfway through eating to the ground.

"Yikes! There's a bear!"

Jin Zijin glanced back, then calmly said, "Looks like we'll be having bear paw tomorrow."

Just as his words fell, the black bear lunged toward them.

Facing ordinary people, a black bear might prove troublesome, but against someone like Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing, it might as well be delivering its own bear paw.

Jin Zijin swiftly sidestepped to dodge the bear's strike without a hint of panic, continuing to bite into a piece of rabbit meat.

On the other side, Yue Rujing—still indignantly fuming over the sudden appearance of the bear that had startled him enough to drop his rabbit leg—promptly drew his short sword and thrust it directly into the bear's body.

One strike was not enough to kill the bear; instead, it enraged the beast. It roared ferociously and lunged at Yue Rujing. Yue Rujing cursed loudly, then immediately leapt to the cave's wall to evade the attack.

The bear crashed into the cave wall with the momentum of its pounce.

But just then, something entirely unexpected happened.

Chapter 1286: Going to Zongrenfu

The walls of the mountain cave were unexpectedly hollow. With a powerful swipe from the black bear, it instantly broke open a large hole.

The black bear followed the momentum and fell into the dark hole. After a long moment, the muffled sound of the bear hitting the ground echoed from below.

Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing exchanged looks. Judging by the sound, the hole was very deep.

Yue Rujing picked up a lit tree branch and tossed it into the pitch-black hole. Through the flickering firelight, they could see that the cave was not only deep but also vast.

What surprised them even more was the unmistakable signs of artificial excavation within the cave. At the center of the cave was a large circular platform, resembling an ancient altar crafted by human hands.

"Who would carve out a cave in such a high mountain?"

Jin Zijin furrowed his brows and gently shook his head.

"Should we go down and take a look?"

"Of course we should." Jin Zijin picked up the torch and began to search for a path downward.

Once they entered the cave, a sudden loud crash erupted from behind them. Countless stones fell from the entrance of the cave. They dodged frantically and managed to avoid injury. When the chaos settled, Yue Rujing cursed angrily.

"Senior Brother, it's bad— the exit is blocked!"

...

Lin Qianqing had arrived at the Zongrenfu. The Zongrenfu was not somewhere ordinary people could gain entry to. In order to see King Jin there, she first visited the Crown Prince Residence to meet Gu Youyou, who helped request a decree from the Emperor.

She held the decree, which Gu Youyou had managed to obtain after considerable effort, and made her way to the Zongrenfu to meet King Jin, feeling waves of unease rising in her heart.

"Miss Lin, do you want to go in or not?" The guards of the Zongrenfu were far more arrogant than the jailers of ordinary prisons. Anyone who appeared here was either royalty or someone of noble birth— but so what? Here, they still had to abide by the guards' authority. For this reason, they never bothered to show any respect for the daughter of Lord Lin, the former Princess Consort of King Jin.

"Of course, I’m going in," Lin Qianqing said calmly, handing the Emperor’s decree to the gatekeeper.

After verifying it as a genuine decree, they finally dared to let Lin Qianqing enter.

"Hurry up, then. People imprisoned here, royal or not, are still criminals."

Although the Zongrenfu was used to confine criminals, the differing statuses of those confined here made the conditions far better than a common jail.

Once Lin Qianqing entered, she was taken to a courtyard. The person escorting her then left, and the courtyard door was locked behind her.

In the corner of the courtyard, a man was crouched on the ground working on something. When he heard someone approaching, he turned his face toward her.

Upon seeing the visitor, he was so shocked that he dropped the small shovel he was holding onto the ground.

His mouth moved as he stammered in disbelief, "Why are you here?"

Lin Qianqing looked at King Jin, and in that instant, her heart was flooded with an overwhelming sadness.

It had only been a year since they last met, but King Jin seemed like a completely different person.

His once youthful face was etched with weariness. His cheeks were unshaven, covered in scruff, and amidst his jet-black hair, scattered streaks of white could be seen.

How old was he now? Just over twenty—and yet white strands of hair had already appeared.

At just over twenty years old, he was destined to spend the rest of his life in the prison of the Zongrenfu.

Lin Qianqing took a deep breath, stepped forward, and threw herself into his arms, her sobs muffled as they escaped her lips.

"Cousin, I was wrong. I shouldn’t have left. I should have stayed with you to face this together..."

King Jin’s entire body stiffened. He raised his hand, wanting to pat Lin Qianqing’s back, but seeing the dirt covering his hand, he finally hesitated and lowered it again.

He forced a small smile and said, "What nonsense are you saying? How could you have stayed?"

Chapter 1287: Disappearance

He pushed Lin Qianqing away, stepped back a few paces, and exclaimed in surprise, "Why have you come back? Isn’t it enjoyable out there? Didn’t I tell you never to return? Now that you’ve come back, what are we supposed to do?"

As the former Princess Consort of King Jin, stepping out of the house would already invite criticism, let alone remarrying.

She was still so young, and her longing for freedom so profound—she truly shouldn’t spend her remaining years growing old in the Lin Residence.

"You should leave quickly. Though it’s not as prosperous outside as Beijing, you could live the kind of life you truly desire."

Lin Qianqing’s face was bathed in tears as she repeatedly shook her head.

"No, I’m not going anywhere. Cousin, I won’t go back. I want to stay here with you in the Zongrenfu."

"Are you out of your mind?" King Jin roared, "Leave at once! This is no place for you."

"I won’t leave. I’ll never leave again. No matter how good it is outside, it’s not my home. Cousin, you sent me away, treating me as if I were your only wife. But in all honesty—during our years together—I

never once truly regarded you as my husband. In my heart, I always resisted the relationship between us. Now that I think about it, I've done you such a grave injustice..."

...

That day, Gu Youyou received a message. Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing had gone to Nanzhao Country in search of Tian Jizi's traces, but they had lost contact with Marquess Yue.

Gu Youyou clenched the letter tightly and asked the messenger, "How long has it been?"

The messenger replied, "It's been over a month since I set out."

Over a month, plus the speed of the messenger's urgent journey—Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing had already been missing for two months.

Gu Youyou said in shock, "Why are you only telling me now?"

The messenger explained, "Nanzhao Country is vast and sparsely populated, with many mountains. Getting lost in the mountains isn't uncommon. At first, our Marquess assumed they were merely lost and would send word once they found their way out. But after waiting a month with no news at all, the Marquess decided to send me to Beijing to relay this to the First Princess Consort."

Gu Youyou closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She could feel her own heartbeat racing, her panic causing her hands gripping the letter to tremble.

They had gone missing—lost in the mountains.

Yet, with Jin Zijin's capabilities, how could they have been lost in the mountains for so long? Unless they had encountered some kind of danger.

She pressed her left hand tightly over her right hand, striving to make herself appear calm.

"Very well, I understand. Sir, it’s been a hard journey for you; go and rest for now."

She forced herself to finish saying this.

"Understood. I’ll take my leave now."

When only Gu Youyou and Xiang Chun remained in the room, Xiang Chun, standing to the side, finally walked up to Gu Youyou with a face full of fear.

"The First Prince is missing. First Princess Consort, what should we do now? Should we inform His Majesty?"

Gu Youyou nodded, glanced at the letter she had been clutching tightly, and tossed it onto the table.

She said, "Yes, we should. The more hands we have, the better. If they had gone missing in Zhuzhao Country, I could at least mobilize everyone to search for them. But over in Nanzhao, I don’t even have any businesses there."

She really ought to open a few establishments in Nanzhao Country as well.

"Then, should you go into the palace to see His Majesty now?" Xiang Chun’s face had turned pale with fear, appearing even more worried than Gu Youyou herself.

Gu Youyou took a deep breath and said, "Alright, I’ll go to the palace now. Go make the necessary preparations."

"Yes, I’ll withdraw for now and prepare."

"Wait, hold on." Gu Youyou suddenly thought of something and quickly called her back.

Chapter 1288: Lured Out

“What else is there?”

“Don’t tell anyone about this matter. With identities like theirs vanishing in Nanzhao Country, if word spreads within Nanzhao, they’ll be in danger even if they haven’t disappeared.”

Xiang Chun responded with a quick “Understood” and hurried off to prepare the items needed for entering the palace.

Gu Youyou sat alone in the room, her brows tightly furrowed into a shape resembling the character for “river.” Before long, another maid came in to report, saying, “Princess Consort, a Taoist priest from Sanqing Temple seeks an audience. He claims he has urgent business with you.”

“A Taoist priest from Sanqing Temple?” Gu Youyou was momentarily startled and hastily asked, “Did he mention his name?”

The maid replied, “He said his name is Zhiqiu.”

Zhiqiu? Gu Youyou had never heard this name before.

With so many Taoist priests in Sanqing Temple, there were plenty whose names she didn’t know.

Just now, people from the Yue Marquess’s household mentioned that Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing had gone missing. Now, a Taoist priest from Sanqing Temple arrived claiming urgent business with Gu Youyou.

There must be some connection between the two.

Gu Youyou quickly rose and followed the maid out to see the Taoist priest named Zhiqiu.

Xiang Chun had just finished preparing the items needed for entering the palace when she saw Gu Youyou hurrying away. Full of urgency, she called out, “Princess Consort, you haven’t changed your clothes yet! Wait for your servant!”

Xiang Chun, flustered, grabbed the prepared items and rushed out but could no longer see any trace of Gu Youyou.

“Where is the Princess Consort?” she asked the servant stationed at the gate.

“She talked with the Taoist priest from Sanqing Temple for a while and then left.”

“Where did she go?” Xiang Chun asked anxiously.

The gate servant dared not inquire about Gu Youyou’s destination and could only shake his head at Xiang Chun, saying, “I don’t know.”

The carriage Xiang Chun prepared was now being taken out by Gui Yunxi. He had timed his arrival perfectly, only to find Xiang Chun looking panicked but with no sign of Gu Youyou.

He asked, “The Princess Consort hasn’t come out yet?”

Xiang Chun replied hastily, “She left, she’s been gone for quite a while.”

Meanwhile, Gu Youyou was in a small grove not far from her home.

She followed the young Taoist priest Zhiqiu to this grove, where he finally stopped walking.

“Now can you tell me? Where exactly are they?”

Zhiqiu turned around, his face devoid of emotion, and stared at Gu Youyou.

Seeing his unnatural expression, a sinking feeling gripped Gu Youyou's heart.

Just at that moment, Zhiqiu opened his mouth to speak, "It was you who killed Brother Zhuo Qing years ago, wasn't it?"

"Zhuo Qing?" The name had almost faded from Gu Youyou's memory. It was only when this young Taoist priest mentioned it that she remembered who it belonged to.

Back then, in that ancient tomb, in order to escape, they had orchestrated a carbon monoxide poisoning accident that killed Zhuo Qing.

They managed to flee but were ultimately captured again.

With the surroundings eerily silent, Gu Youyou now knew she had fallen for a trap, and she was in danger.

Although things had changed since Xuanzong's reign, there were still some die-hard followers of Yu Jizi lurking around. It seemed that this young Taoist priest, Zhiqiu, was one of them.

Gu Youyou cautiously eyed him and said, "I didn't kill Zhuo Qing. He died in his sleep, and it had nothing to do with me."

At this moment, she could only stall for time. She hoped Xiang Chun would show some cleverness, notice her absence, and immediately send people to look for her.

This grove wasn't far from the gate. If people came to search, they would find her sooner or later.

Zhiqiu let out a cold laugh and said, "I saw it with my own eyes—how they all died in that tomb. Even my master was deceived by you, wasn't he?"

Gu Youyou sneered, “You’ve got it wrong. That old bastard schemed against me first. How could a mere woman like me possibly deceive him?”

Chapter 1289: Disappearance Again

"You better not try to argue. Do you think I don’t know just how capable you are, woman?"

"Oh really!" Gu Youyou said with a chuckle. "Who are you? Are we close? How do you even know what I’m capable of when I don’t even know myself?"

"Hmph, you’re truly infuriating. I’d like to see how long you’ll remain stubborn. Master, her subordinates will come looking for her soon. Let’s take her away now."

Gu Youyou was startled, a chill running down her spine.

She spun around abruptly and saw Yu Jizi, dressed in black, standing behind her, wearing a sinister smirk.

...

Xiang Chun hadn’t seen Gu Youyou after a while and called for a few house servants to search the vicinity.

According to the gatekeeper, she had left on foot with that Taoist, heading east.

She remembered that there was a small grove to the east, which also happened to be a convenient spot for conversations.

She led her people to the grove, but still couldn’t find Gu Youyou.

Frantic, she turned to the group and said, "Everyone, split up and search quickly. It’s only been a brief moment—she couldn’t have gone far."

"Ugh, how could this happen? One after the other, everyone seems to be vanishing." Xiang Chun muttered in worry.

Searcy, hearing the news, arrived swiftly and asked in a sharp tone, "Is it true that Miss Gu is stirring up trouble again?"

Xiang Chun's anger flared. She stood tall as the head maid and retorted indignantly, "What do you mean by 'Miss Gu'? She's the Crown Princess Consort. This is not 'stirring up trouble'—she had urgent matters to attend to."

"Hmph!" Searcy sneered, "What urgent matters involve losing track of yourself?"

"She has something important to handle. She'll probably be back soon," Xiang Chun defended Gu Youyou.

"Ah!" Searcy was about to throw in more cutting remarks when she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her foot. Instantly, her leg grew weak and numb.

Xiang Chun, startled, set aside her frustrations about Searcy's disrespect and quickly stepped forward to support her.

"What's wrong? What kind of trick are you up to now?"

"Trick your big-headed nonsense," Searcy shoved Xiang Chun away, sat on the ground, and cradled her leg. Then, with a grimace, she pulled a needle out from the sole of her foot.

Her eyes widened in shock as she exclaimed, "The Crown Princess Consort might truly be in trouble this time—this needle belongs to her."

The needle was coated with a potent anesthetic, which explained why she couldn't feel the strength in her leg.

Luckily, Searcy possessed a peculiar constitution; had it been anyone else, half their body would have lost all sensation.

Searcy quickly gathered everyone searching for Gu Youyou and remarked that the matter involved Sanqing Temple, implying that sending house servants to search aimlessly would be futile.

She shared her deductions with the group, leaving everyone with a foreboding sense of doom.

The Crown Prince was absent, and now the Crown Princess Consort had been taken.

Xiang Chun’s face turned deathly pale with fright, and her body entirely weakened. In the end, she had to be carried back.

It wasn’t long before someone came to report that a few corpses had been found by the stream.

Searcy rushed over to investigate and was horrified to confirm that Gu Youyou had indeed encountered something grave.

The deceased were Hidden Guards that Jin Zijin had stationed around Gu Youyou. Their faces were serene, bearing no sign of pain, but upon examination, it was discovered that their meridians had all been snapped by immense Inner Strength. Who in this world could possess such power?

"Quickly, send word to His Majesty. Remember, do not let this leak out."

With Gu Youyou missing, only Searcy could maintain control over the Crown Prince Residence.

She was effectively the residence’s doctor, her authority surpassing even that of the butler.

Soon, the Emperor arrived at the Crown Prince Residence under the pretext of visiting Jin Xuyao. Within the courtyard, the corpses of the Hidden Guards lay in repose. After personally inspecting them, the Emperor’s brows furrowed deeply. His dark expression seemed to drop the very temperature of the scene by several degrees.

Chapter 1290: Trapped in the Cave

Xiang Chun sobbed softly from the side and said, "Your Majesty, it was the Taoists from Sanqing Temple who did this. It must have been Huo Li who turned traitor while the Eldest Prince and the Princely Heir Yue weren't around. Your Majesty must recover our Eldest Prince's Consort..."

Searcy pulled Xiang Chun aside and scolded her in a low voice, "If you don't understand, don't talk nonsense. His Majesty has his plans."

The Emperor stood up and looked at Searcy with surprise.

"You are General Lu's daughter, aren't you?"

Searcy turned her face away and nodded reluctantly with some displeasure.

"The descendant of the Poison Healer?" the Emperor asked again.

The matter of the Poison Healer's family being framed by Yu Jizi had long been exposed to the public. Now, she could openly admit her identity.

"I suppose so," Searcy said.

"Who do you think killed them?" The Emperor asked bluntly.

Searcy remained silent for a moment, took a breath, and said, "I suspect Yu Jizi has returned."

At the mention of Yu Jizi, everyone present displayed strange expressions, faintly tinged with fear.

Who didn't know that the Eldest Prince had opposed the Dao Sect, altering its internal dynamics? Although no one had openly stated it, his intent was quite clear: it was to deal with Yu Jizi. While Yu Jizi was absent, he had orchestrated the rebellion of Yu Jizi's main disciple and provoked countless other disciples to defect. This deep-seated grudge... if Yu Jizi didn't know, so be it. But if he found out and returned, how could he possibly let it slide?

If that were truly the case, the Eldest Prince’s Consort would be in serious danger.

"Him? What makes you think so?" The Emperor asked.

Searcy replied, "I’ve seen him strike."

Given that he had acted, no matter how many people were protecting Gu Youyou, it would be futile.

Upon hearing this, the Emperor’s expression remained stern, and he said nothing for a long time. After a while, he finally said, "Take Xuyao with you and come into the palace to care for him."

Perhaps within the Imperial Palace, Yu Jizi might still have some reservations.

Let’s hope his target was solely Gu Youyou and that he wouldn’t set his sights on Xuyao.

...

Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing had already been trapped in that massive cave for several months. Even the bear carcass they had been living off was nearly finished. Staring at the diminishing bear meat, Yue Rujing had sighed more than a dozen times.

"If we don’t get out soon, I’ll end up eating my own flesh. I wonder if it’d taste better than bear meat."

Jin Zijin held a book and meticulously copied down the words carved into the cave walls one by one. Once he finished recording this side of the wall, he would have documented everything in the cave.

He was so engrossed in his writing that he ignored Yue Rujing’s complaints.

It wasn’t that he didn’t take Yue Rujing seriously—it was just that Yue Rujing complained countless times every day. He had grown numb to it and generally tuned him out.

"Hey, Senior Brother, is there any way to make a pot of soup? These bones look decent enough. Roasting them every day is getting boring."

Still, Jin Zijin didn’t respond and continued his record-keeping.

Feeling thoroughly bored, Yue Rujing wandered over to a stream flowing down the cave wall, scooped up some water, and drank. It was classic mountain spring water—sweet and refreshing, cool as it touched his lips.

He savored the taste, giddy with the thought of how great it would be to use this water to make a soup from the bear’s bones. But it was just a fantasy—they didn’t have a pot.

This was an enormous cave, half natural and half man-made.

Within the cave stood an altar. Atop the altar rested a coffin made of mysterious black ice, and the surrounding spring water had been channeled around the coffin, forming an Eight Trigrams Array Chart.

The soft sound of the flowing water added a touch of vitality to the otherwise silent cave, making it feel a little less lifeless.

To preserve the bear meat’s freshness, they had moved the bear carcass into the coffin.