Farmhouse 1651

Chapter 1651: He Isn’t Like This

But she was quickly restrained again by two maids.

"Let go of me! What are you doing? Duke Ning, it’s this woman who harmed me, I’m not that kind of person! I..."

"Second Miss, the matter has already been exposed!" Zhang Butler interrupted her helplessly, thinking: Can’t you see everyone is looking at you as if you’re a joke?

"I, I..." Zhang Shiyu looked around in panic, finally her gaze fell upon Gu Youyou.

Her poisoned gaze fixed on Gu Youyou, she harshly shouted: "Why did it turn out this way? The cup of water was clearly meant for you, why am I the one poisoned?"

Gu Youyou merely said calmly: "A legitimate daughter of the Chancellor Residence hiding such poison, it’s truly eye-opening! I am, after all, the Duchess Ning; how could I drink such poison? Since the poison was brought by Miss Zhang, naturally Miss Zhang should drink it, right?"

"You, you swapped the water?" Zhang Shiyu’s eyes were bloodshot, her expression was chaotic.

She stared at Gu Youyou, wanting nothing more than to tear apart the woman in front of her.

Gu Youyou shrugged gently and said: "I don’t know, I just picked a cup at random. You didn’t mark which cup was poisoned, so how would I know? Maybe I was lucky, or maybe I’ve accumulated enough virtue for heaven to refuse to ignore someone trying to harm me!"

Gu Youyou’s words infuriated Zhang Shiyu to the point of wanting to vomit blood; she was clearly deliberate, yet claimed not to know?

She looked at Jin Zijin, grievously accusing Gu Youyou of her sins.

"She knew, she did it on purpose, don't believe her, Duke Ning, Gu Youyou is a venomous woman, you can't trust her. She deliberately gave me poisoned water to drink..."

Everyone thought this Zhang Family's Miss was truly pitiable, yet still couldn't grasp the situation at this point.

Or perhaps, her obsession with Duke Ning had reached an incurable stage; everyone recalled that although the Zhang Family's Miss didn't surpass Gu Youyou, she wasn't this pathetic!

Jin Zijin snorted sarcastically, saying: "So what if it was intentional? Shouldn't it be?"

Upon hearing the man's deep voice, Zhang Shiyu was stunned.

Jin Zijin continued: "You tried to poison someone, but in the end harmed yourself; isn't it self-inflicted? Ha, is this how the daughters of the Zhang Family behave? Dare to harm my duchess, do you know what crime this is?"

His eyes were full of mockery, making Zhang Shiyu unable to believe her own eyes.

She remembered the first time she saw him standing beside the Dragon King and Dragon Mother Statue in the snow, his facial features gentle, receiving incense from the hands of the faithful. That slight smile playing at the corner of his mouth was like spring sunlight capable of melting the winter snows.

When did he speak with such harsh words, when did his expression pierce so deeply into one's heart?

Zhang Shiyu's face was ashen.

Zhang Butler hurriedly said: "Miss, don't worry, the master is right nearby, he'll be here soon, the master will save you."

Meanwhile, in the adjacent room, Gu Shuisheng looked at Chancellor Zhang in shock.

You want me to take responsibility? I just arrived, what responsibility should I assume?

Chancellor Zhang looked helpless and said: "I know you're wronged too, you're the most innocent one in this matter. But what can I do? Do you want me to watch them take Shiyu away? Do you know what crime this will be if it's confirmed? No matter how inadequate Gu Youyou may be, she is still an Imperial Family's daughter-in-law; the Imperial Family needs their reputation, Shiyu can only face death!"

Chapter 1652: Prime Minister Zhang Begs Him

"This is her own fault. Hasn't Minister Zhang taught her not to harbor malicious intentions? Now she's just proving that harming others ultimately harms herself!" Gu Shuisheng exclaimed with deep emotion. He owed Minister Zhang, but there were countless ways to repay such a debt, and he didn't wish to be tangled with Miss Zhang in any manner.

"If this hadn't happened, I would have certainly stopped her. But it has already occurred—what can I do? I can't just watch her walk to her death! Shuisheng, I can only tell them that it was my doing, and its purpose was to bring you two together. Therefore, Shiyu can only marry you! I have never begged anyone in this lifetime, but consider this an old man's plea to you!"

Minister Zhang was both hateful and pitiful, hateful for using force and favors to compel him, and pitiful for a father who humbly pleaded for mercy for his erring daughter from a former beggar.

Gu Shuisheng was filled with grief and indignation, detesting both coercion and manipulation as much as anything, and now he faced both.

He shook his head sorrowfully, saying, "It's not about whether I'm willing or not. How can two people who annoy each other possibly marry? Minister Zhang, you know why Miss Zhang chose me, right? It's because she despises me. She also detests Princess Ning, so she seeks to eliminate both of us at once in one fell swoop."

The physically and mentally exhausted Minister Zhang lifted his head to look earnestly at Gu Shuisheng, finally seeing a glimmer of hope.

He hurriedly said, "It doesn't matter, as long as you agree, it's fine. Shiyu must pay some price for what she's done wrong. I will explain this to her, and she will agree."

Gu Shuisheng closed his eyes, reflecting on the burdens of debt he'd accumulated since becoming Gu Shuisheng, and reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"Alright, consider it a repayment for recognizing my talent."

Without Minister Zhang, the new Top Scholar of this cohort wouldn't have been Gu Shuisheng.

Without Minister Zhang, after Gu Wu's death, he would have probably continued wandering alone!

Forget it, let it be a form of repaying the favor!

...

Minister Zhang and Gu Shuisheng returned to the room where Zhang Shiyu had just regained consciousness. Remembering the muddled events and seeing the person standing before her, she was so furious she wished she could stab him with a knife.

Would her pristine reputation as Zhang Shiyu be ruined in the hands of this person?

He, apart from Gu Youyou, was the person she loathed most.

Despite having hands and feet and some talents, he lived as a lazy beggar!

Utterly humiliating the very essence of being a scholar.

"You, did you conspire with Gu Youyou against me? Father, this person destroyed your daughter's honor, you must kill him!" Zhang Shiyu's face was already tear-stained, and her eyes red and swollen to a frightening extent.

Yet Minister Zhang did not comfort her like a loving father but stood aloofly aside, saying in a low voice to Jin Zijin, "Prince Ning, Princess Ning, this matter was arranged by me alone and has nothing to do with my daughter."

Jin Zijin raised a cold eyebrow, saying, "Are you sure you want to take responsibility for this matter, Minister Zhang? If it was your doing, then the entire Zhang Residence..."

Zhang Shiyu was also frightened. If her father were to take the blame, then... no...

Zhang Shiyu hurriedly said, "No, Father, you can't..."

"Silence!" Minister Zhang loudly interrupted her and turned to Jin Zijin, saying, "Prince Ning, you may have some misunderstanding about me. I didn't intend to harm the Princess. It was out of desperation with my unfilial daughter that I thought of such a plan to have her married off."

"What?"

Upon hearing such an inexplicable statement from Minister Zhang, not only were Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin confused, but everyone present, except for Gu Shuisheng who knew what Minister Zhang intended to say, was left bewildered.

Chapter 1653: The Dupe

Thought to myself: Has Prime Minister Zhang lost his mind? He's turned his daughter into this state just so she can be married off? He's ruined what little reputation she has left, how could she possibly get married now? Who would want her?

But then everyone immediately saw the newly crowned Top Scholar, Gu Shuisheng, standing next to Prime Minister Zhang... Could it be that he wants her?

Gu Youyou's eyebrows twitched, and she murmured, "Shuisheng, you're a victim too, don't do anything foolish!"

Gu Shuisheng cast a grateful glance at Gu Youyou, but his heart ached and he turned his head away.

Nobody wants to do something foolish, but how many people in this world can truly control their own fate?

Prime Minister Zhang first apologized to the couple from Prince Ning's family, but the apology wasn't for the Zhang family's young lady attempting to poison Gu Youyou, but for occupying their space and staging this farce.

He then said it was all orchestrated by him, with the purpose of bringing Zhang Shiyu and Gu Shuisheng together.

Prime Minister Zhang was reluctant to let Zhang Shiyu marry away, so he conceived the idea of recruiting a live-in son-in-law for her.

Obviously, the newly crowned Top Scholar was a good choice, and being close at hand, in Prime Minister Zhang's eyes, they seemed to be a match made in heaven.

Unfortunately, the two parties involved didn't see it that way. They both found each other unbearable and refused to agree to Prime Minister Zhang's proposal. Reluctantly, Prime Minister Zhang resorted to this last move, forcing the matter to completion.

In this way, the victims turned out to be Zhang Shiyu and Gu Shuisheng.

Zhang Shiyu naturally wouldn't sue her father at the Governor's Office, and Gu Shuisheng, being a protégé of Prime Minister Zhang, expressed forgiveness. In front of so many people, to preserve Zhang Shiyu's reputation, he also agreed to become Zhang Family's live-in son-in-law.

In ancient times, becoming a live-in son-in-law wasn't a commendable position; one could inevitably be labeled as living off a woman.

But Gu Shuisheng's situation was somewhat unique. Everyone simply thought he was tricked by Zhang Zhang's father and daughter and was conned into becoming a live-in son-in-law, and for him, they mostly felt sympathy.

Gu Youyou watched speechlessly as this family staged their own drama. After they compensated her for the damages to Xiguang Residence, they left grandly.

Gu Youyou gritted her teeth and said, "How can people be so shameless?"

Jin Zijin said, "If you don’t want to let them go, how about..."

"No, no!" Gu Youyou quickly interrupted, "Our enmity is not to the point of life and death. From what I’ve seen of this dreadful couple, their married life is likely to be very thrilling. Prime Minister Zhang’s hard days are still ahead. It’s what they call ’one thing subdues another!’"

...

The affair of the Zhang Family stirred up quite a commotion, bringing another bout of excitement to Beijing.

After calculating, this year’s Beijing seemed to be particularly lively!

Especially the Zhang Family.

The second young lady of the Zhang Family was caught by the butler in Xiguang Residence, and that man was none other than Prime Minister Zhang’s protégé, the newly crowned Top Scholar. However, it was later confirmed by Prime Minister Zhang that this was a scheme he devised for his daughter with marital difficulties.

Then everyone started gossiping again.

If you want to trap the newly crowned Top Scholar within the Zhang Residence, couldn’t you choose any other place? The Zhang Residence is so big, even the firewood shed would do. Why did you have to do it at Xiguang Residence?

Now it’s embarrassing and disgraceful. Fortunately, you’ve secured Gu Shuisheng; otherwise, your daughter would be waiting to die an old maid at home.

After all, this was not a glorious matter, so to end it as quickly as possible, Prime Minister Zhang hastily ordered preparations for their wedding, setting the date just three days later.

As if racing against time.

Chapter 1654: Nobody Is Willing

Although Gu Shuisheng agreed outwardly, he couldn’t help but feel indignant inside. After all, when young people get angry, they often resort to drowning their sorrows in alcohol. On the day before the wedding, he was still wandering the streets with a wine jug.

Gu Youyou happened to come across him while heading to Xiguang Residence. Seeing Gu Shuisheng’s hopeless look and the smell of alcohol on him, she couldn’t help but feel sympathy.

"Gu Shuisheng?"

Gu Shuisheng stopped and turned to look at Gu Youyou.

Gu Youyou looked at Gu Shuisheng, sighed softly at the wine jug in his hand, and said, "Why bother? Isn’t this self-inflicted? If you don’t want it, even as the new Top Scholar, the Zhang Prime Minister can’t force you to marry the young lady of the Zhang Family."

Gu Shuisheng, having drunk, looked a bit flushed.

Listening to Gu Youyou’s words, he was slightly taken aback, then sneered sarcastically and said, "What else can be done if not this? Watch Zhang Shiyu die?"

He didn’t mind Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin taking care of Zhang Shiyu, but how could he refuse the Zhang Prime Minister’s plea?

He let out a laugh and said, "You knew the water was poisoned; you could have chosen not to drink it. Why did you make Miss Zhang drink it?"

Gu Youyou was stupefied and regarded him as merely being drunk.

She coldly laughed and said, "She brought that upon herself, why shouldn't I let her drink? She poisoned it herself, so naturally, she has to suffer the consequences."

"I know she brought it upon herself, but a woman's reputation is so important. What you did ruined her," Gu Shuisheng said angrily.

Gu Youyou paused, then laughed at the irony.

She chuckled and said, "Oh, what I did ruined her, but did she think about ruining me before doing it? Haha, of course, she thought about it, precisely because she knew doing this would ruin me, that's why she did it, isn't it?"

"You..." Zhang Shuisheng seemed to sober up a bit, looking at Gu Youyou's angry expression, realizing he'd said something he shouldn't have.

Gu Youyou continued, "Ha, should I let them bully me repeatedly? Do you know when Zhang Shiyu first framed me? Do you know how many times the Zhang father and daughter have provoked me? Precisely because I tolerated again and again, she dared to escalate. I'm not a saint, nor do I have the leisure to guard against thieves every day!"

After shouting, Gu Youyou left in a carefree manner.

She thought too much, such a person deserves to be ruined by the Zhang father and daughter in this life.

Initially, she considered him a victim, kindly said a few words to show sympathy, but he still sympathized with the culprit!

Who's to blame if the culprit is pitiful?

For example, a murderer might seem pitiful when brought to justice, but without punishment, how can the innocent victims he killed rest in peace?

The streets of West Street in Beijing were lively and festive; it was the day the Zhang Prime Minister's daughter was to marry, and the entire street was bustling.

Before dawn, Zhang Shiyu was pulled up by several matrons, dressed, and had her bridal makeup applied.

The exquisite makeup masked Zhang Shiyu's haggard face from the past few days. A woman is always exceptionally radiant on her wedding day.

The daughters of the Zhang Family were exceptionally beautiful, whether it was the eldest or the second Miss. The groom Gu Shuisheng was also talented and handsome, a perfect match.

The bride looked at herself in the bronze mirror, but those beautiful eyes showed not the slightest vitality.

She, Zhang Shiyu, ultimately became the woman no one wanted, and her father found her a beggar through coercion.

Chapter 1655: Fleeing on the Wedding Night

No matter how outstanding Gu Shuisheng is in others' eyes, even if he is the newly appointed Top Scholar by the emperor himself, to Zhang Shiyu, he is still the filthy beggar.

The image of him in her mind remains from the day she brought him home.

After sitting in a daze all morning, she vaguely heard someone calling out that the auspicious time had arrived. In a daze, someone covered her head with a red cloth, turning her world entirely crimson.

She revealed a smile with a hint of surprise, suddenly finding this red color quite beautiful.

No wonder her sister was so happy on her wedding day. To wear a red dress and marry the man one loves is, as a woman, the happiest thing in life.

"First bow to Heaven and Earth..."

"Second bow to the parents..."

Immersed in her red world, like a puppet, she was repeatedly pushed down, then she heard her father's voice ahead.

He joyfully said the word "good" three times.

Good, good, good, Zhang Shiyu also started to smile.

Good, good, good...

After some time had passed, she was taken back to her room. Sitting on the bed, everyone retreated, and the world returned to tranquility.

Along this journey, she thought a lot, from when her sister happily donned a wedding dress, to when her sister returned to her married home crying to her mother, complaining about being bullied by the Lin Family's young lady, and her husband visiting the quarters of those lowly concubines instead of hers.

She lamented that her status was inferior to the young lady of the Lin Family, and not only that, she had to endure exclusion by the concubines!

The smile vanished from her sister's face, replaced by endless tears.

Later, her sister died, her mother died too, and she became synonymous with unmarriable!

Why did it turn out this way? Because she had married a man she didn't love, she had gone to the Prince Jin Residence for power and status.

But for her, it was different. Zhang Shiyu always knew that she approached without hesitation the man she adored like sunlight before the Dragon Mother Statue, but today was her wedding day, where was that man?

On countless nights, she imagined that when this side of the red world opened, the man she longed for day and night would crash into her view.

Unknowingly, tears streamed down her face. As she hid in this red world, she realized that when this world opened, that man would never again appear before her eyes.

Tears burst forth and flowed more and more, ruining her exquisite bridal makeup.

Zhang Shiyu tore off the red cloth from her head. Having lived in this residence for over twenty years, she knew how to avoid everyone and, unconsciously, fled outside.

Today, the Zhang Family was receiving their son-in-law, making the house incredibly lively, with only the unnoticed small side door where a woman in a wedding dress ran out.

In the pitch-black night, the bright red wedding dress also turned into black, swallowed by the darkness.

The noise behind her grew distant as she sprinted down the dark, silent street, tears and sweat soaking her clothes, finally reaching the tall gate.

At this hour, ordinary households were already asleep; the two guards at Ningwang Residence's gate were dozing off, clutching the handles of their knives.

She opened her mouth, making a motion of wild laughter, but no sound emerged.

A dagger in her hand, she extended her arm and ruthlessly slashed her own forearm.

The blood gushed forth instantly.

Chapter 1656: Bleeding Into the Prince Residence

Zhang Shiyu stepped closer and closer to the gates of Ningwang Residence, the sound of her bleeding, the steps heavier with each print, finally woke up the two guards.

They rubbed their sleepy eyes, and in the dim light, a woman in full red attire holding a glistening white dagger startled them into a shiver, prompting them to swiftly draw their swords.

"Stop!"

"Who are you?"

Zhang Shiyu slowly approached step by step, shouting loudly, "Open the door!"

As they got closer, the two guards could finally see clearly who it was.

Wearing exquisitely crafted bridal attire, she held a flashing dagger in one hand while the other hand dripped with blood.

The second Miss of the Zhang Family, everyone knew Miss Zhang was getting married today, she should be in her bridal chamber at this time, why would she appear here?

"Open the door!" Zhang Shiyu shouted fiercely once more, truly startling the two guards.

"Miss Zhang, your hand is bleeding."

"Yes, Miss Zhang, you should quickly go back and stop the bleeding!"

Zhang Shiyu curled her lips into a strange smile and said, "Isn't Gu Youyou a doctor? I'm here to find her, open the door, do you want to watch me bleed to death?"

Pushed to the brink, Zhang Shiyu cut another wound on her arm.

The two guards were scared to death; no matter how infamous Zhang Shiyu's reputation was, she was still the Prime Minister's most beloved daughter, not someone mere guards could afford to offend.

The two of them had to make a temporary decision – one stayed behind to comfort and calm her, while the other went inside to report to Jin Zijin and Gu Youyou.

What an unfortunate night for them to be on night duty.

"Miss Zhang, please, why not put the knife down first. I have older ones and young ones to care for. If you're going to commit suicide, please don't drag me along!"

"Get out of the way!" Zhang Shiyu shouted fiercely at the guard.

"Miss Zhang?" The guard was almost in tears, just hoping his companion could be faster. Facing a frantic Miss Zhang, he was moments from dropping to his knees!

"Didn't you hear me? I told you to get out!"

Seeing the guard not budging, Zhang Shiyu placed the dagger against her neck threateningly.

The guard, tongue-tied with fear, exclaimed urgently, "I... I, ah ah! Miss Zhang, don't, don't, I'll let you, I'll let..."

Seeing the blood starting to flow from Zhang Shiyu's neck, the guard could only relent.

With excessive blood loss, Zhang Shiyu's steps began to falter.

She bit her tongue to stay more alert and started running down the main road towards Jin Zijin and Gu Youyou’s main courtyard.

The guard dared not come near, only following her from behind.

Numerous servants were startled awake, putting on their clothes to watch the commotion.

Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin also got up, clad in pajamas, only to see Zhang Shiyu in full red attire, appearing maniacal.

Gu Youyou looked at her in disbelief and said, "Are you crazy? You’re supposed to be marrying, what madness is this at our place?"

Jin Zijin asked the guard, "Have you notified Prime Minister Zhang?"

"Not yet, not yet!" The guard shook his head dumbfoundedly, then turned and ran towards the Chancellor Residence to inform Prime Minister Zhang.

Zhang Shiyu propped up her spirit, looked at Gu Youyou, and laughed maniacally, "You, you wouldn’t let me in, but I still got in! I’m wearing a wedding dress, even if I die, I’ll die here!"

Gu Youyou was horrified, realizing this girl truly was mentally unhinged.

Seeing Zhang Shiyu’s bleeding hand, driven by a doctor’s instinct, she wanted to stop the bleeding first.

However, Jin Zijin stopped her.

Chapter 1657: If I Die, Let It Be in the Ningwang Residence

Jin Zijin glared at Zhang Shiyu with an expression of utter disgust in his eyes and said, "In the past few hundred years, so many people have died in this courtyard—one more won’t make a difference, nor will one less. You want to die? Be my guest!"

He pointed to a rockery not far away.

Zhang Shiyu’s face turned deathly pale; her hands were dripping blood, as was her heart.

She quietly asked herself, "No, why has he changed?"

The Jin Zijin in her memory was nothing like this. Where had those warm eyes gone? Could it be because it was nighttime now, that his warmest side, like the sunlight during the day, was only given during the daytime?

"Your Highness Ningwang? I just want to ask you, what’s wrong with me? Why don’t you want me?"

Jin Zijin replied indifferently, "Whether you’re good or bad, what has it got to do with me?"

"I..." She was instantly left speechless.

Seeing herself in a red bridal dress, she hurriedly straightened the hair at her temple to present her exquisite face better to Jin Zijin.

She smiled and said, "Look, I’m much prettier than her. Look, everyone says I’m especially beautiful today. The bride is the most beautiful woman in the world, just look!"

Jin Zijin had never felt anything more repulsive than the woman in front of him.

In the past, he only thought that Prime Minister Zhang sought to curry favor with the Imperial Family, hoping to get his daughter married into the royal lineage, but never imagined that Zhang Shiyu had any infatuation with him.

All those acts, he always thought were a sham.

But seeing Zhang Shiyu, dressed in bridal attire, running to his residence in the middle of the night to commit suicide, he finally realized that every one of her schemes was genuine.

Yet this true feeling forced upon him only made him feel disgusted.

Gu Youyou bit her lip in silence, feeling a myriad of emotions.

This was truly a pitiful and hateful woman.

Her sincere affection was misguided.

Not only was there no dissent, but it also could only make others hate her more.

Jin Zijin turned his face away, raised his hand, and said blandly, "Take Miss Zhang out; Prime Minister Zhang should be arriving soon!"

He wrapped an arm around Gu Youyou's waist, walking back with her, feeling nothing but utter dejection without any other emotions.

Zhang Shiyu watched their retreating figures in despair, the excessive blood loss making her face appear ghastly pale.

But at that moment, she didn't know where the strength came from, suddenly pushing away the guard about to escort her away and charged straight toward the rockery Jin Zijin had pointed to.

With a loud bang, both Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin turned around startled.

The maids in the residence, holding lanterns, screamed in fright due to Zhang Shiyu's action, throwing the lanterns far away.

The lantern started burning near Zhang Shiyu, illuminating her face clearly.

She looked at Jin Zijin and Gu Youyou, who had turned around, her face covered in blood, and laughed crazily, "I said it, even if I die, it will be here. From now on, I'll always be watching you, even if I can't be yours alive, I'll remain the ghost of this Prince Residence even after death!"

Under the night sky and flickering flames, the scene was more terrifying than one could describe.

Several maids were petrified with fear.

The onlookers were ashen-faced one by one.

Jin Zijin shielded Gu Youyou in his arms, gently covering her eyes with his broad palm, whispering something to her.

But Zhang Shiyu couldn't hear anymore; that final image was forever engraved in her mind.

It was only at that last moment she understood that his warmth wasn't limited to day or night; all his warmth was given to that one person.

...

Chapter 1658: Laying Her to Rest

This night, both the Zhang Residence and the Ningwang Residence were restless.

Gu Shuisheng was stalling and avoiding entering the bridal chamber. When he could no longer delay and finally entered, he found that there was no one in the room.

The Zhang Residence was thrown into chaos, searching everywhere for the bride, until a guard from the Ningwang Residence came running to inform them that Zhang Shiyu had gone to the Ningwang Residence.

Prime Minister Zhang, along with Gu Shuisheng and others, rushed to the Ningwang Residence, only to see Zhang Shiyu, her face covered in blood, already a lifeless corpse.

It was also at this moment that everyone realized just how deep this seemingly capricious young woman's obsession with Prince Ning was. It was no longer surprising that she would go to such crazy lengths to oppose Gu Youyou.

Prime Minister Zhang fainted on the spot, and Gu Shuisheng, still dressed in the groom's attire, silently walked to Zhang Shiyu's side, using his sleeve to wipe the blood from her face before carrying her body back to the Zhang Residence.

Prime Minister Zhang could save Zhang Shiyu's life through the concept of substitution, but he could not save her heart.

Today the Zhang Residence held a wedding, and tomorrow they would hold a funeral.

When Prime Minister Zhang awoke, his hair, which had just turned grey overnight, became snow white, and he appeared utterly aged, although he wasn't actually old.

Zhang Shiyu was dead. She remembered her first encounter with Jin Zijin, standing like sunshine before the Dragon Mother Statue, yet she could only see the indifference in his eyes towards her. She remembered Gu Shuisheng at his most destitute, wearing ragged clothes, the most down-and-out beggar, but she could not witness him shining on this day. In her life, she was forever trapped in her first glance.

"I shouldn't have forced her. She had said she was unwilling, that she'd marry no one but Prince Ning. I thought she was just angry," Prime Minister Zhang weakly spoke while lying in bed, as Gu Shuisheng gently scooped a bowl of thin porridge with a spoon in front of him.

"She was a strong-willed person. Except for conceding to her elder sister, she wouldn't yield to anyone; least of all to Gu Youyou, whom she had always looked down upon."

Gu Shuisheng paused in his movements and said, "Hasn't Prince Ning and the Princess long been married? That selection of the concubine was just a facade!"

Prime Minister Zhang gently shook his head and said, "But Shiyu didn't think so!"

After some thought, he added, "Enough, whether she thought so or not isn't important. She had long set her eyes on Prince Ning. Whoever became the Princess of Ning was wrong, even if it wasn't Gu Youyou, it would've been someone else."

Zhang Shiyu's obsession was too deep. Wearing her red wedding dress, she secretly ran out of the residence and killed herself against the rockery at the Ningwang Residence. This incident was a tremendous blow to Prime Minister Zhang. After returning home, he fell ill and took half a month to recover.

With the death of Zhang Shiyu, the marriage between Gu Changsheng and the Zhang Family could no longer proceed.

Gu Shuisheng was transferred to the Ministry of Personnel as an official of moderate rank, obtained his own residence, and was given a salary. After thanking Prime Minister Zhang, he left the Zhang Family.

From then on, the Zhang Family had nothing to do with him. Meeting Prime Minister Zhang again, he would only be an ordinary colleague.

Prime Minister Zhang felt he had failed in teaching his children and, fearing another Zhang Shiyu might appear, decided to take his family, resign, and return to his hometown, far from Beijing.

The Emperor, tossing the resignation letter from Prime Minister Zhang onto the table, rubbed his temple slowly and said, "Beloved Minister Zhang, I know you are heartbroken over losing your beloved daughter, but you also know the court is in dire need of capable people at this time!"

It hadn't even been a year since the teeth of the Ducal Residence were removed, and the new imperial exam had just concluded. The influx of new blood had just begun and couldn't really be put to use yet.

This was the reason the Emperor couldn't let Prime Minister Zhang leave at this time.

Chapter 1659: Chancellor Zhang Has Thought It Through

He may have many faults, but he is nothing more than a pitiful father who is protective of his offspring.

When it comes to serving the Imperial Court, he does not hesitate at all; for the Emperor, this man is useful.

"Your Majesty, this old minister is no longer capable of handling court affairs. My mind is made up, and I hope the Emperor can grant my wish!"

The Emperor, also an old man weathered by time, sighed deeply, "Since your mind is made up, I will agree to your request. However, I have one condition!"

Prime Minister Zhang was momentarily relieved, but hearing that the Emperor had a condition, his heart sank again.

"Please speak, Your Majesty!"

"You may retire to the countryside, but only six months later. You should stay on and assist for another half a year. Without you here in Taihe Hall, the absence of Prime Minister Zhang would make it a much lonelier place!"

The often troubled Prime Minister Zhang couldn't help but smile with relief at the Emperor's words.

On the court, he confronted heaven and earth, regardless of how fiercely they argued at the time. Now, it has all become just a memory.

Once he leaves, Jie Huanzhi and the others will probably feel loneliness too. When the young officials recall a certain prime minister, it is likely they will remember his stubborn determination to oppose the masses!

...

Madam planned to leave with Jin Ziyuan, first bidding farewell to the Emperor in the palace, and then going to the Ningwang Residence to say goodbye to Jin Zijin and Gu Youyou.

"We are leaving now, Doctor Gu, thank you for your care!"

Gu Youyou nodded lightly, not saying much.

Jin Zijin fixed his gaze on Jin Ziyuan, but Jin Ziyuan kept his head down, looking at his toes.

"Have you decided where to go?" Jin Zijin uncharacteristically asked.

Madam shook her head and said, "We'll just keep going, as far as we can. When we find a place Ziyuan likes, we'll stop. If we grow weary of it, we can move on again."

Gu Youyou thought they were going back to Qiuci, so she asked, "You aren't going back to Qiuci?"

Madam replied, "We originally fled to Qiuci to seek refuge. We visited the Emperor this morning, and the truths from those years have come to light. The misunderstandings are resolved, so there's no need for us to hide anymore."

Gu Youyou said nothing more, simply saying, "Then, Madam, be careful on your way!"

"Yes, we'll get on the carriage now!"

Madam turned around and instructed the servant to take Jin Ziyuan onto the carriage.

Jin Zijin, however, kept gazing at him until he could no longer be seen.

Watching that large carriage move farther away, Gu Youyou couldn't help but sigh, "We are about to leave too, aren't we? It's astonishing how many years we've spent in Beijing."

Jin Zijin said, "Yes, our home is almost finished!"

...

The Empress Dowager’s life was finally coming to an end. She had been in a coma for several days and nights; today, she woke up, drank some broth, and still had some energy to speak, indicating a momentary recovery.

The Emperor did not have many children, and those who could gather by the Empress Dowager’s side were just Jin Zijin and his wife, along with Prince Qin and his wife.

For fear of bringing bad luck to the sickroom, the children were not allowed inside. A Palace Maiden was taking care of Jin Xuyao and Prince Qin’s children as they played in the garden of Renshou Palace.

The Empress Dowager looked around at the room full of people, and her gaze finally fell on Jin Zijin.

"Zijin, I have something to say to you!"

Jin Zijin stepped forward and crouched in front of the Empress Dowager.

She said, "You were raised in Qi Mountain, but that wasn’t your father’s fault. I know you’ve always resented him because of those events, but back then, you didn’t know how difficult our days were!"

Chapter 1660: The Empress Dowager Passes, the Emperor Passes

Reflecting on the time before the Emperor ascended the throne, the Empress Dowager felt a constant unease.

"If that hadn’t been done, you might not even be alive!" the Empress Dowager said with difficulty.

Jin Zijin opened his mouth and said softly, "I don’t hate him, and I’m not refusing to be Emperor out of hatred. It’s simply that I’m truly not suitable."

Jin Zijin knew what the Empress Dowager wanted to say, so in order to spare her some effort, he tried to explain more clearly.

The Emperor sat by the side, listening quietly.

Jin Zijin had his own reasons for not becoming Emperor, but because there was always some distance between him and his father, he would not patiently explain it to him.

Jin Zijin said, "My master's lifelong wish was to remove the influence of the Dao Sect and return power to the Imperial Court, bringing peace to the world. This hard-won peace should be left in the hands of someone capable, someone like Father who can preserve it. I'm unwilling to let the people suffer; I am not suitable!"

His voice was not loud, yet every word reached the ears of everyone present.

The Empress Dowager looked at Jin Zijin for a long time without speaking.

The Emperor looked at him with complete relief.

Prince Qin appeared somewhat dumbfounded.

Jin Zijin turned around and looked at Prince Qin.

He smiled at Prince Qin and said, "Tingyu was raised by Father's side since he was young; Father personally taught him to read and write. Of the three of us, he is the one most like Father. Only someone like that can, like Father, bring a stable life to the people of Zhuzhao Country."

Only then did Prince Qin regain his composure, going from dumbfounded to at a loss.

He had long understood that there was no point in fighting for the throne, that living a lifetime as a carefree prince was much better, but his brother...

The Empress Dowager suddenly felt relieved and smiled lightly, saying, "I think... this way... it's good! As long as there's no fighting, no bloodshed, anything's fine. Emperor, what do you think?"

The Emperor nodded lightly, speaking with a trace of choked emotion, "If mother thinks it’s good, then it is good!"

"Yes! In that case, I can be at ease!" The Empress Dowager smiled and slowly closed her eyes.

Throughout her life, she protected the Emperor and the Emperor’s children until the end; now she could face her master in the afterlife.

...

In the twenty-ninth year of Changqing, the Empress Dowager passed away!

The Imperial City held a grand funeral for her, and she was buried in the Imperial Mausoleum.

The next month, the Emperor announced the appointment of his third son, Prince Qin, as Empress Dowager, and moved him along with the Crown Princess Consort and their concubines into Zhongcui Palace.

At the time, the Ministers of the Imperial Court were left puzzled.

Everyone knew that Zhongcui Palace was where the Crown Prince lived before reaching adulthood. As for the current Crown Prince, he had long since come of age, married, and had little princes. How could such a large family all move into Zhongcui Palace?

Not only was it against protocol, but that small Zhongcui Palace couldn’t accommodate so many people!

Yet soon, people stopped talking about this matter.

Shortly after Crown Prince Jin Tingyu moved into Zhongcui Palace, a tragic news came from the Imperial Mausoleum.

While the Emperor was paying respects on the seventh day after the Empress Dowager’s death, an accident occurred, and he died suddenly in the Imperial Mausoleum.

The entire nation was shocked!

The Crown Prince and Prince Ning rode through the night to the mausoleum upon hearing the news, arriving to find the Emperor’s body already cold; he had passed away some time ago.

How? How could this happen?

Jin Zijin raised his hand, lightly touching the Emperor’s face, cold to the touch.

Gu Youyou set down her medical kit; there was no longer any need to examine to know that the Emperor was dead.

"Father..."

The Crown Prince knelt before the Emperor’s bier, wailing with grief.

Jin Zijin turned his head and, suppressing his voice, said to Gu Youyou, "Determine the cause of his death!"

Gu Youyou nodded gently and began examining the Emperor’s body.

There were no obvious wounds on the body, nor any signs of sudden illness leading to abrupt death.