

Husband, Be a Gentleman Chapter 41-60

Chapter 41

The arrival of autumn added to the sombre atmosphere in the palace.

It was a windy morning, Pei Lam stood outside his chamber in thin white clothes.

Outside Pei Lam's chamber there were fresh blood on a wall. The empress had sent someone to kill one of Pei Lam's palace maids who was a spy and a secret lover of seventh prince.

Pei Lam could have saved the dead palace maid. He caught her reporting to seventh prince. She begged him to spare her life while she was being dragged to his courtyard. Why should he save her? She was another ant trapped in a cage who wasn't allowed to see her family and friends outside the palace. The wind blew through his cold body and he smiled, death was an escape for her.

'Xiao Lam, why are you standing here?' the empress asked. 'It's too windy, you'll be ill.'

Pei Lam didn't turn around, he continued to stare at the blood stain on a wall.

'I received news your imperial father is conscious,' the empress said. 'You should go and visit him. Seventh prince had been acting like a filial son by his bedside these past few days.'

'There's nothing good to see there,' Pei Lam said.

'You... this little boy!' the empress said.

'Imperial mother, aren't you tired?' Pei Lam asked.

'He's your imperial father!' the empress said.

Pei Lam turned around and looked sadly at his mother. 'Imperial mother, put your hand over your heart and ask yourself if you love imperial father.'

'What are you implying?' the empress asked.

'How much you love imperial father is how much I love him,' Pei Lam said. 'So I don't need to see if he's conscious.'

The empress couldn't refute her son's words. She and the emperor were married for more than twenty years but there was no love between them.

'Imperial mother, don't waste your energy anymore,' Pei Lam said.

'What are you saying?' the empress asked.

'Imperial mother, I'm tired,' Pei Lam said. 'I don't want to battle anymore.'

'You're insane!' the empress said.

Pei Lam let the wind blow through his tired heart.

'That day did you truly requested your imperial father to take away your crown prince position?' the empress asked.

Pei Lam nodded his head.

'I'll never let that happen!' the empress said. 'I've planned this future for you for many years. What do you mean you're not going to battle anymore? You must keep battling even if you don't want to.'

Pei Lam laughed coldly. 'Imperial mother, don't force me.'

The empress felt helpless. Was it her son who was standing in front of her? Why did he become a stranger?

'Imperial mother, it's windy,' Pei Lam said. 'Go back to your chamber.'

Pei Lam glanced at the blood stain on the wall again then he left his courtyard.

The following day news of the emperor was awake and alert spread outside the palace. It was rumored the emperor was deeply moved by the filial seventh prince who never left the emperor's bedside while the emperor was ill.

At Pei Jin's manor, Yan Shi Ning's body felt tired so she napped on the bed.

During the period the emperor was ill, Pei Jin was free. On those free nights he would bathe together with Yan Shi Ning, roll on the bed with her, let her nap and roll on the bed with her until dawn.

One of Pei Jin's guards knocked on the door. Pei Jin opened the door and the guard reported the news about the emperor being awake and alert.

Pei Jin closed the door after the guard left and returned to the bed.

Yan Shi Ning opened her eyes and looked at Pei Jin. 'The emperor's conscious?'

Pei Jin nodded his head. 'It's been three days, of course the emperor needs to be conscious again.'

'I'm waiting for the emperor's edict,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning felt lethargic, she didn't want to move her body but she didn't want Princess Kang Hua to live another peaceful day.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hand. 'Shi Ning, I want to hear how you feel about your father.'

Yan Shi Ning frowned. She knew Pei Jin was asking her before the emperor's edict if she wanted him to ask the emperor to spare her father's life.

'Although he's my father,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'We've lived together for two years but there's no love between us. I think only losing his prime minister position is too soft on him. He's the reason why my mother was killed. But he's still my father, I don't want him to lose his life.'

'I understand,' Pei Jin said. He hugged Yan Shi Ning. 'Shi Ning, don't worry. I'll ask imperial father to spare his life. Also, Yan Jing isn't someone who idly wait for death. Yan Jing looks like a weak man, but he wouldn't have kept his prime minister position all these years if he wasn't a capable man. That's why I think he'll do everything to save his own life.'

'What will he do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning tighter and he looked outside the window.

As Pei Jin expected, after Yan Jing heard the emperor was awake Yan Jing dressed and rushed to the palace to see the emperor.

The emperor was reading reports when Wang Fu Mu entered the emperor's chamber.

'Your majesty, Prime Minister Yan requests to see your majesty,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'I don't want to see him,' the emperor said.

Wang Fu Mu walked outside the emperor's chamber and Yan Jing begged Wang Fu Mu to persuade the emperor to see him.

Wang Fu Mu sighed and returned to the emperor's chamber. 'Your majesty, Yan Jing said he has something important to discuss with you.'

The emperor laughed coldly. 'He still has something important to discuss? Bring him in here.'

The emperor was amused Yan Jing dared to see him.

Yan Jing wore ordinary clothes, kowtowed in front of the emperor, cried and held up his folded prime minister uniform.

'Your majesty, I'm here to appease some of the injustices your majesty had to endure,' Yan Jing said.

'Appease me?' the emperor asked.

'Yes your majesty,' Yan Jing said. 'I'm not suited to be the prime minister. My wife and my youngest daughter has committed a grave offence against your majesty. That's why I came to see your majesty. I'm willing to resign to appease your majesty.'

'What you're saying is laughable,' the emperor said. 'Don't you know what the punishment is for deceiving an emperor? Death for everyone involved.'

'Your majesty, I was deceived too,' Yan Jing said. 'I didn't know anything about it.'

The emperor laughed coldly. Even if the imperial guards reported to him that Yan Jing wasn't involved in the deception, he was repulsed to see the Yan Jing who was crying and begging in front of him.

'Your majesty, I have another grievance I want to discuss with you,' Yan Jing said.

The emperor thought Yan Jing didn't understand boundaries.

'Your majesty, I want to divorce Kang Hua,' Yan Jing said.

'Do you think I'll spare you if you divorce her?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty, there is something you don't know,' Yan Jing said. 'Why I want to divorce Kang Hua has nothing to do with her offence. She had deceived me for many years and committed adultery with another man.'

The emperor looked at Yan Jing with contempt.

'Your majesty, the truth is Yan Shi Ting isn't my daughter,' Yan Jing said. 'Yan Shi Ting is Kang Hua and her older cousin's daughter. Kang Hua deceived me for more than sixteen years. I only found out the truth recently. I didn't think Kang Hua was this despicable. That's why I want

to divorce her. Your majesty, please grant my request. If your majesty doesn't believe me, you can send someone to investigate. If you discover I have lied to you then I'm willing to die.'

The emperor laughed at the sight of Yan Jing's hypocritical righteousness. He knew Yan Jing was someone who valued dignity and status. He didn't think there would be a day Yan Jing would cry and beg. Nor did he expect Kang Hua would dare to commit adultery and Yan Shi Ting wasn't Yan Jing's daughter.

'Your majesty, these past few days I've thought this is my retribution,' Yan Jing said. 'That year I abandoned my first wife and daughter and made them suffer... I have no confidence to face the past. Kang Hua is an unreasonable woman, I've suffered under her control for many years. But I can't swallow her adultery and deceit. Your majesty, I beg you to grant my request to let me divorce her. After divorcing her, I'll return to Xuan Qing and guard my first wife's grave until my death.'

Yan Jing acted pitiful in front of the emperor. He wasn't certain the emperor would spare his life and the emperor's silence made him more anxious.

'Yan Jing, I've underestimated you,' the emperor said. 'If what you said is true then you should accept this token from me and return home. Kang Hua has mistreated you like this then she doesn't need to live anymore. But she is the empress' sister and it's not good for this news to be spread outside. I'll let you deal with the situation discreetly.'

Yan Jing's body shook at the sight of the emperor's token, three long white fabrics. He understood the emperor wanted Kang Hua to die and keep Kang Hua's adultery a secret. If he couldn't expose Kang Hua's adultery then other people would think that it was his decision to kill Kang Hua and the emperor was innocent.

'Do you have anything else important to discuss?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty, I'll listen to your advice,' Yan Jing said.

The emperor laughed. 'You're a good man. After you have dealt with the situation, I'll let you return to Xuan Qing to be with your first wife.'

Yan Jing couldn't laugh freely as the emperor, he knew he would die before returning to Xuan Qing.

The emperor watched Yan Jing leave hopelessly and his ruthless heart cursed Yan Jing, 'Yan Jing, I did consider sparing your life. But you overestimated your intelligence. Do you dare to oppose my edict?'

Chapter 42

'Wang Fu Mu, summon the crown prince,' the emperor said.

'Yes your majesty,' Wang Fu Mu said.

Pei Lam who had not eaten for a few days, lost a lot of weight and walked weakly into the emperor's chamber.

'Other people dream of entering this chamber,' the emperor said. 'But you're impressive, you need an invitation before you're willing to enter this chamber.'

'Imperial father, your health is important,' Pei Lam said. 'It's not good for you to upset yourself out of bed.'

'You're the only one who understands this much,' the emperor praised.

'Imperial father, you taught me everything,' Pei Lam said.

The emperor threw a report at Pei Lam. 'Don't learn to act like ninth prince in front of me!'

Pei Lam didn't avoid the report and it hit his forehead. 'I envy ninth brother.'

The emperor gritted his teeth.

'If I was ninth brother,' Pei Lam said. 'Then imperial father wouldn't be angry. Ninth brother didn't visit your bedside but you didn't fault him for not being filial. It doesn't matter if ninth brother isn't sincere or distant, imperial father wouldn't care. That's why I envy ninth brother.'

'I don't care because he is no one in my eyes,' the emperor said.

'Is that so?' Pei Lam asked. 'Then imperial father, you should see me as no one too.'

'Bastard child!' the emperor said.

Pei Lam kowtowed in front of his father. 'Imperial father, please take away my crown prince position.'

Pei Lam hit his forehead on the floor.

The emperor felt his tenth son that he trained for many years had become a stranger.

'Tenth son... this is the third time you have asked me this!' the emperor said.

'Imperial father, I hope there won't be a fourth time,' Pei Lam said.

The emperor knocked over the teapot and cup. 'Tenth son! You're the crown prince I put a lot of energy to train for more than eighteen years! Yet you're asking me to take away your crown prince position. Are you willing to disappoint me?'

'Imperial father, I'm sorry,' Pei Lam said. 'But I don't want the throne and rule over the kingdom. Imperial father, seventh brother is the one who wants it. You should grant his wish. He's devoted and decisive, it makes him more suitable to be emperor than me.'

'Seventh prince?' the emperor asked. 'Devoted? He's a fraud! Who's seventh prince? I know him better than you. He's someone who has the most ulterior motives.'

The emperor struggled to stand. Wang Fu Mu rushed to the emperor's side but the emperor pushed him away.

'Everyone leave!' the emperor ordered.

'Crown prince, take care of the emperor,' Wang Fu Mu said to Pei Lam and left the chamber.

Pei Lam dismissed Wang Fu Mu's advice.

'Although seventh brother has ulterior motives,' Pei Lam said. 'But he hasn't committed any serious offences. But I've shamed imperial father beyond acceptable.'

'So you lied about Yan Shi Ting?' the emperor asked.

Pei Lam didn't deny his father's accusation.

'I didn't think there would be a day tenth son knows how to calmly lie,' the emperor said and laughed coldly. 'It doesn't matter, you shouldn't even dare to think about me taking away your position! I raised you from a child to an adult. I know what you're thinking like I know my own hand. I know your mother forced you to deceive me. Also, seventh prince isn't innocent in this deception either. I know clearly who purposely wanted to expose Yan Shi Ting. Seventh prince and Consort Mu knew about Yan Shi Ting's fake pregnancy long ago and they waited until the wedding to expose Yan Shi Ting. Their black hearts aren't innocent.'

The emperor hit the table. He acted stern with Pei Lam and appeared to favor Pei Zhang. But it wasn't his true heart.

The emperor hated situations out of his control. He knew Pei Lam was soft but Pei Lam was also capable, which was why he chose to train Pei Lam. He thought after he died, Pei Lam would have enough power to sit on the throne. But Pei Lam disappointed him before he died.

The emperor didn't trust Pei Zhang. Pei Zhang was someone who thought too highly of their intelligence, always manipulating situations

to benefit themselves and would do anything to gain favor like being stabbed unnecessarily to appear heroic in the eyes of the Dian Kingdom's citizens.

Pei Lam knew Pei Zhang would never satisfy their father's expectations. 'Imperial father, if you're not satisfied with seventh brother, there's still ninth brother.'

The emperor's deadly aura was emitted in all four directions.

'I will never allow ninth prince sit on the throne!' the emperor said.

'Why?' Pei Lam asked.

Pei Lam was curious why his father treated Pei Jin coldly for more than twenty years. He knew Pei Jin was intelligent and treated others fairly. If he could see Pei Jin's strengths then their father could also see Pei Jin's strengths.

'Tenth son, you only need to worry about being a good crown prince!' the emperor said. 'You're my heir, the kingdom will become yours.'

Pei Lam felt helpless to escape his cage. Would he ever even take one step out of his cage? He remembered the dead palace maid and a familiar suffocating sensation wrapped around his body.

Pei Lam stood. 'I don't want it!'

'Pei Lam!' the emperor said.

'Imperial father!' Pei Lam said.

'Do you want me to be angry to death?' the emperor asked.

Pei Lam cried, pulled out a dagger and stabbed his chest. 'Imperial father, don't force me!'

The emperor grabbed Pei Lam's hand. 'Pei Lam, what do you want to do?'

Pei Lam used his strength to stab the dagger deeper. 'Imperial father, I want you to grant my request.'

'Summon an imperial physician!' the emperor cried out.

Wang Fu Mu rushed into the emperor's chamber and realised that day was beautiful. Then he wondered if flowers were blooming in Pei Jin's manor.

Wang Fu Mu hid his thoughts and he acted concern in front of the emperor.

'Your majesty what happened?' Wang Fu Mu asked. 'Ah! Crown prince are you alright?'

That day news about the emperor taking away tenth prince's crown prince position faster than punishing the Yan Manor surprised many people.

The empress almost died to see her son return with blood on his chest. She collapsed on a chair after she read the emperor's edict in her son's hand, her son was no longer the crown prince.

The empress thought her eyes misread the emperor's edict. She had warned her son not to say any nonsense in front of the emperor. Why would the emperor grant their son's insane request?

'Bastard child!' the empress said. 'How many people do you want to kill?'

Pei Lam found peace amongst the chaos around him. After more than eighteen years in a cage, the door was opened. He could see sunlight, hear the sounds of birds chirping, smell the scent of blossoms and feel warmth enter his cold body. He had never felt as relaxed and happy as he did that day. He smiled like a fool because finally he escaped the cage.

At Pei Jin's manor, Yan Shi Ning couldn't believe the news about the crown prince.

'He's no longer the crown prince?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head.

'Then who will be the new crown prince?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'The emperor is keeping the crown prince position vacant,' Pei Jin said.

'Do you think it could be you?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin shook his head. 'It's alright, everything happened according to the plan. But there's something else...'

'What?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Shi Ning, imperial father asked Yan Jing to kill Princess Kang Hua,' Pei Jin said.

'Why would the emperor do that?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'It's hard to see imperial father's true motives,' Pei Jin said. 'Shi Ning, do you want to go to the Yan Manor and give Princess Kang Hua a memorable parting gift? We can let her see clearly whose hands she died under.'

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Of course we need to go. I want to see her die suffering.'

Chapter 43

Yan Jing spent days at home thinking about how to kill Kang Hua without witnesses.

Princess Kang Hua sat by the window and the sunlight shone on her grey hair strands. In the past she would pluck grey hair, but she knew there was no need to anymore.

Princess Kang Hua heard the door opened, she raised her head and she was surprised to see Yan Jing as much as she was surprised to see flowers blossomed during autumn.

A few nights ago most of the maids and servants ran away from the Yan Manor. Only the older maids and servants stayed because there was nowhere else for them to serve. So the Yan Manor was quiet enough for a door creak to sound loud.

Yan Jing threw a basket of three long white fabrics in front of Kang Hua. 'It's the emperor's edict, you can kill yourself.'

'Why should I?' Princess Kang Hua asked. 'Didn't the emperor ask you to kill me?'

'You should have killed yourself long ago!' Yan Jing said.

'Why should I die before you?' Princess Kang Hua said.

Yan Jing didn't want to admit he would be killed after Kang Hua died. 'I told you, I'm not going to die with you!'

Princess Kang Hua laughed coldly.

Yan Jing regretted he couldn't kill someone with his own hands. 'If you kill yourself, I'll take care of your bastard child.'

Princess Kang Hua prolonged ingesting the bottle of poison because her heart wasn't at ease about Yan Shi Ting.

Princess Kang Hua didn't get a chance to accept Yan Jing's bribe, an old maid entered the chamber.

'Master, ninth prince's wife is here,' the old maid said.

Yan Jing ignored the resentment in Kang Hua's eyes.

'It's your choice,' Yan Jing said and left the chamber.

Yan Shi Ning was surprised at the quiet and dirty state of the Yan Manor. It was different to the first day she arrived at the Yan Manor two years ago. That day the arrogant Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting waited for her at the entrance of the Yan Manor between the clean two lion statues. Afterward for two years, Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting always reminded her that she was eating and living in their home.

An old maid escorted Yan Shi Ning to the courtyard and she sat opposite her father.

The old maid poured tea for Yan Shi Ning, she drank it and thought it didn't taste half as delicious as it did two months ago.

'Shi Ning, this is a bad time for you to visit,' Yan Jing said.

Yan Jing didn't want his daughter to see the poor state of the Yan Manor.

Yan Shi Ning smiled gently at her father. 'Father, a few days ago my body was unwell and I couldn't come to visit sooner.'

Yan Jing saw how much his daughter looked like Dung Thi and he sighed sadly. 'Shi Ning, all these years have you ever resented me?'

Yan Shi Ning was surprised by her father's question and quietly drank tea.

Yan Jing knew his daughter's silence meant she did resent him. 'You have the right to resent me. I'm to blame for everything that has happened.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't want to hear her father's regrets. 'The emperor... did father receive an edict from the emperor?'

Yan Shi Ning knew her question was as rhetorical as her father's earlier question.

Yan Jing wanted to leave at least one good impression of him in front of his daughter. 'I don't know what the emperor will do. But I've resigned and the emperor gave his permission for me to return to Xuan Qing.'

Yan Shi Ning felt a little pity to see an old man chased away from the imperial court. 'That's good. When I married ninth prince, people told me to live a peaceful life. Father, distancing yourself from the imperial court will let you live a peaceful life. Having power is good but it comes with anxiety.'

Yan Jing lowered his head and drank tea. He didn't think his daughter could be that kind.

'I heard little sister's health is poor,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I came here to visit little sister.'

'Shi Ning, there's nothing good for you to see,' Yan Jing said.

'Father, she's still my little sister,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning put the cup on table and she walked to the gardens.

In the gardens Yan Shi Ting was dribbling and smiling at the sky like a fool. She saw Yan Shi Ning in front of her and grabbed Yan Shi Ning's dress.

'You hurt me!' Yan Shi Ting said.

Yan Shi Ning felt guilty seeing the beautiful Yan Shi Ting became a fool. But Yan Shi Ting's shrieks scared her and she stepped back from Yan Shi Ting.

'Shi Ting, let go of my dress,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ting teared off a sleeve of Yan Shi Ning's dress. The dress was one of the new expensive dresses Lady Su's dressmakers delivered to Pei Jin's manor. She didn't get to pity her dress because Yan Shi Ting was touching the collar of her dress.

Yan Shi Ting thought she found a treasure.

'What a beautiful dress,' Yan Shi Ting said.

Yan Shi Ning felt relieved Yan Shi Ting wasn't going to tear the other sleeve off her dress.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ting grabbed Yan Shi Ning's collar. 'This is my dress! Take off my dress! You're a bad person! You stole my dress!'

Yan Shi Ning pushed Yan Shi Ting away from her and took many steps back.

Yan Shi Ting fell on the ground and cried loudly. 'You're a bad person! You want to hurt me! Why do you want to hurt me? Why? I'm the crown prince's wife!'

Yan Shi Ning heard Yan Shi Ting was insane but she didn't know how insane until she witnessed Yan Shi Ting's crying one moment and laughing the next moment.

'Shi Ting, I'm truly sorry,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I didn't think I'll cause you to become like this. But don't worry, after she dies, I'll take good care of you.'

Yan Shi Ning left Yan Shi Ting in the gardens to look for her mother's killer.

After Yan Shi Ning left, Pei Lam stepped out from the shadows. He watched Yan Shi Ting sit on the ground while tearing petals and leaves off flowers.

'Big brother crown prince, I love big brother,' Yan Shi Ting said to the flower. 'Big brother, do you love me?'

'Um,' Pei Lam said.

'Then in the future will you marry me?' Yan Shi Ting asked the flower.

'Um,' Pei Lam said.

Pei Lam couldn't believe the Yan Shi Ting in front of him was the same young girl with bright eyes in his memories. He thought those early childhood years were beautiful.

Yan Shi Ting felt that someone was standing behind her. She turned around and smiled. She stood and grabbed Pei Lam's sleeve. 'Big brother crown prince, you're here. I knew big brother would come.'

Pei Lam let Yan Shi Ting wrap her arms around his neck.

Yan Shi Ting felt happy. 'Big brother crown prince, do you know long I waited for big brother? I thought big brother wouldn't come. Big brother crown prince, why isn't big brother talking? Is it because you don't love Shi Ting? Big brother crown prince, you can't hate Shi Ting. Shi Ting will be the crown prince's wife.'

Yan Shi Ting remembered something and began to take off her dress. 'Big brother crown prince, today my dress is easy to take off. Big brother come behind me. I know big brother loves that position the most-'

Pei Lam hands squeezed Yan Shi Ting's neck.

Yan Shi Ting tried to push away the hands around her neck, but the hands were too strong. She gasped for air and felt like she was slowly choking.

A while later Yan Shi Ting stopped struggling. She silently cried, suspicions were gone and everything beautiful died. Why was the crown prince crying? She wanted to wipe his tears but she had no strength left.

Pei Lam's hands let go of Yan Shi Ting's neck and he silently cried.

'For you dying is better than living,' Pei Lam said. 'If you die, you can escape.'

Afterward the body of one of the imperial city's beauties fell into cold water. But Yan Shi Ting's eyes were wide opened as though she was asking, 'Big brother crown prince, why did you kill me?'

Pei Lam stood in the gardens, pulled out an old letter and teared it to pieces, 'Big brother crown prince, I'll open the small western door of the Yan Manor. If big brother wants me, big brother can come there to find me. I'm waiting for you.'

Chapter 44

Yan Shi Ning entered Princess Kang Hua's chamber.

The chamber was quiet and dusty. Princess Kang Hua glanced at Yan Shi Ning and Princess Kang Hua laughed coldly. She couldn't believe Princess Kang Hua wanted to enter a grave arrogantly.

'Why did you come here?' Princess Kang Hua asked coldly.

'I came to see how you'll die,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Princess Kang Hua pursed her lips.

Yan Shi Ning noticed the white fabrics on the table. 'The past few days I thought about how you're feeling. Do you feel like you've lost everything?'

Princess Kang Hua heard Yan Shi Ning's condescending tone. She turned to look at Yan Shi Ning who no longer acted gentle instead looked down on her. The way Yan Shi Ning smiled coldly was the same way Yan Shi Ning smiled at her on Yan Shi Ting's wedding day.

Princess Kang Hua stood straight. 'It was you!'

'What do you think?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Why?' Princess Kang Hua asked.

'Why?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'Shouldn't I be the one asking you why?'

Princess Kang Hua took a step back.

'Why did you poison my mother to death?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'My mother never fought with you. Why did you kill my mother?'

Yan Shi Ning couldn't control the pain in her heart. She couldn't kill Princess Kang Hua and couldn't stop her tears from falling.

'She deserved to die!' Princess Kang Hua said. 'Who is she to dare to compete with me? She's only scum.'

'You're scum!' Yan Shi Ning said. 'You stole someone else's husband. You committed adultery, you're deceitful and shameless!'

'She deserves to die!' Princess Kang Hua said. 'She's scum. Who is she to deserve him? I'm a princess, why do I need to lower myself under a scum and be a second wife? It's an insult to me! Scum like her deserves to die! I should have killed her earlier! Each day she lives is another day of insults to me! You should die too! You and your mother are scums and deserve to die!'

Yan Shi Ning slapped Princess Kang Hua's cheek.

'You're the one who deserves to die!' Yan Shi Ning said. 'You're a woman who has a cruel snake heart!'

Princess Kang Hua was startled by Yan Shi Ning's slap.

'This is your retribution,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Your big sister betrayed you and your only daughter is insane. The husband you stole is the man who gave you these white fabrics. You've lost everything and left with two empty hands. Kang Hua, do you know how I wanted you to die after I found out you killed my mother? Didn't you want your daughter to be the crown prince's wife? I stopped your daughter from marrying the crown prince. Didn't you want to steal my mother's husband? I made certain he turned his back on you. Didn't you always want to maintain your arrogance? I kicked you onto dirt. I won't let you die peacefully. I want you to lose everything you cared about. I want you to die suffering. I want you and everyone you care about to pay for killing my mother.'

'You're dreaming-' Princess Kang Hua said.

'Second mistress fell into the well!' an old maid cried out from outside the chamber. 'Madam, second mistress died!'

Princess Kang Hua pushed Yan Shi Ning away and ran outside.

'What did you say?' Princess Kang Hua asked.

'Madam, second mistress died,' the old maid said.

'Where is she?' Princess Kang Hua asked in a shaky voice.

'Second mistress... she's in the gardens...' the old maid stuttered.

Princess Kang Hua ran to the gardens and a shocked Yan Shi Ning followed Princess Kang Hua.

At the well, the old maids and servants were finding a way to pull Yan Shi Ting out of the well.

Yan Jing stood away from the well, he didn't know if he was happy or sad.

Princess Kang Hua pushed the old maids and servants out of the way. She looked down at her daughter who died with her eyes opened and she screamed loudly.

'Shi Ting!' Princess Kang Hua cried out. 'My daughter! Who did this? Who?'

Princess Kang Hua looked at everyone around the well.

'Madam, I don't know who,' Yan Shi Ting's personal maid said. 'Earlier ninth prince's wife came to the gardens to see second mistress. Then I went to brew medicine for second mistress in the kitchen. When I came back here, I didn't see second mistress anywhere. So I walked around the gardens and found second mistress dead in the well. I don't know who killed second mistress.'

Princess Kang Hua turned around and she wanted to kill Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning stepped back away from Princess Kang Hua.

'I didn't kill her,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'She's like this and you still didn't spare her!' Princess Kang Hua said. 'I want to kill you!'

Princess Kang Hua pulled out a dagger and stabbed Yan Shi Ning's chest.

Xiao Zai jumped out of the shadows and pushed Princess Kang Hua away from Yan Shi Ning.

'Shi Ning!' Yan Jing cried out.

Princess Kang Hua stood up from the ground. 'I should have killed you sooner! That year I killed your mother, I should have killed you too! You're a cruel demoness! I want to kill you!'

Yan Jing thought he misheard Kang Hua's words. What that year killed your mother? What did that mean?

Yan Shi Ning's chest hurt and her face whitened. 'Didn't you try to kill me? You used Fu Gui to poison me.'

'Fu Gui?' Princess Kang Hua asked and looked confusedly at Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning was confused why Princess Kang Hua didn't know what Fu Gui was.

'Shi Ning, how did your mother die?' Yan Jing asked.

'How my mother died?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'She ordered widow Li to poison my mother to death!'

'Widow Li?' Yan Jing asked. 'How is that possible?'

Yan Shi Ning laughed coldly. 'Father, didn't you know you've been living with a cruel woman for many years? Even now, do you truly don't know you married a black hearted woman?'

Yan Jing was saddened by his daughter's look of hatred toward him.

Yan Shi Ning cried. 'I have a good father. My father let my innocent mother be killed. My mother was killed by you and that woman!'

'That's why she wants to take revenge on her father and me,' Princess Kang Hua said and she laughed bitterly. 'Yan Jing, did you hear your daughter say she hates you? Yan Jing, you're in your position today because of your good daughter. Everything was her plan. She sent the letters, she's the one that ruined our marriage and she's the one that killed Shi Ting! Yan Jing open your eyes and look at your good daughter. She destroyed everything you have.'

Yan Jing heard everything and his heart froze. He didn't want to believe his daughter did everything Kang Hua said. In that moment he felt like he lived his whole life in vain and everything bad that happened was his retribution.

'Shi Ning, go home,' Yan Jing said and looked at his daughter for the last time.

A lot of blood flowed out of Yan Shi Ning's stab wound. She felt her body weakened, the sky darkened and she fainted.

'Mistress!' Xiao Zai cried out.

Xiao Zai ran to Yan Shi Ning and carried her to the horse carriage. He knew after they returned to the manor, ninth prince was going to skin him alive.

After Yan Shi Ning left the Yan Manor, Yan Jing ordered the servants to bound and lock Kang Hua in her chamber.

Later that night Yan Jing gathered all the old maids and servants. He poured wine for everyone until they were all drunk and collapsed on the

table. Then he used the three white fabrics to make a noose and suspend it from the ceiling of Kang Hua's chamber.

Yan Jing wrapped the noose around the bound Kang Hua's neck. She screamed but he stabbed her heart with a dagger and she died.

Yan Jing picked up the small bottle on Kang Hua's table, lit the Yan Manor on fire and ingested everything in the small bottle.

Before Yan Jing died, he remembered the ten years he studied and Dung Thi was by his side. She loved him, cooked for him and supported him. He wanted to give her everything in the world, money, status and for everyone to envy her. He studied day and night and thirsted for success. Finally he passed the imperial examination, earned money and status. But afterward his fate changed for the worst, he lost her... he watched the fire burn everything and everyone inside the Yan Manor and he laughed. Everything that happened in the past became a dream. If that was so then he accepted all his wasted energy to pursue everything was pointless.

Chapter 45

Xiao Zai carried Yan Shi Ning to Bei Dou's chamber.

Bei Dou was scared to death to see the unconscious Yan Shi Ning.

Xiao Zai put Yan Shi Ning on the bed and he explained to Bei Dou what happened at the Yan Manor.

'Go and run to the palace to tell Pei Jin,' Bei Dou said.

Xiao Zai rushed out of Bei Dou's chamber to the horse carriage.

Bei Dou was scared how Pei Jin would react to the news about Yan Shi Ning being injured.

Bei Dou washed his hands and was prepared to examine and clean Yan Shi Ning's wound. But he looked at the wound on her chest then he looked out the window. He saw a maid and summoned the maid.

'You come here,' Bei Dou said.

Bei Dou vaguely remembered the maid. He had seen her often in the gardens. She calmly helped examine Yan Shi Ning even though Yan Shi Ning's chest was bleeding.

'Have you washed your hands properly?' Bei Dou asked.

'Yes,' Xiao Tu said.

'Firstly, take off ninth prince's wife's dress,' Bei Dou said.

'The dress is stuck to mistress' chest,' Xiao Tu said.

'Use scissors to cut off her dress,' Bei Dou said.

'Yes,' Xiao Tu said.

'Use the bowl of water and cloth I prepared to clean her wound,' Bei Dou said.

'Yes,' Xiao Tu said.

'What colour is the blood?' Bei Dou said.

Xiao Tu passed a piece of Yan Shi Ning's dress to Bei Dou.

'Good, she's not poisoned,' Bei Dou said. 'You can bandage her wound.'

'Done,' Xiao Tu said.

Bei Dou dared to turn around and he checked Yan Shi Ning's condition.

Bei Dou was scared to see how much blood Yan Shi Ning lost. He was surprised the maid was calm while seeing that much blood.

Bei Dou decided the maid was suitable to help him examine people in the Yan Manor when they were ill or injured. After he was certain Yan Shi Ning's condition was stable, he and the maid walked outside his chamber.

Bei Dou looked at the maid who was staring at him strangely. She stepped closer to him and vomited on his clothes.

'Gentleman Bei, the sight of blood makes me queasy,' Xiao Tu said and fainted.

Bei Dou looked at his dirty clothes and the 'calm' maid who fainted on his chest, he realised he overestimated her calmness.

Inside the horse carriage, Xiao Zai gripped Xiao Hui's collar and Xiao Zai cried pitifully.

'I'll be dead soon,' Xiao Zai said. 'Ninth prince is going to skin me. What do I do?'

Xiao Hui endured Xiao Zai's tears that were dirtying his clothes.

'Don't worry,' Xiao Hui said.

'Will you help me beg ninth prince to be merciful toward me?' Xiao Zai asked.

'No,' Xiao Hui said. 'I promise I'll burn joss sticks on the anniversary of your death.'

'Thank you,' Xiao Zai said. 'You need to keep the joss sticks for your grave too.'

Early that morning Pei Jin and Pei Zhang was summoned to the palace. Pei Jin was relieved the imperial court meeting finally ended after two shichen hours. But Pei Zhang asked to escort Pei Jin to the palace gates.

Pei Jin thought it was true if someone received good news, their body would emit a happy aura like Pei Zhang. Although the crown prince

position was vacant, Pei Zhang acted like 'if father isn't going to pick me then who can me pick?'

'Ninth brother, I didn't think there would be a day tenth brother would be in this unfortunate position,' Pei Zhang said.

Pei Jin smiled politely and he didn't offer his opinion.

Pei Zhang purposely baited Pei Jin. He gave Pei Jin an opportunity to gain his favor. But Pei Jin insulted him by not taking the bait. 'Last time I looked for ninth brother to drink wine, ninth brother declined. Ninth brother, are you free to drink today?'

'I'm free today but I'm scared I'll waste seventh brother's free time,' Pei Jin politely declined.

Pei Zhang frowned. Pei Jin dared to reject him again, but at least Pei Jin appeared more regretful than last time. He didn't understand why an unfavored prince refused to support any sides. He wondered if Pei Jin truly wanted to be a carefree gentle ninth prince.

Pei Zhang smiled and forgave Pei Jin's rejection. He remembered one of Pei Jin's servants accidentally revealed the news about Yan Shi Ting's fake pregnancy and it helped him oppose the empress and the Yan Manor. 'Ninth brother, thank you.'

Pei Jin acted confused. 'Seventh brother, why are you thanking me?'

Pei Zhang looked at Pei Jin's confused face and he felt happier. He decided he would find more ways to make good use of Fu Qing.

Pei Jin watched Pei Zhang walked away confidently then Pei Jin walked outside the palace gates.

Outside the palace gates Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai were waiting for Pei Jin.

'Ninth prince, finally you're outside the palace,' Xiao Zai said and cried.

'What happened?' Pei Jin asked and his intuition warned him it was bad news.

'Ninth prince, your wife is injured,' Xiao Hui said.

Nearby Pei Zhang was surprised to see the usually calm Pei Jin was panicking and leapt into the horse carriage... all these years it was the second time he had seen Pei Jin panicked. The first time was after Consort Chen died. He realised Pei Jin was sentimental about women. An image of the gentle Yan Shi Ning entered his head and he signalled one of his guards. 'Go and find out what happened to ninth prince's wife.'

Pei Jin rushed home and he looked for Bei Dou.

Bei Dou had changed into clean clothes, carried Yan Shi Ning to hers and Pei Jin's chamber then he waited for Pei Jin in the courtyard.

'How is my wife?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou pushed Pei Jin's hand away from his collar. 'She couldn't die.'

Pei Jin thought Bei Dou knew how to use a sharp tongue to choke a person speechless. But he knew it meant Yan Shi Ning wasn't in a serious condition.

Pei Jin ran to the bed and Bei Dou followed Pei Jin.

'Where is she injured?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou hesitated to reply.

'Where?' Pei Jin asked.

'Chest,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin grabbed Bei Dou's collar again. 'You bandaged her wound?'

Bei Dou raised his innocent hands. 'It wasn't me.'

Pei Jin let go of Bei Dou's collar. 'I knew you wouldn't dare.'

Bei Dou ignored Pei Jin's mockery of him because he knew Pei Jin's heart was hurting.

Pei Jin sat on the bed and touched Yan Shi Ning's forehead.

'Is it serious?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou frowned. 'If the wound was lower by a hand, it would have been serious.'

Pei Jin was confused. What lower? Below the chest was the stomach. Stomach? He didn't understand why a stomach injury would be more serious than a chest injury.

Bei Dou saw Pei Jin's confusion turned into joy.

'You guessed right,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin's eyes shone brightly.

Yan Shi Ning dreamt about when she was a six-year-old girl. In a garden planted for young children there were many young trees that blossomed every ten years and bear fruits twelve years later. She asked the elders to let her take one young trees home to plant it in her mother's garden.

The elders advised the six-year-old Yan Shi Ning many things. 'Xiao Ning, you need to take good care of this young tree. The fate of the young tree will grow up like its master's fate.'

Yan Shi Ning listened to the elders' advice. Each day she would run to her mother's garden and water her young tree. But one day she didn't see her young tree in her mother's garden, Pei Jin's goat ate her precious young tree!

In Yan Shi Ning's dream, her forgotten young tree grew tall and strong after twelve years. She smiled, climbed the tree and picked fruits. Then the ground disappeared and she fell.

In Yan Shi Ning's unconscious state she cursed Pei Jin, 'MF Pei Jin, you dug up my precious young tree again!'

Yan Shi Ning felt like a sharp dagger stabbed her chest. Her chest ached and she touched her chest.

'Don't touch!' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning opened her eyes and saw Pei Jin was sitting on the bed next to her. The sunlight shone through the window and warmed the room. But his face looked a little anxious. Suddenly she remembered her chest injury and her head ached.

Yan Shi Ning's head ached because she remembered Pei Jin's instructions before he travelled to the palace.

'I have a guard at the Yan Manor,' Pei Jin said. 'If Yan Jing prepares to kill Princess Kang Hua, the guard will send news to our home. Then we'll go to the Yan Manor together. Shi Ning, you can't go on your own. Princess Kang Hua's in a fragile state since Yan Shi Ting became insane. No one can predict what can happen. Shi Ning, if you want to go to the Yan Manor, you have to go with me. Understand?'

At that time she nodded her head and promised Pei Jin. But Pei Jin's guard sent news about Yan Jing preparing to kill Princess Kang Hua and she couldn't wait for Pei Jin to return from the palace.

Yan Shi Ning was worried Princess Kang Hua would die before Pei Jin returned. So Yan Shi Ning decided to bring Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai with her to the Yan Manor. But Xiao Hui wasn't at the manor and only Xiao Zai followed her to the Yan Manor.

'Shi Ning, how should I punish you?' Pei Jin asked.

'I'm injured,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'If you listened to me then you wouldn't be injured,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning saw Pei Jin was being stern with her. She quietly pulled the blanket up to hide her face but he stopped her.

'Pei Jin, what do you want to do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Let me see your wound,' Pei Jin said.

Earlier Bei Dou told Pei Jin if the dagger stabbed a little deeper, it would have stabbed Yan Shi Ning's heart. Luckily Xiao Zai was there to push Princess Kang Hua away before the dagger stabbed her chest deeper.

Pei Jin looked at Yan Shi Ning's chest wound and his heart ached. He wanted to touch her wound but he was scared it'll hurt her.

'Does it hurt?' Pei Jin asked.

'It hurts a lot!' Yan Shi Ning lied.

After Yan Shi Ning drank the medicine Bei Dou brewed for her, she didn't feel any chest pain. But she needed to act pitiful in front of Pei Jin so he wouldn't think of a primitive way to punish her.

Pei Jin turned his head to the door. 'Bei Dou! Didn't you say you gave my wife medicine to numb the pain?'

Outside the chamber, Bei Dou was suspicious why the medicine didn't work.

'Pei Jin... honestly it only hurts a little,' Yan Shi Ning confessed.

Pei Jin realised Yan Shi Ning fooled him. 'Wife, you're improving each day. Not only did you not listen to me but you learned how to fool me. Wife, wait and see how I'll punish you.'

Yan Shi Ning was thinking of what to say when Pei Jin hugged her gently.

Pei Jin was overjoyed and whispered in Yan Shi Ning's ear. 'Shi Ning, we conceived a child together.'

Chapter 46

Yan Shi Ning stared at her stomach.

Yan Shi Ning rubbed her stomach like a fool. 'I'm pregnant?'

'It explains why you've been tired lately,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning thought she couldn't be pregnant that soon. She wondered if hers and Pei Jin's child was inside her.

Yan Shi Ning's stomach didn't look like it changed but she felt a strange change. 'Pei Jin, should I give birth to this child?'

'What?' Pei Jin asked.

'Princess Kang Hua and the empress used Fu Gui to poison me because they hoped I would die pregnant... wait, something's not right. Pei Jin, I remembered something. Pei Jin, when I was at the Yan Manor I asked Princess Kang Hua about it and her reaction was strange...'

'Shi Ning, are you saying that someone else poisoned you?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head.

'Who?' Pei Jin asked.

'Yan Shi Ting gave me the incense sticks,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'She said the empress gave them to her. It can't be the empress. Princess Kang Hua and the empress are fishes in the same net. If the empress wanted to kill me then the empress wouldn't hide it from Princess Kang Hua.'

Yan Shi Ning couldn't believe there was someone else behind Princess Kang Hua and the empress who wanted to kill her.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hand. But his eyes saddened, he thought of who else would want to kill her.

Pei Jin thought if Princess Kang Hua didn't try to kill Yan Shi Ning then it could also be possible the empress didn't kill Consort Chen. But Bei Dou said Fu Gui was rare and hard to make so an ordinary person couldn't possess Fu Gui.

Pei Jin's heart constricted, he had followed the wrong suspect for a long time. He wondered who could have such a cruel heart to make him suffer for many years. The cruel hearted person he thought of was his father and his back turned cold.

'Pei Jin, what are you thinking?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I think perhaps it's imperial father who killed Consort Chen and who also tried to kill you,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning's heart ached for Pei Jin. She had never seen him that sad before. She knew the emperor was cold toward Pei Jin. But if the emperor was the culprit then the emperor wanted Pei Jin to lose his wife and child. It meant the emperor held a big grudge against Pei Jin.

Pei Jin didn't fight for or requested anything from the emperor. Yan Shi Ning thought if it truly was the emperor then it would be no different from the emperor using a dagger to cut Pei Jin into small pieces. She didn't care about her chest injury, she sat up, hugged Pei Jin and kissed his lips.

'Pei Jin, it's alright,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'You don't need to think about it anymore. You still have your little lion and a little lion cub here with you.'

Pei Jin felt like he was falling into an abyss. But Yan Shi Ning hugged him, kissed him and saved him from the abyss. He buried his head on her neck and greedily stole her warmth.

Pei Jin's father had been cold toward him since he was a child and in the palace only Consort Chen gave him a little warmth. Consort Chen's death when he was a twelve-year-old made him felt the world around him darkened. Then his teacher took him out of the palace to Xuan Qing. In his darkest period a little girl entered his dark tunnelled heart and into his world.

Pei Jin remembered clearly the first time he saw Yan Shi Ning. Her hair was messy, her dark eyes, her messy dress and her chubby arms. She clearly was a naive little girl but acted wise and tough. After she knew

he was teasing her, her face puffed like a lion's mane and she widened her eyes like she wanted to jump onto him to bite him. In that moment he thought she looked like a provoked little lion... his little lion. It didn't matter if she was in Xuan Qing or in the imperial city acting like a gentle lady, she was still his little lion. No one forced him to love his little lion, his heart willingly loved her deeply.

At the beginning Pei Jin thought it was amusing to tease the naive Yan Shi Ning. She was the only one in his life who laughed and ignored him at will. He didn't know why later his heart slowly changed. After the emperor betrothed him to Lady Yewu, he didn't feel anything. But after Lady Yewu died, his heart felt relieved and missed the little lion who was living in Xuan Qing. He thought his little lion would have matured.

Pei Jin wasn't certain if he volunteered to go help prevent serious flooding in Xuan Qing to avoid the palace battles or if he only wanted to see Yan Shi Ning. He could have stayed at a villa in Xuan Qing but he ran to his teacher's house that was next to Yan Shi Ning's house and during the nights he would wake her up and force her to pour tea for him. He thought it would be good if she was always by his side even if she gritted her teeth and glared at him, he was willing for her to become an adult then he would marry her.

Pei Jin first thought about marrying Yan Shi Ning six years ago, but he buried that thought. He was a prince and his father wouldn't allow him to marry her as his official wife. He didn't want her to lower herself and be his second wife and her personality didn't suit the palace.

After Pei Jin travelled to Southern Jiang, he found out Yan Shi Ning's mother died and she moved to the Yan Manor. He sent some of his guards to secretly gather news about Yan Shi Ning at the Yan Manor. His guards reported to him that Yan Shi Ning's status in her family prevented her from finding a suitable husband and it made him happy. He planned after he finished his duties in Southern Jiang he would return to the imperial city and marry her. But before he finished his duties he received news about the crown prince and Yan Shi Ting and

he immediately ran back to the imperial city... he wasn't going to allow seventh brother to marry his little lion as a concubine.

Pei Jin knew Yan Shi Ning only showed her real self to him like how he only took off his mask in front of her.

Pei Jin nibbled Yan Shi Ning's earlobe and whispered in her ear. 'Wife, it's the middle of the day but you miss your husband this much? Perhaps you want to do it with your husband.'

Yan Shi Ning wanted to console Pei Jin but after he whispered nonsense in her ear, she pushed him away from her. 'MF Pei Jin!'

Yan Shi Ning forgot about her chest injury, overexerted herself and her face whitened.

'Shi Ning, are you alright?' Pei Jin asked.

'My chest hurts,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'My stomach hurts. My whole body hurts.'

Pei Jin ran outside to call Bei Dou.

Bei Dou gave Pei Jin a bottle of pain relief cream. Pei Jin ran to the bed and gently rubbed the cream on Yan Shi Ning's chest wound. After she fell asleep, Pei Jin ran outside to ask Bei Dou about her pregnancy.

'When will my wife's chest wound heal?' Pei Jin asked.

'Two months,' Bei Dou said.

'Do I need to refrain from doing it with my wife while she's pregnant?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou nodded his head.

'When is it safe for me to do it with my wife?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou blushed but he realised it was a good opportunity to take a little revenge on Pei Jin. It was Pei Jin's fault for turning into someone with a missing brain.

'Fu Qing is a good place,' Bei Dou provoked. 'After your wife gives birth, her body needs time to recover. You can either choose to endure for a year or...'

Pei Jin angrily strode back to the bed while Bei Dou smiled... indeed ten years wasn't too late for a gentleman to take revenge. Bei Dou knew it was safe for a husband and wife to do it together after the first three months of pregnancy but he wasn't a fool to tell Pei Jin the truth.

Bei Dou was about to return to his chamber, but he bumped into the 'calm' maid.

'Gentleman Bei, have you been to Fu Qing?' Xiao Tu asked.

'No!' Bei Dou lied.

'Then why did you say Fu Qing is a good place?' Xiao Tu asked.

'I heard it was a good place,' Bei Dou lied.

Xiao Tu nodded her head. 'I knew Gentleman Bei wouldn't go to a place like Fu Qing.'

'That's right,' Bei Dou said.

Bei Dou wouldn't have gone to Fu Qing if Pei Jin didn't force him.

'I heard the food there is expensive,' Xiao Tu said. 'Gentleman Bei is a frugal person. Of course Gentleman Bei wouldn't go there to eat expensive food.'

'How am I frugal?' Bei Dou asked.

Xiao Tu's hand gestured at Bei Dou's clothes. 'Gentleman Bei, you wear the same black clothes every day throughout a year.'

Bei Dou was speechless. Who said he wore the same black clothes? He bought new clothes every year except it was the same colour and design.

Short Side Story Two

Gentleman Su: Is that you Bei Dou? Why are you free to visit me today?

Bei Dou looked at the ceiling.

Gentleman Su: Did you come to buy the same black clothes?

Bei Dou: I... want to choose a different colour and design.

Chapter 47

After a nap, Yan Shi Ning thought about the emperor's motives.

'Pei Jin, I'm not certain the emperor poisoned me,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Why?' Pei Jin asked.

'I don't know what the emperor's motives to poison me are,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin's head and heart were muddled earlier. Yan Shi Ning's logic reminded him that he forgot to think about his father's motives for poisoning Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's eyes shone at each other.

'Shi Ning, do you think it's that person too?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head. 'Perhaps that person used Princess Kang Hua in hope of using her to kill me. Besides, Princess Kang Hua didn't need to wait, she could have poisoned me the moment I arrived in the imperial city.'

'In the past Bei Dou and I had the same thought as you,' Pei Jin said. 'Then we thought perhaps she wanted you to die outside the Yan Manor to deflect suspicions... but looking at the past now, perhaps that assumption is wrong.'

Yan Shi Ning's chest hurt while remembering how viciously Princess Kang Hua stabbed her and she wondered if Princess Kang Hua was still alive.

'That's right,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If Princess Kang Hua wanted to kill me, she would have killed me at the Yan Manor.'

'Earlier like you,' Pei Jin said. 'I thought it was imperial father. But now I think it's that person, she has a motive to kill you.'

An image of the kind Consort Mu appeared in Yan Shi Ning's head and she sighed. 'Glancing at her, she seems like a kind person.'

'Shi Ning, do you remember what I told you about Consort Chen?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning remembered Pei Jin confided in her about how Consort Chen was poisoned by Fu Gui and she nodded her head.

'At that time I suspected there was something wrong about the fragrance of the incense sticks,' Pei Jin said. 'So I hid them but later they disappeared. Thinking about it now, I think she found out I hid them and sent someone to retrieve the incense sticks. I think Consort Mu knows that I know the incense sticks were poisoned.'

'That's why I think she wants borrow a dagger to kill me,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'She and seventh brother used Yan Shi Ting's fake pregnancy to oppose the empress and the crown prince,' Pei Jin said. 'They would do anything to eliminate anyone who poses a threat to them big or small.'

'Pei Jin, what should we do now?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin laid his hands on Yan Shi Ning's stomach. 'I need to ask someone to be certain who poisoned you. After I've confirmed it then I can plan what to do next.'

'Who do you need to ask?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'The empress,' Pei Jin said.

'The empress?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'If the empress denies it then it's possible Consort Mu is the culprit. But if the empress did it, would she admit it to you?'

'I have a way to make the empress tell me the truth,' Pei Jin said.

'Pei Jin, are you hiding anything else in your stomach?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hands and put them below his stomach. 'Inside your husband's stomach isn't hiding anything. But your husband is hiding something here.'

Yan Shi Ning's face flushed red. She pulled his hand to her mouth and bit hard. 'Even if you're about to die, you wouldn't know how to be serious.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't think Consort Mu would be so cruel only to ensure Pei Jin didn't have a son. She was worried if other people found out she was pregnant then something bad could happen to their child.

'I think it's not the right time for our child to be here,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, do you know what Bei Dou gave me after we got married?' Pei Jin asked.

'What?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'A remedy to prevent pregnancy,' Pei Jin said.

'Why didn't you use it?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'If I can't protect my wife and child,' Pei Jin said. 'Then I wasted more than twenty years of living.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't know why Pei Jin's stern tone warmed her heart.

'Pei Jin, do you want to be the emperor?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Yan Shi Ning, I want to see how you'll look as an empress and how you'll fool the world thinking you're a gentle empress,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin was a capable man. If he truly wanted to be emperor then she would support him. But she didn't expect him to be amused at the thought of them being the emperor and the empress.

'Then I don't want to be the empress,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If I'm the empress, I'm not allowed to move around while others bow in front of me. There's nothing amusing about being the empress.'

'Wife, if you'll be unhappy as the empress,' Pei Jin said. 'Then your husband will continue being a carefree prince.'

Yan Shi Ning was certain Pei Jin didn't want to be the emperor and she thought it was a pity to waste his abilities. She was curious how he would look wearing an emperor's clothes and sitting on the throne. But an emperor had more than three thousand concubines. That thought soured her heart.

'Shi Ning, you're injured so it gives you an alibi to stay at home and make it easier for you to hide that you're pregnant,' Pei Jin said. 'For the next year I'll feed you and wait for our child to be born. Wife, why must you be pregnant? How will I endure the nights? Wife, think about it. I can see you, touch you but I can't eat you. Isn't this a way to kill me?'

Yan Shi Ning laughed at Pei Jin's pitiful face. 'Pei Jin, you can marry a second wife.'

Pei Jin looked at Yan Shi Ning like he wanted to kill her.

Yan Shi Ning pouted her lips. 'I was being sincere.'

Pei Jin's hands held Yan Shi Ning's head. 'Wife, wake up! Don't dream during the day and speak nonsense!'

Yan Shi Ning didn't show that Pei Jin's words sweetened her heart.

'Pei Jin, how are you going to deal with the empress?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Shi Ning, do you want to know about Bei Dou's real identity?' Pei Jin asked.

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, do you know about what happened to the Think Household in the south?' Pei Jin asked.

'Think Household?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'Are you talking about the Think Household that was convicted of treason, their properties were seized and they were killed a few years ago?'

Yan Shi Ning was surprised when she heard how many horse carriages it took to carry all of the Think Household's properties to the palace.

'Bei Dou's real name is Think Kien Nan,' Pei Jin said. 'He's the oldest son and the thirteenth generation of the Think Household.'

Pei Jin remembered after Bei Dou saved his life, Bei Dou pointed to the south and asked him to call him Bei Dou. But Bei Dou's heart was in the north, Bei Dou wanted to kill the empress who framed and killed Bei Dou's family.

'Bei Dou didn't want to be a merchant like his father and ancestors,' Pei Jin said. 'He likes learning about medicine. When his family home was on fire, I saved him from the fire. He suffered burns on his body and it was hard to recognise him. Wife, didn't you always ask me why Bei Dou's face doesn't change expression? It's because his real face was burnt.'

'His... face?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘In the past he wore a mask,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Later in Southern Jiang, he met a master physician who gave him a new face. That’s why no one knows his real identity.’

‘Why did you save him?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘I met Bei Dou long ago,’ Pei Jin said. ‘At that time I was asked to perform duties outside the palace and I was attacked by assassins. It was Bei Dou who saved me. So when I knew about his family, I wanted to save his life.’

‘Did the Think Household commit treason?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘What happened to the Think Household involves the empress,’ Pei Jin said.

Chapter 48

‘If I didn’t save Bei Dou’s life then I wouldn’t have known the empress secretly used the Think Household’s support to secure the crown prince’s position,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Then why was the Think Household framed?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘It was a complicated situation,’ Pei Jin said. ‘The Think Household became too rich and powerful and imperial father became weary of the Think Household. The empress and the crown prince’s supporters found out about the emperor’s plan to investigate the Think Household so they sent people to frame the Think Household to get rid of evidence of their connection with the Think Household. But many court officials received bribes from the Think Household and those court officials were implicated too. Imperial father couldn’t demote almost half of his court officials so he could only sacrifice the Think Household, and the empress and the crown prince escaped death by association with someone convicted of treason.’

'Does that mean the empress and the crown prince betrayed the Think Household to protect themselves?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'That's right,' Pei Jin said. 'Imperial father only wanted to take away the Think Household's properties. He didn't intend to kill them because he didn't want another rebellion in Southern Jiang. But the empress and the crown prince framing the Think Household meant imperial father couldn't spare anyone from the Think household... Shi Ning, I want to tell you a secret that I haven't told anyone before.'

'What secret?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Shi Ning, apart from the emperor everyone else involved in this secret were killed,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning shivered.

'Shi Ning, my imperial grandfather intended for my imperial uncle to be emperor,' Pei Jin said. 'But my imperial father changed the name of imperial grandfather's intended heir to my imperial father's name.'

'Is that true?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin rubbed his chin.

'Pei Jin, the emperor sat on the throne before you were born,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'How did you find out?'

'My imperial uncle cryptically told me when I was a boy,' Pei Jin said. 'I didn't understand what his words meant until I became an adult.'

Pei Jin remembered how his father pretended to have a close bond with his imperial uncle, Prince Chen Nan.

Prince Chen Nan was the person who led army forces to conquer Southern Jiang. But after Prince Chen Nan returned to the imperial city he behaved like a carefree prince so citizens of the Dian Kingdom would forget about his contribution.

Up until Pei Jin was six years old, he was close to his imperial uncle who always tossed him in the air and asked about his life each time his imperial uncle returned to the imperial city. In the past he felt his imperial uncle was more of a father to him than his own father who never showed any affections toward him.

The empress gave birth to the crown prince when Pei Jin was six years old. His imperial uncle pretended he drank a lot of wine and carried him outside the palace, 'Xiao Jin, your uncle will take you horse riding.'

Pei Jin's imperial uncle held him tightly on a horse and his imperial uncle rode as fast as the wind.

'Xiao Jin, your imperial uncle loves you,' Prince Chen Nan said. 'But your uncle is powerless to help you. The crown prince is born, he'll become my imperial older brother's heir. It's a pity, I thought I could see you become emperor. In the past if I could predict the future then I wouldn't pretend I didn't know my imperial older brother, your father changed your imperial grandfather's edict... Xiao Jin, your imperial father... still thinks I don't know. Your imperial father has a rock head. All these years he never intended to spare me. If I wanted to be emperor then I wouldn't have given up control over my army forces. But why is your imperial father this cruel toward me? Xiao Jin, in the future you need to act close with your imperial father.'

Pei Jin was only a six-year-old boy, he didn't know if he misheard his imperial uncle's words while his imperial uncle rode the horse fast as the wind. At that time he didn't understand his imperial uncle's words. His imperial uncle brought him back to the palace after he was tired from horse riding.

'Xiao Jin, sit here and wait for your imperial uncle,' Prince Chen Nan said. 'I'm going to go ride my horse a little longer. In the past twelve years I haven't ridden a horse this comfortably. Xiao Jin, wait for me to come back.'

Pei Jin always remembered his imperial uncle's words that day because it was the last day his imperial uncle was alive.

That day Pei Jin waited a long time for his imperial uncle but he didn't see his imperial uncle return to the palace. He only saw imperial guards ran into the palace, but he didn't know what happened. He only knew his imperial uncle never appeared in front of him since that day. A long time later, he asked Consort Chen about his imperial uncle. Consort Chen told him his imperial uncle drank too much wine and rode a horse with a broken leg. His imperial uncle was flung off the horse and his head hit a rock and his imperial uncle died.

Yan Shi Ning held Pei Jin's hand while he was crying and telling her about Prince Chen Nan.

'Years later I sent guards to investigate my imperial uncle's life outside the imperial city,' Pei Jin said. 'I didn't expect my imperial uncle's presence as a twenty-year-old man had a deep impact on the people of Southern Jiang. There's a memorial in Southern Jiang to honor my imperial uncle. When I arrived in Southern Jiang, I stayed at a villa that my imperial uncle built. My imperial uncle was a good person... but my imperial father is a cruel person.'

Yan Shi Ning wondered if Pei Jin became emperor whether he would become ruthless like his father and kill anyone that was a threat.

'My imperial uncle's words helped warn me about my life in the palace,' Pei Jin said. 'He said he was powerless to help me, but it was him who helped me with everything. He told me the truth about my environment for me to protect myself and be a step ahead of other people. Shi Ning, you said I understand my imperial father. Of course I need to understand him if I want to survive under his reign.'

Pei Jin thought it was a tragedy for a father and son to live their whole lives being weary of each other.

'I know my imperial father used many schemes to obtain the throne,' Pei Jin said. 'Whoever was a threat to steal his throne would die a pitiful death. So he didn't hold a grudge against the crown prince after he found out the empress and the crown prince framed the Think Household. After my imperial father waited for the Southern Jiang

rebels to finally be subdued, he was disappointed the crown prince had no desire to be emperor.'

Yan Shi Ning shivered, the battles in the palace was scarier than the battles in the Yan Manor.

'Pei Jin, did the Think Household truly commit treason?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'No one knows for certain whether it's true or a lie,' Pei Jin said. 'Bei Dou wasn't involved in his family's trade so he didn't know what happened. Like other people, he only knew all his family members were killed. He's not certain if his family committed treason or if his family was the sacrifice to protect other people.'

'Pei Jin, how are you going to deal with the empress?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'If the empress didn't kill Consort Chen then I don't need to take revenge on the empress,' Pei Jin said. 'But Bei Dou resents the empress deeply. If it wasn't the empress, the crown prince and their supporters' betrayal then Bei Dou's family members wouldn't have died such pitiful deaths.'

'Pei Jin, are you saying that Bei Dou will deal with the empress?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Yes, I agreed with Bei Dou to let him deal with the empress,' Pei Jin said.

'What will he do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'In a few days the crown prince will leave the imperial city,' Pei Jin said. 'Bei Dou will use that opportunity as the first step of his plan. Shi Ning, what are you thinking?'

'I'm worried about what will happen to you... if someone finds out about Bei Dou's real identity then they'll report it to the emperor,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning was scared she would lose Pei Jin if the emperor found out Pei Jin saved Bei Dou's life.

'Shi Ning, don't worry,' Pei Jin said. 'We'll use all our abilities to protect Bei Dou's real identity.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning heard the sounds of a maid's footsteps running toward their chamber.

Pei Jin got out of the bed and stood in front of the door. 'What is it?'

'Ninth prince, earlier a messenger delivered news that the Yan Manor is on fire,' the maid said.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning looked concerned at each other.

That night the Yan Manor was destroyed. No one from the Yan Manor could be saved, other people could only stand at a distance and watch the Yan Manor being burned.

Yan Shi Ning's father's last words haunted her, 'Shi Ning, go home...'

Yan Shi Ning realised what her father's last words meant and she knew who lit the Yan Manor on fire. Her father protected her by destroying the Yan Manor.

Although Yan Shi Ning didn't kill Yan Shi Ting, but her father knew it would be hard for other people to believe she didn't kill Yan Shi Ting. If the witnesses at the Yan Manor reported what happened that day to the emperor then the emperor wouldn't spare her, Pei Jin and everyone else in Pei Jin's manor.

Yan Shi Ning was uncertain about her feelings toward her father that neglected her for years. He was also the man that her mother wanted to forget but couldn't forget while her mother was alive. She resented her father for years but he used his life to compensate her.

Yan Shi Ning's mother's death was avenged. Princess Kang Hua, her father, Yan Shi Ting and all the witnesses in the Yan Manor were dead.

Yan Shi Ning only had Pei Jin left in the world. She couldn't predict the future but she could use all her abilities to protect herself and those she cared about.

Chapter 49

Bei Dou's heart began to act strange.

Bei Dou thought it started since the day Yan Shi Ning was injured and he asked the 'calm' maid to clean and bandage Yan Shi Ning's chest wound. That day the 'calm' maid collapsed onto him after helping Yan Shi Ning, blood made her queasy. He had lived for more than twenty years but he didn't like being close to women. But the 'calm' maid's accidently collapsing onto him felt like he was struck by lightning.

From that day Bei Dou didn't know why he was aware of the 'calm' maid's presence. In the morning when he was practicing Kung Fu, he noticed she was carrying a tray of food somewhere nearby. In the afternoon when he walked outside to buy medicine, he noticed she was embroidering flowers. In the evening when he stood under a tree, he noticed she was climbing another tree to help retrieve a kite for another maid... he didn't know why but he was scared she would fall off the tree.

Bei Dou's fear came true, the 'calm' maid broke a branch and fell off the tree... he didn't know when he braced her fall until a group of maids surrounded him and he realised he was carrying her in his arms.

Bei Dou didn't know why he ran to brace the 'calm' maid's fall. He was someone who prioritized himself so after she stood steady on her feet, he wanted to walk away but she stopped him.

'Gentleman Bei, can you help me retrieve that kite?' Xiao Tu asked.

Bei Dou thought why he needed to help the 'calm' maid, he didn't have enough free time to help. But his body didn't cooperate with his

thoughts, he blinked and the kite was in his hands. His muddled head and body left the group of maids.

'Big sister Xiao Tu, I didn't think you would dare to talk to Gentleman Bei,' the first maid said.

'Big sister Xiao Tu, you even dared to ask Gentleman Bei to retrieve the kite,' the second maid said. 'Big sister, did you know that each time I see Gentleman Bei, I want to run away?'

'Big sister Xiao Tu, Gentleman Bei is no different from a demon,' the third maid said. 'I shiver each time I see him. It's alright if he doesn't say anything but it's scary to death if he speaks.'

'That's right,' the fourth maid said. 'What's scarier is why he helped big sister Xiao Tu retrieve the kite.'

'Gentleman Bei's strange behaviour is scarier than his usual scary self,' the fifth maid said. 'In the past he never glanced at a maid so it's strange he would help big sister Xiao Tu.'

While the group of maids were gossiping, Bei Dou stood nearby to eavesdrop. He finally found out the 'calm' maid's name was Xiao Tu. He waited half a day to hear what Xiao Tu said about him.

'Perhaps today Gentleman Bei ingested the wrong medicine,' Xiao Tu said.

Bei Dou took a step back and fell on the ground. What wrong medicine? He stood, returned to his chamber and thought deeply about Xiao Tu's words. He finally agreed he must have ingested the wrong medicine otherwise he wouldn't do something strange like brace her fall and help her retrieve a kite.

A few days later, Bei Dou's old personal maid returned to her country home to take care of her sick mother.

Pei Jin visited Bei Dou's chamber and asked him who he wanted to be his new personal maid. He didn't know what demon possessed him but he pointed at Xiao Tu who was passing by his chamber.

'I choose her,' Bei Dou said.

'I was only passing by,' Xiao Tu said.

'Bei Dou, did you point to the wrong maid?' Pei Jin asked.

'She has steady hands,' Bei Dou said. 'She'll be able to help me with many things.'

As a result of Bei Dou's words, Xiao Tu's belongings was moved to the chamber closest to Bei Dou's chamber. He was used to having his courtyard to himself, it was a strange feeling to live close to another person. He wanted to chase her away but he also didn't want her to leave. Besides, she was pleasant to look at.

Bei Dou put the bottles of remedies down on a table and he watched Xiao Tu familiarising herself with the medicine in the drawers.

Xiao Tu was wearing a blue dress. She tiptoed on a ladder step to open the higher drawers.

Bei Dou didn't know why his eyes were focusing on her exposed arms and why his heart was pounding.

'Gentleman Bei, where is the Xue Lian herbs?' Xiao Tu asked.

Bei Dou was flustered after being caught staring at Xiao Tu. 'It's the third drawer on the same level as the seventh rung.'

'Thank you Gentleman Bei,' Xiao Tu said. 'Also, Gentleman Bei did you buy new clothes?'

Bei Dou looked at his new brown clothes and nodded his head.

'Gentleman Bei, you're too young to suit wearing brown,' Xiao Tu said. 'You're young white skin suits wearing blue clothes like the same colour as my dress.'

Bei Dou wondered how soon Gentleman Su could make him ten new blue clothes.

Suddenly Bei Dou heard Xiao Tu cried out, he blinked and he didn't know when he braced her fall. His neck to his forehead turned red after he realised he was carrying her in his arms.

In that moment Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning walked into Bei Dou's chamber.

'I didn't see anything,' Pei Jin provoked.

Bei Dou glared at Pei Jin. Then Bei Dou heard Yan Shi Ning's demoness laugh so he put Xiao Tu onto the floor.

'Wife, someone is experiencing spring,' Pei Jin said.

'Husband, you're right,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Gentleman Bei is at the right age to marry and have children.'

'That's right,' Pei Jin said. 'It's my carelessness to forget. Wife, let's go outside for a stroll so we won't delay Gentleman Bei's progress.'

'Let's go,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Bei Dou's head spun at the sounds of the beautiful compatible pair mocking him. But Xiao Tu wasn't flustered because she didn't understand Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's words.

'You can leave,' Bei Dou said to Xiao Tu.

Xiao Tu obediently carried the bottle of Xue Lian and walked outside.

'Bei Dou, you have good vision,' Pei Jin praised. 'What's her name?'

'Xiao Tu!' Bei Dou said in a frustrated tone.

'Bei Dou, you certainly remember her name clearly,' Pei Jin provoked.

Bei Dou was also confused why he remembered Xiao Tu's name.

'She's Duan Ba Hou's granddaughter,' Pei Jin said. 'Duan Ba Hou met misfortune and sent her to my teacher. My teacher sent her to his acquaintance whom he saved their life. After my teacher's acquaintance died, she was sent to my manor. Although she's a maid, she's still a young lady from a prominent household so I arranged for her not to serve anyone. I intended to wait for her to age a little more before marrying her off to a good household. But now it appears I don't need to anymore.'

'I'm not marrying her!' Bei Dou said.

'I didn't ask you to marry her,' Pei Jin said. 'Why are you protesting?'

Bei Dou was speechless and his face flushed red.

'But if you're this resolute then I'll need to continue finding a good household for her,' Pei Jin provoked.

'You can't do that... I'm teaching her about medicine,' Bei Dou said. 'She's intelligent... it'll be a pity if she starts a family too soon... I want her to be my pupil.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning looked at each other then they laughed loudly.

'Why did you come here to look for me?' Bei Dou said.

'Tomorrow the crown prince is leaving the imperial city,' Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou's body stiffened. After Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning left, Bei Dou opened a drawer, pulled out a sword and sunlight reflected off the sword in four directions.

It was the sword the empress used to bribe the Think Household to support the crown prince. It was the most deadly sword in the world. Bei Dou wanted to use the sword to kill the empress in the palace.

Xiao Tu returned to Bei Dou's chamber and she stood still after she saw Bei Dou's deadly aura while holding the sword.

Bei Dou put away the sword because he thought it scared Xiao Tu.

'Gentleman Bei, do you want to go kill someone?' Xiao Tu asked calmly.

Bei Dou nodded his head.

Xiao Tu put down a bottle on a table. 'This is the bottle of poison I brewed as Gentleman Bei instructed. Gentleman Bei, do you want me to cover the sword with this poison?'

Bei Dou was speechless, he didn't know why Xiao Tu wasn't scared.

Short Side Story Three

Bei Dou: I fell in love at first sight.

Xiao Tu: I fell in love over a long period.

Bei Dou: But I was naive.

Xiao Tu: He was naive so I had to take the first step toward him.

Chapter 50

At the end of autumn.

'You bastard child!' the empress cursed and sobbed.

'Imperial mother, this time I'm leaving the imperial city forever,' Pei Lam said. 'Imperial mother, take good care of your health.'

'No!' the empress said. 'You'll come back. Wait until your imperial father calms down and sees Pei Lam's false heart and you'll be called back.'

The empress didn't want to accept all her years of scheming would fail. She only had one son, how could she accept being separated from her son?

'Imperial mother, status, power and money will turn to smoke,' Pei Lam said. 'Your heart doesn't need to waste energy about smoke.'

Pei Lam knelt in front of his mother, hit his forehead on the floor and left his mother's chamber.

Pei Lam's words prompted the empress to remember a year ago the grandmaster she met told her the same fortune that everything will turn to smoke and it was better to let go of swords to free the heart.

Pei Lam's father had refused to see him since that day he stabbed himself. He didn't know if his father would be willing to see him before he left the palace.

Pei Lam stood in front of his father's chamber and looked at the fallen flower petals. He knew his father was too angry to see him but he was amused at his childish father.

Wang Fu Mu was frightened how Pei Lam could smile in Pei Lam's situation. 'Crown prince.'

Pei Lam turned around and he saw Wang Fu Mu who served his father for more than twenty years. Wang Fu Mu was a little eunuch at the age of ten and later became his father's advisor. He knew Wang Fu Mu was someone who was capable otherwise Wang Fu Mu wouldn't be the closest person to his father.

Wang Fu Mu was even more frightened after Pei Lam bowed to him. 'Crown prince, what are you doing? Your servant doesn't dare to receive.'

'You have a fast mouth,' Pei Lam said.

Wang Fu Mu thought Pei Lam was possessed by a demon. 'Crown prince, the emperor doesn't want to see you. It's better if crown prince visit another day that isn't cold like today.'

'I don't know if I can see my imperial father when he isn't angry anymore,' Pei Lam said.

Earlier Wang Fu Mu informed the emperor that Pei Lam wanted to see the emperor and thought it was pitiful to see how disappointed the emperor was in Pei Lam. He thought perhaps after the emperor calms down and couldn't tolerate Pei Zhang anymore then the emperor would summon Pei Lam to return to the palace.

Pei Lam knew Wang Fu Mu was a fox who would survive many more years in the palace. He bowed to Wang Fu Mu to force Wang Fu Mu to do him a favor and pass on his warning to his father.

Wang Fu Mu bowed his head lower than Pei Lam's bowed head.

'Wang Fu Mu, if my imperial father doesn't want to see me then I'll trouble you to pass my warning to my imperial father,' Pei Lam said. 'I trust you'll pass on my warning to my imperial father.'

'Your servant will listen to crown prince's words carefully,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'Warn my imperial father to be careful of ninth brother,' Pei Lam said.

'Crown prince, what does that mean?' Wang Fu Mu asked.

'Ninth brother was involved in the harvest festival incident,' Pei Lam said.

'Your servant understands,' Wang Fu Mu said.

Pei Lam knelt in front of his father's chamber, hit his forehead on the ground and left the palace.

Wang Fu Mu entered the emperor's chamber and he didn't know what the emperor was thinking while staring out the window. He thought out

of the princes, Pei Jin was the most similar to the emperor but he didn't know why the emperor treated Pei Jin coldly.

'Your majesty, the crown prince has left the palace,' Wang Fu Mu said.

The emperor turned around and glared at Wang Fu Mu. 'He is no longer the crown prince.'

Wang Fu Mu knew the emperor wasn't angry at him but was angry to be reminded of why Pei Lam wasn't the crown prince anymore.

'What did he say?' the emperor asked.

'The crown prince wants your majesty to take care of your majesty's health,' Wang Fu Mu said. 'The crown prince also warned you to be careful of seventh prince.'

Wang Fu Mu knew if there was a day Pei Lam returned to the palace then he would be executed for deceiving the emperor. But he was willing to risk his life for Pei Jin to succeed.

'Be careful of seventh prince?' the emperor asked. 'Why did the crown prince say that to you?'

'The crown prince didn't say why,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'I understand,' the emperor said.

Outside the palace gates many imperial guards escorted Pei Lam outside the imperial city because the empress was concerned about Pei Lam's safety.

Pei Lam thought his mother's concern for his safety was wasted.

The horse carriage travelled for a long time then it suddenly it stopped.

Pei Lam closed his eyes and he could feel there was bad news outside the horse carriage.

‘Crown prince, ninth prince is in front of the horse carriage,’ an imperial guard said.

Pei Lam opened the curtains and he saw Pei Jin sat on a horse with the sunlight glaring behind Pei Jin.

‘Tenth brother,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Ninth brother, why are you here?’ Pei Lam asked.

‘We’re close brothers like arms and legs,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Of course I’m here to escort you outside the imperial city.’

‘Ninth brother, you’re wasting your heart’s energy,’ Pei Lam said.

‘I heard you’re going to a remote town that’s extremely cold,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Did you bring enough warm clothes?’

‘I brought enough,’ Pei Lam said.

Pei Jin frowned. ‘Your ninth sister asked me to say farewell to you on her behalf.’

Pei Lam hated thinking of Yan Shi Ning as Pei Jin’s wife but he smiled politely. ‘Ninth brother, other people are envious you’re married to ninth sister.’

‘Tenth brother, for many years I still can’t see through your true heart,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Ninth brother, aren’t you also someone that’s hard for other people to see your true heart?’ Pei Lam asked.

Pei Jin’s back turned cold at the sight of Pei Lam’s disturbing smile. ‘Your ninth brother is a simpleton.’

‘The day is late,’ Pei Lam said. ‘Ninth brother should return home.’

‘Tenth brother, take care of your health,’ Pei Jin said. ‘We’ll see each other again.’

'We won't see each other again,' Pei Lam said.

Pei Jin was startled at the calm conviction in Pei Lam's tone. He didn't know what Pei Lam's intentions were.

Pei Jin watched Pei Lam's horse carriage leave for a while then Bei Dou appeared next to him.

'There are twenty-eight imperial guards,' Pei Jin said. 'Can you cope?'

Bei Dou nodded his head.

'Alright then go smooth as the wind,' Pei Jin said.

Inside the horse carriage Pei Lam closed his eyes and ignored the bumpy ground. What Yan Shi Ning said to Yan Shi Ting at the Yan Manor echoed in his ears, 'Shi Ting, I'm truly sorry. I didn't think I'll cause you to become like this. But don't worry, after she dies, I'll take good care of you.'

Pei Lam realised Yan Shi Ning wasn't as beautiful and good as he thought. She was involved in his disastrous wedding day and Pei Jin was the person behind everything. Luckily he found out before he left the palace. He left his father a final warning for his father to see Pei Jin's true black heart and the palace would no longer be peaceful.

Chapter 51

To leave the imperial city it was impossible to avoid mountain terrains.

'Who are you to dare to obstruct the path?' an imperial guard asked.

'Stop the pleasantries,' Pei Lam said and took off his mask. 'Prepare to sacrifice your lives.'

Pei Lam's sharp sword tasted fresh blood. Sunlight shone on the bloody ground. More imperial guards appeared because they thought Pei Lam's life was in danger, but they were immediately killed under Pei Lam's

sword and their dead bodies collapsed on the ground. The last face they saw were Pei Lam's disturbing smile.

Pei Lam searched forty dead bodies for someone similar to his build and looks to exchange clothes with him. Then he flung the forty dead bodies down the mountain.

Pei Lam escaped on a horse and heard silence in four directions. He was happy he no longer had to be Pei Lam and truly free.

Pei Lam rode for a while but a person with a cold demon face who wore black clothes obstructed his path.

'It's you,' Pei Lam said.

Pei Lam recognised Bei Dou who had a cold demon face that never changed expression and was also Pei Jin's servant but he didn't know why Bei Dou followed him.

'Thank you,' Bei Dou said and raised his sword.

Later at Pei Jin's manor, Bei Dou recounted what happened to Pei Lam and Pei Lam's imperial guards.

'You said thank you to him?' Pei Jin asked.

'Of course I should thank him for dealing with the imperial guards,' Bei Dou said.

'I didn't think he would kill everyone to escape,' Pei Jin said. 'What are his true intentions?'

'Perhaps he wants to start a new life,' Bei Dou said.

'A new life?' Pei Jin asked. 'If that isn't true then it's hard to explain his actions. I didn't expect tenth brother was someone like this. I thought he asked imperial father to take away his position to wait for a good opportunity to strike... where are you hiding him?'

'Su Ci,' Bei Dou said and looked in four directions.

'Gentleman Bei, who are your wandering eyes looking for?' Pei Jin teased.

'There are sand in my eyes,' Bei Dou lied.

Pei Jin spat out tea. 'Why don't you find your precious pupil to help you? Wait, don't disturb her. She's studying effects of some poisons in the courtyard with Xiao Zai... wait, where are you running to... tomorrow I'm summoned to the palace, you need to be prepared.'

Pei Jin thought Bei Dou was in a deep spring trance after only a few days.

In the courtyard Bei Dou's expression darkened, he saw Xiao Zai sat too close to Xiao Tu.

Bei Dou's deadly eyes focused on Xiao Tu. 'You, follow me to my chamber!'

Xiao Tu calmly followed Bei Dou to his chamber. 'Gentleman Bei, what's wrong?'

'There are sand in my eyes,' Bei Dou said. 'Help take them out for me.'

Xiao Tu was speechless.

Inside Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's chamber, Yan Shi Ning's chest wound had healed. It wasn't a surprise considering for half a month she was forced to ingest nutritious food and herbal remedies to improve her health while pregnant and recovering from her injury.

Pei Jin thought Yan Shi Ning's body was even more appealing while she was pregnant. The problem was he could only see, kiss and touch her but he couldn't eat her because Bei Dou advised him it was dangerous for him to eat her while she was pregnant.

'Wife...' Pei Jin said pitifully.

Yan Shi Ning knew what Pei Jin wanted. She pulled the blanket over her body and avoided his hands.

'Wife...' Pei Jin sulked.

'No,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Only one time,' Pei Jin said.

'No,' Yan Shi Ning said and rolled over.

'You don't care about me,' Pei Jin said in a frustrated tone.

Yan Shi Ning turned her head to look at Pei Jin's pitiful face.

'Little sister Ning, don't you pity me?' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning played dead on her back to avoid putting pressure on their child.

'This child is hateful,' Pei Jin said.

'This child is still yours even if this child is hateful,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, don't forget this child is yours too-' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning kicked Pei Jin off the bed. 'MF Pei Jin, tonight you're not allowed to sleep on this bed.'

Pei Jin wore his outer robe and unwillingly left the chamber.

Xiao Zai was guarding outside the chamber and saw Pei Jin's pitiful face.

'If you don't stop smiling then you'll be in trouble,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin was lenient on Xiao Zai because Xiao Zai protected Yan Shi Ning's life at the Yan Manor. Also, Xiao Zai had begged Yan Shi Ning to save Xiao Zai from him so he only scared Xiao Zai a little.

Xiao Zai believed Pei Jin's threat, he stopped smiling and looked like he was at his parent's funeral. 'Ninth prince, I don't know if it's appropriate for me to tell you this.'

'Hurry and say it,' Pei Jin said.

'Ninth prince, the truth is... after your wife is three months pregnant as long as you're gentle it's safe,' Xiao Zai said.

Pei Jin's eyes shone brightly. 'Truly?'

Xiao Zai nodded his head.

'How do you know?' Pei Jin asked.

'I read it in one of Gentleman Bei's books,' Xiao Zai said.

'Bei Dou you lied to me again!' Pei Jin cried out.

Last time Bei Dou lied to Pei Jin that Pei Jin had to wait half a month instead to seven days to have a wedding night with Yan Shi Ning. But Bei Dou dared to lie to him that he had to wait a year after Yan Shi Ning was pregnant to eat her.

Xiao Zai was happy Pei Jin wanted to kill Bei Dou. Xiao Zai thought it was Bei Dou's fault for interrupting Xiao Zai's alone time with Xiao Tu.

'Xiao Zai, how did you find out about my situation with my wife?' Pei Jin asked suspiciously.

'I... I didn't hear anything,' Xiao Zai lied.

'Xiao Hui, lock this eavesdropper in the firewood storage room!' Pei Jin said. 'Don't let him eat for two days!'

'Yes, ninth prince,' Xiao Hui said.

'Xiao Hui, you don't have to use brute force,' Xiao Zai said. 'I know how to walk... ah... you don't need to carry me... ah... you don't need to throw me into the firewood storage room.'

Xiao Hui locked the firewood storage room and left.

That night Pei Jin knocked Bei Dou unconscious.

Early the following morning Bei Dou woke up and saw Xiao Tu was laying on top him.

'Why... are you here?' Bei Dou asked and pulled the blanket over his body.

Xiao Tu rubbed her eyes and looked at her surroundings. 'Gentleman Bei, why am I here?'

In that moment Pei Jin opened Bei Dou's door and entered Bei Dou's chamber.

'What am I seeing?' Pei Jin asked innocently. 'Everyone look away!'

Bei Dou's mouth and eyes widened after seeing the crowd behind Pei Jin.

'Everyone remember we didn't see a lady on Gentleman Bei's bed!' Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou wanted to kill Pei Jin.

'Gentleman Bei, are you going to marry me?' Xiao Tu asked.

Bei Dou's throat felt choked.

'Gentleman Bei that means I'll need to die,' Xiao Tu said and cried.

'You're not allowed to die!' Bei Dou said.

'Gentleman Bei, you don't have to force yourself to marry me,' Xiao Tu said.

'I'm not forcing myself!' Bei Dou said. 'You're a good person!'

Xiao Tu hugged Bei Dou and cried happy tears. 'Gentleman Bei!'

Inside the firewood storage room Xiao Zai felt he was struck by lightning after he heard Bei Dou was marrying Xiao Tu.

The moment Xiao Hui opened the door Xiao Zai cried pitifully and hugged Xiao Hui.

'Xiao Hui, I lost Xiao Tu!' Xiao Zai said.

Xiao Hui pushed Xiao Zai away before Xiao Zai could wipe snot on Xiao Hui's clothes.

Xiao Hui threw wrapped buns at Xiao Zai. 'Hurry and eat the buns!'

'Big brother Xiao Hui is a good big brother!' Xiao Zai praised.

Chapter 52

Bei Dou followed Pei Jin to the palace.

Bei Dou disappeared after Pei Jin entered the emperor's chamber.

The emperor sat on the highest chair and he wore a somber expression. While Consort Mu and seventh prince sat happily beside the emperor and the empress was in her chamber and her heart was missing the absent crown prince.

'Xiao Jin, I heard Shi Ning's body has been unwell,' Consort Mu said. 'Is she feeling better today?'

Pei Jin hid Yan Shi Ning's chest injury for two months. He explained to his imperial family that Yan Shi Ning had a chest infection and he had invited many physicians to clear her chest infection but she was still ill.

Since the harvest festival incident Consort Mu and seventh prince's spies couldn't enter Pei Jin's manor to confirm if Yan Shi Ning was pregnant.

'Compared to a few days ago Shi Ning's body is recovering,' Pei Jin said. 'But to be safe Shi Ning needs to rest for a few more days. Shi Ning asks for imperial father and mother's forgiveness.'

The emperor frowned. Even Pei Jin's wife had a weak body then the Dian Kingdom would have to wait longer for the emperor to have the first grandson.

'Shi Ning can visit your imperial father and me later,' Consort Mu said. 'Shi Ning's health is more important. But I haven't seen her for two months... perhaps Xiao Jin's physicians...' She turned to look concern at the emperor. 'Why don't I send my imperial physician to examine Shi Ning?'

Consort Mu wouldn't feel at ease until she could confirm if Yan Shi Ning was ill or pregnant. If Pei Jin declined her offer then she would know Yan Shi Ning was pregnant.

'Mother that is kind of you,' Pei Jin said.

The emperor was frustrated to hear Consort Mu looking down on Pei Jin. Although Pei Jin didn't compete with his other sons or request anything from him, Pei Jin was still his son. He couldn't believe Pei Jin didn't even request for him to send an imperial physician to examine Shi Ning who was ill for more than two months.

The emperor frowned while assessing his three sons that were in his chamber. One son was too cruel, another son was an enigma and the youngest son still didn't know how to speak clearly.

Wang Fu Mu rushed into the emperor's chamber and he could see the emperor's thoughts.

'What happened?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty, earlier seventh prince's second wife's messenger informed that she fainted,' Wang Fu Mu said.

The emperor glared at Wang Fu Mu who dared to smile while reporting bad news to him.

'The imperial physician who examined seventh prince's second wife said that she is pregnant,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'Truly?' the emperor asked suspiciously.

Wang Fu Mu glanced at Consort Mu and he wondered if Consort Mu would dare to learn from the empress and Princess Kang Hua's bad example.

'Emperor, please grant my request to let Long Thi enter the palace for your imperial physician to examine her,' Consort Mu said. 'I'm worried she'll miscarry.'

The emperor nodded his head and he thought perhaps he was going to have his first grandson soon.

Consort Mu and seventh prince exchanged a secret smile at each other.

Consort Mu and seventh prince knew Long Thi was pregnant for a while and purposely sent a messenger to the palace to announce the news to the emperor. As they expected the emperor didn't need to see Long Thi but sent imperial physicians to confirm Long Thi's pregnancy.

The imperial physicians returned to the palace and reported to the emperor that Long Thi was pregnant.

'Congratulations imperial father,' Pei Jin said. 'Congratulations mother, congratulations seventh brother!'

'I hope to hear good news from ninth brother too,' Pei Zhang said.

'It's up to the heavens,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Zhang didn't know Yan Shi Ning was pregnant so Pei Zhang felt exhilarated. Pei Zhang knew the crown prince position was within his grasp because there was no one worthy to compete with him.

The emperor wasn't impressed by Pei Zhang's arrogance.

'Wang Fu Mu, ask someone to send valuable gifts to Shi Ning and Long Thi,' the emperor said.

Pei Zhang was satisfied his father was rewarding Long Thi but he was unhappy his father also rewarded Shi Ning.

Pei Jin understood his father's dissatisfaction toward Pei Zhang and Pei Jin thought his little lion was the one who benefited from the tension between his father and Pei Zhang.

After the Yan Manor was burned, the emperor compensated Yan Shi Ning with many gifts because the emperor wanted to let other people know Yan Shi Ning wasn't mistreated marrying into the imperial family.

Pei Jin sighed inwardly, his father was either suspicious of him or used him to provoke other people.

'Ninth son, seventh son has many wives for the imperial family to thrive,' the emperor said. 'Perhaps I should select a second wife and concubines for ninth son.'

Pei Zhang raged after he heard his father's words implied his father was considering Pei Jin to become crown prince.

Pei Jin only wanted to protect Yan Shi Ning and their child. If his father forced him to marry other women then it would cause chaos in his and Yan Shi Ning's home. He knew if he declined his father's offer then his father would know Yan Shi Ning was pregnant... but he was a little happy his father wanted him to have children because it meant his father wasn't the one who poisoned Yan Shi Ning.

Suddenly an imperial guard charged into the emperor's chamber.

'Your majesty, the crown prince's body was found at the bottom of a mountain,' the imperial guard said.

The emperor felt like lightning struck him. 'What did you say?'

'Your majesty, I don't dare to identify the crown prince's body,' the imperial said.

'Don't dare?' the emperor asked. 'How can you not dare to identify someone who's alive and healthy?'

'Your majesty... the crown prince's body isn't whole... but his body was discovered next to the broken body at the bottom of the mountain,' the imperial guard said.

The imperial guard gave the emperor the pendant the emperor gave Pei Lam long ago.

The emperor's heart ached to pieces. He remembered memories of his beloved Pei Lam since Pei Lam was a boy to an adult. He didn't want to believe his precious Pei Lam died a painful death and Pei Lam's body wasn't whole.

'Who?' the emperor asked. 'Who killed my only crown prince?'

The emperor cried pitifully. He thought he was temporarily separated from Pei Lam, he never expected they would be separated by death.

'Give back my crown prince!' the emperor ordered. 'I want my crown prince back here and whole!'

Everyone was startled to see the emperor shed tears in front of them.

Consort Mu and seventh prince's backs were cold and sweaty after the emperor glared accusingly at them. They knew they had a motive to kill Pei Lam but they couldn't prove their innocence.

Wang Fu Mu didn't have an opportunity to speak to Pei Jin since Pei Jin entered the palace so Wang Fu Mu wondered if Consort Mu and Pei Zhang did kill Pei Lam.

Pei Jin was startled to realise how deeply his father loved Pei Lam. If he was the one who died instead of Pei Lam, he doubted his father would cry a single tear for him.

Pei Jin wondered how his father would react if his father found out Pei Lam was the one who faked Pei Lam's death.

'Everyone leave!' the emperor ordered.

Before everyone left the emperor's chamber, Wang Fu Mu exchanged a secret look with Pei Jin so Pei Jin waited nearby the chamber for Wang Fu Mu.

After a while Wang Fu Mu secretly met Pei Jin.

'How is my imperial father?' Pei Jin asked.

'His majesty is grieving and an imperial physician sedated his majesty,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'I'll need to trouble you to take care of my imperial father's health,' Pei Jin said and bowed.

'Your servant doesn't dare to receive,' Wang Fu Mu said.

Wang Fu Mu secretly passed a small folded paper to Pei Jin.

'Then I'll be leaving first,' Pei Jin said.

Inside the horse carriage Pei Jin opened the folded paper, 'I don't know why tenth prince knows about the harvest festival incident. Tenth prince asked me to warn the emperor to be careful of ninth prince. So tenth prince can't return to the palace.'

The atmosphere in Consort Mu's chamber was tensed.

'Xiao Zhang, did you kill Pei Lam?' Consort Mu asked.

Pei Zhang shook his head. 'If I wanted to kill him then I wouldn't kill him in this critical period.'

'Then who is the killer?' Consort Mu asked. 'Before his unexpected death everything was within our control. Did you see how your imperial father wanted to swallow us whole?'

'I can see imperial father doesn't want me to be crown prince,' Pei Zhang said. 'Mother, did you hear what imperial father said... my only

crown prince. Tenth brother is dead! I want to see apart from me who else imperial father dare to choose as the crown prince.'

'That's right,' Consort Mu said. 'Even if we did kill him, no one can do anything to us. Your imperial father lost one son, he wouldn't want to lose another son. We only need to be patient and wait for your imperial father to calm down. But I don't know what the killer's motive is.'

'Perhaps his enemy,' Pei Zhang said.

'That's too simple to be true,' Consort Mu said. 'Hurry and send an imperial physician to examine Yan Shi Ning. If she's pregnant then it'll cause more trouble for us.'

'Mother, I understand,' Pei Zhang said.

'Xiao Zhang, what do you think about your ninth brother?' Consort Mu asked.

'In the past I thought he was a complicated person,' Pei Zhang said. 'But looking at the past now I think he is a simpleton. Perhaps he truly wants to be a carefree prince.'

Consort Mu shook her head. 'I think there is a possibility your ninth brother wants to oppose us.'

'Mother, what are you saying?' Pei Zhang asked.

'He knows I'm involved with the Fu Gui incense sticks,' Consort Mu said. 'I think he retaliated by killing Pei Lam to warn us. Xiao Zhang, think about how many calamities happened after he returned to the imperial city from Southern Jiang... the harvest festival, news of Yan Shi Ting's fake pregnancy was spread to us through his servant... perhaps he intended to borrow our dagger to kill others... also how Yan Shi Ting mysteriously fell into the well is suspicious.'

'Is ninth brother that dangerous?' Pei Zhang asked.

Consort Mu silently contemplated deeply.

'If he wants to fight for the throne then he needs to be a capable person,' Pei Zhang said. 'Besides we're already cautious of him and know who are connected to him. He is someone who has no strong allies and has no power in the imperial court.'

'But we can't rely on our assumptions,' Consort Mu said. 'We need to continue to spy on his activities.'

Chapter 53

At home Pei Jin reflected about Wang Fu Mu's note.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin toss and turn on the bed.

'Pei Jin, are you a cong you bing?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning kicked Pei Jin who was crawling under her inner robe.

'Shi Ning, your temper is worse by the day,' Pei Jin teased.

Yan Shi Ning didn't want to admit Pei Jin was right about her temper.

'What are you going to do if you can't tolerate my temper?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Of course I can tolerate your temper,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin knew if he teased Yan Shi Ning too much then she would kick him outside their chamber.

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin was troubled about something otherwise he wouldn't have trouble sleeping. 'Pei Jin, what's wrong? Did something happen in the palace?'

'Shi Ning, what do you think about tenth brother?' Pei Jin asked.

'He's soft, calm and beautiful,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'At a glance he looks like someone harmless.'

‘What if my harmless tenth brother wants to harm me?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘What?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin explained to Yan Shi Ning about Wang Fu Mu’s note.

‘We didn’t leave a trace at the harvest festival,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘How did the crown prince know we were involved?’

‘I don’t know why he knows but he wouldn’t want to warn imperial father unless he has evidence,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning thought perhaps it was her fault that the crown prince found evidence. She slowly recalled everything that happened at the Yan Manor and she suspected the crown prince was involved in Yan Shi Ting’s death.

‘Pei Jin, do you remember I told you Yan Shi Ting’s death was suspicious?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head. He remembered Yan Shi Ning wasn’t certain if someone pushed Yan Shi Ting into the well or Yan Shi Ting accidentally fell into the well.

‘Shi Ning are you saying that tenth brother killed Yan Shi Ting?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘That day Yan Shi Ting scared me and I left her in the gardens,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘A while later her body was found in the well. I remember in the gardens there’s a sculpture. Perhaps the crown prince was hiding behind it that day, overheard what I said to Yan Shi Ting and that’s how he knows we were involved in the wedding incident.’

‘Shi Ning if your speculations are true then why would tenth brother kill Yan Shi Ting?’ Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning couldn’t believe someone who looked harmless like the crown prince would push Yan Shi Ting into the well. ‘Pei Jin, perhaps

my speculations are wrong and the crown prince didn't kill Yan Shi Ting.'

Pei Jin knew Yan Shi Ning was frightened that a harmless Pei Lam was capable of heartlessly killing Yan Shi Ting. 'Shi Ning, I didn't want to go see tenth brother but now I need to go see him.'

Yan Shi Ning heard the sadness in Pei Jin's tone. After Bei Dou captured the crown prince, Bei Dou locked the crown prince in a secure place. But Pei Jin never visited the crown prince and she thought perhaps Pei Jin wanted to maintain the small brotherly bond between them.

'In the past I was reluctant to let Bei Dou deal with the crown prince,' Pei Jin said. 'But now I know I was naive. If imperial father found out the truth then three years of firewood collected would be burned within a shichen hour.'

Yan Shi Ning was scared Pei Jin's fear was true and the emperor would kill Pei Jin if the emperor found out the truth.

'Pei Jin, why does the emperor hate you?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I thought about why for many years,' Pei Jin said. 'I even suspected I wasn't imperial father's blood son.'

'Pei Jin, you know that's not true,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If you're not the emperor's blood son then you wouldn't be alive now.'

'That's why at the right opportunity I need to ask my imperial father why he hates me,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning's heart ached for Pei Jin because it was something that troubled his heart for years.

'Pei Jin, there's something else,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'What?' Pei Jin asked.

'Why would Wang Fu Mu who is the closest person to the emperor pass a note to you?' Yan Shi Ning asked suspiciously.

Pei Jin hesitated to answer.

'Last time you promised you wouldn't hide anything else from me!' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning... you didn't ask me about this so I didn't lie to you,' Pei Jin said. 'Shi Ning... I'll tell you another secret I haven't told anyone else before.'

Yan Shi Ning silently listened to Pei Jin talk about Wang Fu Mu.

'When Wang Fu Mu was a young eunuch he was bullied in the palace,' Pei Jin said. 'Like when he was thirteen years old he knocked over a vase and was nearly beaten to death. He used the strength he had left to run and hide in a chamber. Inside the chamber was a young man who pulled out a pill and put it in Wang Fu Mu's life. The young man climbed the window after he heard other people chasing after Wang Fu Mu. The pill Wang Fu Mu swallowed was a rare pill that protected a person's qi. It saved Wang Fu Mu's life. At that time Wang Fu Mu didn't know who his mysterious young savior was. But it motivated Wang Fu Mu to survive long enough to repay his savior so he slowly built connections in the palace.'

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hand. 'Three years later Wang Fu Mu met his savior again. It was my imperial uncle, Prince Chen Nan who returned to the palace on horseback after conquering Southern Jiang. Wang Fu Mu didn't dare to say that he knew the heroic Prince Chen Nan. So imperial uncle didn't recognise Wang Fu Mu. Later their fates changed. Wang Fu Mu crawled into a high position and my imperial uncle's status slowly diminished. Wang Fu Mu's heart ached for his savior. Wang Fu Mu secretly followed imperial uncle to help imperial uncle at the right opportunity. But he failed to find out imperial father had put a sleeping pill into imperial uncle's wine cup until after imperial uncle fell off a horse and died.'

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's sadness.

'Wang Fu Mu secretly grieved for imperial uncle's death while serving imperial father,' Pei Jin said. 'Wang Fu Mu failed to repay imperial uncle for saving his life. But Wang Fu Mu remembered out of all the emperor's sons, imperial uncle loved me the most. So Wang Fu Mu secretly protected me to repay imperial uncle. Imperial father regards Wang Fu Mu highly because imperial father believes Wang Fu Mu doesn't favor any of imperial father's sons. Even I didn't know Wang Fu Mu was secretly protecting me for a long time.'

'How did you find out?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Shi Ning, do you remember the first day I arrived in Xuan Qing?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning's teeth itched while she remembered her pitiful six-year-old self who was bullied by Pei Jin.

'During that period Consort Chen died,' Pei Jin said. 'Assassins were sent to kill me but Wang Fu Mu warned me to be careful otherwise I wouldn't be alive now... like during Consort Chen's funeral, Wang Fu Mu warned me to be careful of my food and drinks. The empress sent a bowl of soup to me and I listened to Wang Fu Mu's warning. I used a silver needle to test the bowl of soup, it was poisoned. Afterward I looked for Wang Fu Mu and he told me about how imperial uncle saved his life. Then he advised me to follow my teacher to Xuan Qing on the pretence that I'm grieving for Consort Chen's death...'

'Is that why you came to Xuan Qing?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Yes,' Pei Jin said.

'Imperial uncle said he was powerless to help you but he helped you a lot,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'That's right,' Pei Jin said. 'Without imperial uncle then I would have died long ago. I wouldn't have met you and we wouldn't have conceived a child together... Shi Ning, we can't hide your pregnancy for much longer.'

'Why?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Imperial father wants me to follow seventh brother's example,' Pei Jin said. 'Imperial father asked me if he could choose a second wife and concubines for me.'

Yan Shi Ning hid the sadness in her heart and smiled. 'That's a good suggestion. I think our home is a little cold. If there are more people then it'll become lively.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning silently looked at each other's eyes while smiling.

'Wife, how can you lie this well?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning looked innocently at Pei Jin. 'What I said earlier was sincere.'

Pei Jin's hands moved closer to Yan Shi Ning's body. 'Truly?'

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, why aren't you scared of being tickled anymore?' Pei Jin asked.

'I'm used to you,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin frowned, he couldn't tickle Yan Shi Ning to force her to tell the truth.

'When will we need to tell others I'm pregnant?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'We'll wait a little longer to protect our child,' Pei Jin said.

'I'll be more cautious after others know I'm pregnant,' Yan Shi Ning promised.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. 'Shi Ning, don't worry. I'm here to protect you. When I'm not here I'll ask my guards to secretly protect you.'

The night sky darkened but Yan Shi Ning couldn't sleep.

Pei Jin remembered Xiao Zai's confession and his eyes brightened.

'Wife, tonight we can't sleep,' Pei Jin said. 'Why don't we do it together?'

'No,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Yes,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin took off Yan Shi Ning's inner robe and his head crawled under her undergarments.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's warm mouth suckled her breasts and her body turned limp.

Pei Jin nibbled Yan Shi Ning's erect nipples.

'It hurts...' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, does your chest wound hurt?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning blushed and shook her head. 'You bit too hard.'

'Shi Ning... later I'll let you bite me,' Pei Jin said.

Chapter 54

Pei Jin spread Yan Shi Ning's legs and he suckled her sweetness between her legs.

'You don't need too...' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin raised his head, his hands held Yan Shi Ning's bottom and positioned her sweetness under his erection and roughly rubbed her sweetness.

'Shi Ning, what do you need?' Pei Jin teased.

Under Pei Jin's teasing, Yan Shi Ning's body burned with desire, her eyes misted, her nipples erected, her back arched tensely and nectar seeped out of her sweetness between her legs.

Pei Jin's erection felt Yan Shi Ning's wetness and he inserted his fingers inside her.

'Shi Ning, do you need this?' Pei Jin teased.

Pei Jin's fingers stroked inside Yan Shi Ning but his fingers evaded the most sensitive spot inside her.

'Umm... ' Yan Shi Ning moaned.

Pei Jin's fingers slowly stroked harder. 'Shi Ning, what do you need?'

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin was purposely teasing her body to frustration. She didn't want to admit she wanted him inside her.

'Shi Ning, do you want to do it?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning gritted her teeth. 'Pei-Jin-I-want-to-sleep!'

Yan Shi Ning tried to wiggle her body away from Pei Jin's body.

Pei Jin refused to let Yan Shi Ning escape. He hadn't eaten her for three months and he didn't want to starve another moment.

Pei Jin's hands gripped Yan Shi Ning's waist and he entered deep inside her. Her eyes narrowed, she relaxed her body, wrapped her arms around his neck and bit his shoulder.

Pei Jin savored the sensation of being deep inside Yan Shi Ning.

'Shi Ning, I kept my promise and let you bite me,' Pei Jin teased. He nibbled Yan Shi Ning's earlobe and whispered in her ear. 'Shi Ning, you're so tight. It feels good to be inside you and have you bite me.'

Yan Shi Ning wrapped her legs tight around Pei Jin's waist. Her body was sweetly tormented by his sweet whispers and his deep thrusts. She felt like she blinked, her body trembled and tightened.

Pei Jin felt Yan Shi Ning's body tightened even more. He was careful not to put pressure on her stomach but he still needed release.

'Shi Ning, let's change the position,' Pei Jin whispered.

Yan Shi Ning's upper body fell back on the bed. Pei Jin straddled her thighs, he withdrew and thrust hard inside her.

'Too deep...' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning didn't know if she was crying tears from too much pain or pleasure.

Pei Jin increased his body strokes while thinking about stealing forbidden books in the palace to find other positions to eat Yan Shi Ning without putting pressure on her stomach.

That night Yan Shi Ning drifted in and out of consciousness while Pei Jin satisfied his three month famine. After a long time he released semen inside her and he used her undergarments to clean her inner thighs. Then he hugged her, closed his satisfied eyes and napped.

Yan Shi Ning didn't know when she fell asleep but she dreamt a vivid dream.

'You old AH!' Yan Shi Ning cursed in her sleep. 'If you dare force him to marry another woman then you won't have another grandchild!'

Pei Jin heard Yan Shi Ning's loud murmurs and after he realised who she was calling old AH, he laughed.

An imperial guard reported the crown prince's death to the empress.

The imperial guard gave the empress the crown prince's clothes they found on his dead body and left the empress' chamber.

The empress hugged her son's clothes and cried pitifully. She cursed Consort Mu and Pei Zhang until she lost consciousness.

The emperor visited the empress after she woke up and he ordered an imperial physician to sedate her.

The imperial physician followed the emperor's order and left the chamber.

The emperor returned to his chamber and sobbed.

Even after the empress was sedated she couldn't sleep peacefully. She was startled awake by familiar voices.

'Imperial mother, status, power and money will turn to smoke... your heart doesn't need to waste energy about smoke... everything will turn to smoke... it's better to let go of swords to free the heart... pay with your life... retribution...' Bei Dou taunted the empress.

'Who's there?' the empress asked.

The empress looked in four directions until she saw a tall masked figure.

'Are you human or a demon?' the empress asked. 'Imperial guard!'

'You don't need to scream,' Bei Dou said. 'Everyone around you is dead.'

'Who are you?' the empress asked. 'What do you want?'

'I'm a demon... I'm here to take your life... you killed many people... you need to die,' Bei Dou said and pulled out a sword. 'You're familiar with his sword. That year you gave it to my father... I love it and brought it here to escort you to hell.'

'You're from the Think Household,' the empress said.

'I'm not human... I'm a demon,' Bei Dou said and pointed the sword in the empress' direction. 'Come here, you killed too many people. They're all waiting for you in hell, everyone from the Think Household, Consort Chen and her child.'

'Consort Chen and her child?' the empress asked confusedly.

'That's right,' Bei Dou said. 'You killed all of them. They're all waiting for you.'

'I didn't kill Consort Chen and her child!' the empress cried out.

'If it wasn't you then who else would kill them?' Bei Dou asked.

'It was...' the empress said. After her panic waned she looked closely at the tall masked figure. 'You're not a demon, you're a human! What do you want?'

Bei Dou jabbed his sword at the empress' throat. 'I'm here to take your life!'

'Did you kill the crown prince?' the empress asked.

'The truth is he's still alive,' Bei Dou said.

The empress' grieving heart felt hope.

'Whether your son lives or dies depends on you,' Bei Dou said.

'What are you implying?' the empress asked.

'If you love your son then exchange your life for your son's life,' Bei Dou said. 'I'll spare your son's life if you kill yourself.'

'How can I believe your words alone?' the empress asked. 'Let me see my son first.'

Bei Dou pulled out a small chest and threw it at the empress.

The empress opened the small chest and saw two fingers and on one finger was the ring that she gave her son.

'Do you need me to cut him into pieces for you to see before you kill yourself?' Bei Dou asked.

'No!' the empress said. 'This is good enough. I believe you.'

The empress looked at her son's fingers and cried.

'You have three days,' Bei Dou said. 'If I don't hear news of your death then you'll see your son's arm. Think about your decision carefully. If you die, your son can't be the crown prince but he can live.'

'Are you Pei Zhang's servant?' the empress asked.

'Compared to your useless son seventh prince is more suitable to sit on the throne,' Bei said and left the empress' chamber.

Chapter 55

The empress and the crown prince died the same year and winter season.

While everyone in the palace were grieving for the empress and the crown prince's deaths, Consort Mu's imperial physician, Gentleman Zheng was sent to examine Yan Shi Ning at Pei Jin's manor.

'Gentleman Zheng, you can call me Xiao Zai,' Xiao Zai said. 'I waited a long time for your arrival. Why are you wearing thin clothes? What if you get a chest infection? Gentleman Zheng, follow me to ninth prince's wife's chamber.'

Gentleman Zheng thought Xiao Zai was friendly like Pei Jin. Everyone else treated him kindly too like they owed him a hundred silver taels.

Inside the chamber the incense fragrance made Gentleman Zheng feel relaxed and he knew a master physician had brewed the incense

fragrance. He heard rumors about a master physician living in Pei Jin's manor and he was happy to finally meet Bei Dou. But he didn't expect Bei Dou was a young man with a cold face.

Bei Dou only glanced once at Gentleman Zheng.

Gentleman Zheng sat on a chair in front of the bed hidden by a beaded curtain.

'Ninth prince's wife, please give me your arm,' Gentleman Zheng said.

Gentleman Zheng heard a cough then an arm appeared through the beaded curtain.

'Ninth prince's wife has a weak pulse,' Gentleman Zheng said. 'She has been ill with a chest infection for a long period. I'll give a maid a list of herbs to buy for ninth prince's wife. After she drinks the remedy between three to five days her body will improve.'

Pei Jin sighed in relief, passed Gentleman Zheng a paper note of one hundred silver taels and Gentleman Zheng left the manor.

Later at the palace Gentleman Zheng reported that Yan Shi Ning had a chest infection to Consort Mu and Pei Zhang.

'My speculation was wrong,' Consort Mu said.

'It's good she's not pregnant,' Pei Zhang said. 'Today is a good day. Both tenth brother and the empress are gone. Anyone left that choose to oppose me will be easily turned to dust.'

Consort Mu was also happy. The empress who she battled for decades was finally dead.

'I didn't expect she would kill herself,' Consort Mu said. 'I thought she would have wanted to kill us to avenge her son's death before she died.'

'The empress had high expectations of tenth brother,' Pei Zhang said. 'Her life dream dissolved in the ocean so it's understandable she would

kill herself. Mother, didn't you hear how the empress was hysterical after she found out about tenth brother's death?

'Xiao Zheng, the truth is the empress is a fool like Kang Hua,' Consort Mu said. 'The empress was only able to survive many years in the palace because she had a powerful family supporting her.'

'Mother, now our rivals that need to die have died and everyone else has aged,' Pei Zhang said. 'The young are incompetent and easily to defeat. Now that the empress and the crown prince are gone, their supporters aren't foolish and will resign like everyone at Guo Huang's manor. Mother, why do you think Guo Huang lost power that year?'

'The higher Guo Huang was the lower he fell,' Consort Mu said.

'Mother, I understand,' Pei Zhang said.

'Today our biggest rivals are gone and your ninth brother has no heir,' Consort Mu said. 'The right opportunity for you to be crown prince will arrive soon.'

At Pei Jin's manor the beaded curtains were parted the moment Gentleman Zheng left.

On the bed Yan Shi Ning and Xiao Tu were laying side by side and smiling cheekily.

Yan Shi Ning got out of the bed and smiled at Pei Jin. 'How was the performance?'

Pei Jin helped Yan Shi Ning stand. 'Of course it was a convincing performance. This time we need to thank Xiao Tu.'

Xiao Tu got out of the bed and was about to say there was no need to thank her but Bei Dou scoffed loudly.

'What is there to scoff about?' Pei Jin asked Bei Dou.

Bei Dou looked at Xiao Tu's wrist and he scoffed. How dare that old man Zheng touch Xiao Tu's wrist even though a thin handkerchief

covered her wrist. He scoffed because he didn't get to touch Xiao Tu's wrist yet.

Yan Shi Ning noticed Bei Dou's attention was solely focused on Xiao Tu.

'It's been a long time since there's been something to celebrate at the manor,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin understood Yan Shi Ning's words and he saw Bei Dou relaxed.

'Bei Dou, you're not young anymore,' Pei Jin said. 'Xiao Tu is sixteen years old... a good age to marry... Shi Ning, is there an auspicious day soon?'

'What auspicious day?' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If they're happy then any day is an auspicious day.'

'Shi Ning is right,' Pei Jin said. 'Tomorrow is an auspicious day if Bei Dou is happy.'

Bei Dou looked out the window like he wasn't happy in front of the married pair who was mocking him. Then Bei Dou looked at Xiao Tu, she looked calm so he looked out the window again.

'It appears Gentleman Bei isn't happy,' Pei Jin teased. 'What do we do now?'

'Gentleman Bei isn't unhappy,' Xiao Tu said.

'How do you know he isn't unhappy?' Pei Jin asked.

'When Gentleman Bei's ears are red it means he's happy,' Xiao Tu said. 'Gentleman Bei's ears are red.'

Bei Dou was speechless like trouble flew past his head.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning saw Bei Dou's red ears and they smiled.

'Then tomorrow is an auspicious day for a wedding day,' Pei Jin said.

'But it's a grieving period for the empress and the crown prince's deaths,' Xiao Tu said. 'No one is allowed to marry.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning stopped smiling while Bei Dou felt trouble flew past his head again.

'But we can secretly marry... and not let outsiders know...' Xiao Tu said.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning both laughed because Bei Dou's ears turned a shade of red brighter.

Short Side Story Four

Four possible scenarios that could happen after Bei Dou and Xiao Tu's wedding ceremony:

Scenario One – Bei Dou and Xiao Tu sat on a bed together and their faces were flushed red. Bei Dou initiated a kiss and they both fell onto the bed... it was a misty night... the following day...

Scenario Two – Xiao Tu stripped Bei Dou's clothes and bound him. She held incense sticks in one hand and a whip in the other hand and she smiled at him.

Bei Dou's eyes widened and he mumbled, 'No need... kiss... no need...'

Scenario Three – On Bei Dou and Xiao Tu's wedding night...

Bei Dou: Tonight's our wedding night.

Xiao Tu: Yes.

Bei Dou: We should sleep early tonight.

Xiao Tu: Yes.

A while later a steady snore was heard in their chamber.

Scenario Four – On Bei Dou and Xiao Tu’s wedding day everyone at the gentle ninth prince’s manor were happy the whole day. The following day the atmosphere was good...

Chapter 56

A solemn atmosphere shrouded the imperial city.

Everyone at Pei Jin’s manor hid their joy.

There were no red flowers, no firecrackers and no red wedding decorations. Everyone at Pei Jin’s manor only changed into new clothes and ate a simple wedding banquet together.

In the evening Bei Dou and Xiao Tu were escorted to their chamber.

When Bei Dou was about to step into the chamber, Pei Jin pulled him back.

‘Do you know how to do it?’ Pei Jin asked softly.

Pei Jin feared the innocent Bei Dou wouldn’t know how to do it.

‘Don’t forget I’m a physician,’ Bei Dou said.

‘I wish you a happy night!’ Pei Jin said.

‘Um,’ Bei Dou said.

Bei Dou stepped into the chamber but Pei Jin pulled him back again.

‘Are you certain you understand what to do?’ Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou looked suspiciously at Pei Jin then Bei Dou strode into the chamber.

Bei Dou carefully checked the windows and doors were locked properly then he stepped toward the bed.

Bei Dou's heart pounded the moment he saw the veiled Xiao Tu on the bed. He waited for his heart to calm a little then he sat on the bed next to her and he stared at the floor for a while.

Bei Dou's hands began fiddling. He didn't know what to do next because it wasn't written in the medical books that he studied.

Xiao Tu slowly moved closer toward Bei Dou and she stretched out her hand in the direction of his hand. He thought she was a daring demoness and his hesitations disappeared. He pushed her onto the bed and pulled off her red veil... except the face of the person below his body wasn't Xiao Tu!

'Ah!' Xiao Zai cried out.

Pei Jin kicked open the locked door, entered the chamber and saw Xiao Zai was crying.

'Ninth prince, save me!' Xiao Zai begged.

A while later Xiao Zai was exchanged for Xiao Tu and Bei Dou finally calmed down a little. But Bei Dou still glared at Pei Jin like Pei Jin was his biggest enemy.

Pei Jin was smiling because Bei Dou tasted what it was like to have other people interfere during a good night.

'It's not that I didn't let you do it,' Pei Jin teased. 'But it wasn't the right time to do it.'

Pei Jin silently cursed Bei Dou, 'you dare to lie I needed to wait a year!'

Bei Dou didn't want to admit that he shouldn't have teased Pei Jin in the past.

Pei Jin waited for Bei Dou to close the door then he turned around to look at Xiao Zai.

'Ninth prince, you're too cruel,' Xiao Zai sulked. 'What happens if Gentleman Bei didn't take off the veil but continued to undress me?'

Pei Jin patted Xiao Zai's shoulder. 'Then you can enjoy being undressed and what happens afterward.'

Xiao Zai was speechless at Pei Jin's way of comforting another person.

Inside the chamber Bei Dou was satisfied it was Xiao Tu on the bed next to him. But he didn't know what to do next.

'Tonight is our wedding night,' Bei Dou said.

'Yes,' Xiao Tu said.

'We should sleep early tonight,' Bei Dou said.

'Yes,' Xiao Tu said.

Xiao Tu began to take off her clothes.

Bei Dou panicked. 'Xiao Tu, what are you doing?'

'Gentleman Bei, don't you take off your clothes before you sleep?' Xiao Tu asked calmly.

Bei Dou was speechless.

Bei Dou and Xiao Tu took off their clothes and they laid straight under the same blanket.

Bei Dou smelt Xiao Tu's body scent and his body stiffened. He recited in his head one hundred times that a spring night was more precious than thousands of silver taels.

Bei Dou dared to look at Xiao Tu's face of anticipation.

'Gentleman Bei, you can't sleep?' Xiao Tu asked.

'Um,' Bei Dou said.

Bei Dou didn't know why his body felt hot.

Xiao Tu widened her eyes. 'Then we should have a wedding night.'

Bei Dou was startled speechless. He thought Xiao Tu was a direct woman.

Xiao Tu leaned her face closer to Bei Dou's face.

Xiao Tu was only wearing her thin undergarments. If Bei Dou looked down then he could see her bare slender legs and her soft chest, his whole body stiffened. Her lips touched his lips and his soul flew away.

In that moment Bei Dou heard strange thump noises beneath the bed. He turned his head around and saw Xiao Hui got out from underneath the bed.

Xiao Hui stood and brushed dust off his clothes. 'Ninth prince asked me to come here to tell you when it's the middle of the tiger hour you should sleep early.'

Xiao Hui unlocked the window and escaped the chamber before Bei Dou could slice him into pieces.

Bei Dou unlocked the door and he saw Pei Jin was smiling brightly.

'Gentleman Bei, it's late,' Pei Jin said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Pei-Jin!' Bei Dou said through gritted teeth.

'Gentleman Bei, it's your wedding night,' Pei Jin said. 'You don't need to be this stern.'

Pei Jin looked carefully at the sword in Bei Dou's hand then he ran away.

'Gentleman Bei, if you want to say anything then you can say it calmly,' Pei Jin said. 'Don't ruin your wedding night by wielding a sword.'

Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai hid behind a wall nearby and they quietly watched Pei Jin who was being chased by the sword wielding Bei Dou.

'Should we help ninth prince?' Xiao Hui asked.

'Why should I help ninth prince?' Xiao Zai asked. 'If it wasn't ninth prince who persuaded me to tease Gentleman Bei then I wouldn't be tossed outside the chamber. My bottom is still numb... Xiao Hui my bottom hurts. Can you help me massage my bottom?'

'Do you want to die?' Xiao Hui asked.

'Confess, why did you agree to help ninth prince tease Gentleman Bei?' Xiao Zai asked.

Xiao Hui coughed. 'The moon tonight is bright and full!'

Xiao Zai looked up at the moon. 'What bright full moon? It's a new moon!'

Xiao Hui would never confess Pei Jin promised he wouldn't separate him and Xiao Zai if he helped Pei Jin tease Bei Dou.

Inside the chamber, Bei Dou checked everywhere thoroughly and he returned to the bed. But he heard Xiao Tu's steady snoring!

Bei Dou tossed and turned on the bed. What wedding night? His wife was happily sleeping while he couldn't sleep.

A while later Bei Dou saw Xiao Tu was about to wake up so he laid still and closed his eyes. But he didn't hear any sounds.

'Gentleman Bei, you can't sleep?' Xiao Tu asked.

'No,' Bei Dou said.

'Do you want to have a wedding night?' Xiao Tu asked.

Bei Dou widened his eyes. 'Um'

Xiao Tu nodded and leaned her face closer to Bei Dou's face.

Bei Dou held Xiao Tu's shoulders. 'Let me.'

Xiao Tu obediently laid on the bed. 'Ninth prince's wife said there's a possibility you don't know what to do and she advised me to take the initiative.'

Bei Dou was frustrated why others thought he didn't know what to do. He gently licked Xiao Tu's soft and fragrant lips.

Xiao Tu opened her eyes. 'Gentleman Bei, do you know how to kiss?'

Bei Dou was confused, he thought he was kissing Xiao Tu's lips.

'Gentleman Bei, you need to insert your tongue inside my mouth,' Xiao Tu said.

Xiao Tu pulled Bei Dou's neck down, she kissed him and inserted her tongue inside his mouth.

'Like this,' Xiao Tu said.

'Xiao Tu, who taught you?' Bei Dou asked.

'Ninth prince's wife taught me,' Xiao Tu said.

Bei Dou almost fell off the bed. The Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning pair was capable of being concerned about anything!

Bei Dou dismissed thoughts about the rotten pair. His thoughts were consumed by Xiao Tu's sweet mouth, taking off her undergarments and her soft naked body.

Bei Dou sucked Xiao Tu's breasts like a newborn drinking milk.

'Gentleman Bei, be gentle... it hurts,' Xiao Tu said.

Bei Dou raised his head and kissed Xiao Tu's lips. He positioned himself between her legs but no matter how he pushed himself forward to death, he couldn't enter inside her.

Bei Dou knew Xiao Tu was in pain but he didn't stop pushing himself forward. He didn't know why he couldn't enter inside her like what was written in the medical books.

Outside the chamber Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were concerned about the lack of sounds.

'Pei Jin, do you think he knows what to do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Indeed he doesn't know what to do,' Pei Jin said.

'Do you need to call him outside to give him instructions?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'No, it's late,' Pei Jin said. 'Let's go back to our chamber.'

Chapter 57

The morning after Bei Dou and Xiao Tu's wedding.

Bei Dou rolled around from night to dawn and finally he could eat Xiao Tu.

Pei Jin successfully ate Yan Shi Ning.

That morning Yan Shi Ning woke up and saw Pei Jin staring sadly at the ceiling. She knocked her head on his arm. 'Pei Jin, what are you thinking?'

'I'm thinking it's been many days and it's the right time for me to see tenth brother,' Pei Jin said.

'You should go,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, do you want to accompany me?' Pei Jin asked.

'I can go outside?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning was three months pregnant and her stomach was round. If she walked outside the manor then her pregnancy wouldn't be a secret anymore.

'Shi Ning, you've been locked at home for months,' Pei Jin said. 'Don't you want to go outside?'

'I do want to go outside but... I decided I want to continue staying home,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin understood Yan Shi Ning didn't want to risk losing their child and he held her hand. 'Shi Ning, I've made you worried.'

'It's enough that you know,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Pei Jin, on the way home remember to buy braised trotters and soft dates at Guo Fu for me.'

Yan Shi Ning licked her lips and felt hungry.

'Shi Ning, recently you've been craving for soft food,' Pei Jin said.

'Um, is something wrong with my cravings?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Elders say if a pregnant woman is carrying a boy then she'll crave soft food,' Pei Jin said. He rubbed Yan Shi Ning's stomach. 'Do you think our child is a boy?'

Yan Shi Ning kicked Pei Jin, his hands were rubbing past her stomach. 'Pei Jin, take your hands away.'

Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning, dressed and unwillingly left the chamber. He was happy to eat Yan Shi Ning but he regretted he couldn't eat her as often as he did before she was pregnant.

West of the imperial city there was a busy shop owned by Gentleman Su Ci. He stood at the front of the shop and greeted customers. He grinned after he saw Pei Jin stepped out of a horse carriage.

'Ninth prince, what wind brought you here?' Su Ci asked. 'Someone bring the rare tea to ninth prince!'

'Gentleman Su Ci, you're too generous,' Pei Jin praised. 'I heard you have a rare jade bracelet at your shop. I came here because I'm interested in seeing the rare jade bracelet.'

'Ninth prince, I understand,' Su Ci said. 'Please come inside. We can drink tea and talk.'

'Sorry for troubling Gentleman Su Ci,' Pei Jin said and walked into the shop.

The rich young gentleman customers who were inside the shop gossiped about Pei Jin.

'Ninth prince is kind and gentle as rumored,' the first young man said. 'A while ago I heard he bought a rare pair of jade bracelets for his wife.'

'You don't know how much ninth prince dotes on his wife,' the second young man said. 'To ninth prince gold and silver can't compare to a beauty's smile.'

'What about you?' the first young man asked. 'Aren't you going to buy this ring? It's only five hundred silver taels. Are you not buying it because your heart will miss the silver taels?'

'No, I have selective vision!' the second young man said. 'Fu Wu, are there other rings similar to this ring?'

Su Ci led Pei Jin into a private room.

'Heavens, I'm begging ninth prince to take the jade away,' Su Ci said. 'You caused me to lose peaceful sleep by keeping the jade here.'

'Your cheeks look a healthy pink and you look livelier than in the past,' Pei Jin said.

'It's an act!' Su Ci said.

'Show me the jade,' Pei Jin said.

Su Ci obediently pushed a hidden clay ornament and exposed a secret passageway through a wall.

Pei Jin looked down at the spacious descending stairway. 'It's impressive.'

Su Ci led Pei Jin down the stairs and to a locked door that had light shining through the gaps of the door.

'He's inside,' Su Ci said. 'I'll be guarding and waiting for you outside.'

'Um, is there anything else?' Pei Jin asked.

'It's better if you see him yourself,' Su Ci said.

Pei Jin thought it wasn't good news. He watched Su Ci walked upstairs then he unlocked the door.

Inside the room Pei Lam's hair was messy, his face was pale and he sat gloomily at a table.

'Ninth brother,' Pei Lam said.

Pei Jin's back turned cold to see Pei Lam's disturbing calmness as though Pei Lam predicted his visit.

Pei Lam stared at the barricaded window. 'I've been asking myself when ninth brother would visit me. I didn't think ninth brother would visit this soon. Is it twelve or thirteen days... ninth brother, look at this place. It's hard to see if it's night or day.'

Pei Jin understood Su Ci's words, Pei Lam was mumbling to himself.

'How did you know it was me?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Lam turned around and looked at Pei Jin. 'Ninth prince, what's scaring you?'

Pei Jin didn't know why Pei Lam's eyes looked soulless.

'Ninth brother, you don't need to be scared,' Pei Lam said. 'I'm your captive and I can't do anything to harm you. Ninth brother, look at me. Even if you gave me a sword I still wouldn't be able to do anything.'

Pei Jin looked at Pei Lam's two missing fingers and he shivered. He didn't expect saying to Bei Dou that he could deal with the empress and Pei Lam would lead to Bei Dou cutting off two of Pei Lam's fingers and using it to force the empress to kill herself.

'Ninth brother, why did you cut off two of my fingers?' Pei Lam asked. 'I thought about why for many days. But after I heard the ringing sounds of funeral bells I understood why. Ninth brother, is my imperial mother dead?'

Pei Jin was startled to see Pei Lam calmly treated the empress' death as something trivial.

'It's good that she's dead,' Pei Lam said. 'I'm not the crown prince anymore, she wouldn't have survived much longer in the palace. Imperial mother had lived a tiring life. The sooner she closes her eyes the sooner she can rest. Death is an escape for her.'

Pei Jin couldn't believe it was the Pei Lam he knew in the past. He didn't know how a lively Pei Lam could say such despairing thoughts.

'Is that why you killed Yan Shi Ting?' Pei Jin asked.

'Shi Ting... ' Pei Lam asked. He vaguely remembered Yan Shi Ting. 'I killed her. She lived a life of suffering. It's better for her to die.'

Pei Lam looked down at his hands. 'I used these two hands to choke her to death and pushed her down the well. It's an unforgiveable crime... but it was worth freeing Shi Ting.'

Pei Jin didn't know how he could understand Pei Lam's eerie indifference.

'Ninth brother, do you think I'm too cruel?' Pei Lam asked. 'Ninth brother, did you expect I'm capable of being this cruel?'

Pei Jin didn't want to admit he suspected Pei Lam was possessed by a demon.

'Ninth brother, the truth is there's no one that isn't cruel,' Pei Lam said.

'What are you implying?' Pei Jin asked.

'Ninth brother, we're all cruel,' Pei Lam said. 'I killed Yan Shi Ting. But ninth brother, ninth sister and everyone else caused her to become insane. Ninth brother, who do you think is crueller?'

Pei Jin didn't know what to say.

'Ninth brother, I only wanted to leave,' Pei Lam said. 'I wanted to escape my cage. Ninth brother, why did you detain me?'

'You truly want to leave?' Pei Jin asked.

'If I didn't want to leave then why did I request many times to take my crown position away?' Pei Lam asked. 'Why did I fake my own death? It's a pity ninth brother ruined everything.'

'You don't want to be the crown prince?' Pei Jin asked.

'This imperial city is only dust eating people,' Pei Lam said.

'If your intention was to leave then why did you need to warn imperial father about me?' Pei Jin asked.

'Warn imperial father... ' Pei Lam asked. 'It appears Wang Fu Mu is ninth brother's ally.'

Pei Jin was impressed by Pei Lam's intelligence.

'Ninth brother, you win!' Pei Lam said.

'Do you want me to die?' Pei Jin asked.

'No,' Pei Lam said.

Pei Lam didn't know why he warned their father. Did he wanted to harm Pei Jin? But he thought Pei Jin was more suited to sit on the throne than Pei Zhang. If he decided to let go of his crown position... why did he need to warn their father?

Pei Lam thought about his father's disappointment and hurt. Perhaps he wanted to compensate his father's pain. His father couldn't see through Pei Jin. So if he warned his father about Pei Jin then his father didn't need to be troubled about Pei Jin.

'Pei Lam, do you think your life is full of unbearable sufferings?' Pei Jin asked. 'Do you think you can only escape if you leave? Do you think everyone close to you suffered too and they can only escape if they die?'

Pei Lam nodded his head.

'Pei Lam, why is it that everyone else that suffered can only escape if they die?' Pei Jin asked. 'Yet you suffered too but don't think you need to die to escape.'

Pei Jin grabbed Pei Lam's collar, teared Pei Lam's robes opened and exposed Pei Lam's chest scar.

'Ninth brother, what are you doing?' Pei Lam asked.

'Why didn't you stab your heart a little deeper?' Pei Jin asked. 'Is it because you didn't want to die? Is it because you're scared of death?'

Pei Jin pushed Pei Lam onto the bed and looked down at Pei Lam.

'Pei Lam, do you think you're clean and innocent?' Pei Jin asked. 'The truth is you're too dirty! You think you're righteous. Yet you're scared of death and too deceitful. If you didn't want to become the emperor then you should have said you didn't want to before you became the crown prince. If you didn't want to marry Yan Shi Ting then you should have kept your distance from her at the start and not give her hope. For your own gains, you used others. Do you think your actions are righteous? Pei Lam, you don't need to act like this, it's too ugly.'

In Pei Lam's world, he was the only good and beautiful person inside his world. He thought he didn't care about the grievances of the outside world but he didn't expect the world he built for himself was too weak. Pei Jin only said a few words to him and his world turned to dust. He wasn't good and beautiful as he thought so his world was no longer good and beautiful. He was a bad person so he had built an ugly world.

'Pei Lam, you've only stepped on others' hopes and good intentions,' Pei Jin said. 'You've hurt the people who supported you for what you call freedom and escape. Do you know why your imperial mother died? She wanted you to stay alive so she killed herself. The palace isn't a cage, it's not dust but you perceived it as a cage to justify your cruel actions in the past.'

Pei Lam fell into a hopeless state.

'If you think the palace is a scary place then this place doesn't have any scary battles,' Pei Jin said. 'You can be happy on your own here.'

Pei Jin left the room and he didn't look back at the soulless Pei Lam.

Pei Lam awoken from his dark thoughts after he heard the sound of the door lock.

'Let me out!' Pei Lam cried out. 'You don't need to trap me here!'

Pei Lam yelled, kicked and punched the door but there was no reply outside the door.

The silence was killing Pei Lam.

'You don't need to trap me here... you can kill me but you don't need to trap me here...' Pei Lam mumbled.

Chapter 58

Pei Jin stood outside Pei Lam's room.

Pei Jin's back was sweaty. He heard Pei Lam yelled hysterically and Pei Lam's mumbles to himself. Pei Jin didn't know why Pei Lam became like that. Was it because Pei Lam was too intelligent and punctured a brain nerve?

Pei Jin couldn't answer Pei Lam, who was crueller? Was it true Yan Shi Ting would suffer less if she died? But after everything Pei Lam had done, Pei Lam lost to himself.

Pei Jin left Su Ci's shop. On the way home a messenger delivered a message to Pei Jin from Su Ci, Pei Lam killed himself. Pei Jin felt remorseful he had indirectly caused Pei Lam to shed fresh blood.

While Pei Jin was away from home, a maid rushed into Yan Shi Ning's chamber.

'Mistress, a few women from Huang Guo's manor are here to see you,' the maid said.

Yan Shi Ning was eating pecans when the maid delivered bad news. She didn't know what Huang Guo was scheming, but she changed into a loose dress to protect hers and Pei Jin's child.

Yan Shi Ning asked the maid to escort the women into her chamber.

The maid led the women into Yan Shi Ning's chamber and poured tea.

'Shi Ning, I heard you've been ill,' second aunt said. 'I wanted to visit you earlier but I heard you were bedridden. Two days ago, I heard you've recovered so I came to visit you today.'

Although Yan Shi Ning had stayed home for many months, she didn't forget how insincere Huang Guo's daughter-in-laws were.

'Aunts, forgive me for making everyone worried,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Second sister, I remembered you brought a bracelet for Shi Ting,' third aunt said.

'Third sister, thank you for reminding me,' second aunt said. She pulled out a pink jade bracelet and gave it to Yan Shi Ning. 'Shi Ning this is for you. I think the colour suits you.'

Yan Shi Ning couldn't refuse and wore the bracelet. She admitted it was a beautiful bracelet with a sweet scent.

'Second sister, it's a beautiful bracelet,' third aunt praised. 'Second sister, you're too frugal. Last time I wanted to wear it but you didn't let me... but why does it have a sweet scent... isn't this a che fragrance?'

Yan Shi Ning's face paled and she took off the bracelet, che fragrances were used to abort children.

'Third sister, is it a che fragrance?' second aunt asked. 'I didn't know. I only thought it was a sweet scent... Shi Ning, forgive my ignorance...'

Yan Shi Ning was scared to death but she spoke calmly. 'Second aunt, it isn't your fault. You didn't know.'

Yan Shi Ning assessed the women who hid their intentions well.

The women praised Yan Shi Ning's dress and she couldn't avoid them purposely touching her waist. Although her stomach was only slightly round, it was still rounder than before she was pregnant.

'Shi Ning, I noticed you've been eating a lot of soft food,' second aunt said. 'Shi Ning, are you pregnant? If you're pregnant you should share the good news with your aunts.'

'Of course,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning was certain the women visited her to see if she was pregnant but she didn't know why.

Yan Shi Ning asked the maid to escort the women to their horse carriage and she waited for Pei Jin's return.

A while later Pei Jin returned to the manor and found Yan Shi Ning in deep thought in their chamber.

'Wife, are you worried about something or are you missing your husband?' Pei Jin asked.

'Earlier Huang Guo's daughter-in-laws came to visit me,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Why did they come?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin sat on the bed and pulled Yan Shi Ning onto his lap. There were maids cleaning in their chamber so she protested but he hugged her and didn't let her go.

Luckily the maids kept their eyes on the floor and quickly left the chamber.

'Pei Jin, don't forget you're gentle ninth prince,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Why are you more of a scoundrel by the day?'

Pei Jin rubbed his face on Yan Shi Ning's neck and spoke in a sad tone. 'Shi Ning, Pei Lam died.'

Yan Shi Ning sat still on Pei Jin's lap.

'Pei Lam broke a teapot and slit his throat,' Pei Jin said. 'When someone discovered what happened it was too late. Pei Lam lost too much blood and his last words were... it's clean red blood, finally I've escaped...' Pei Jin said.

In front of others Pei Jin acted like he was happy Pei Lam died. He could only show how guilty and sad he felt in front of Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning understood Pei Jin's feelings. She knew Pei Jin didn't kill Pei Lam but in Pei Jin's heart he blamed himself for Pei Lam's death.

Yan Shi Ning turned around and wrapped her arms around Pei Jin's neck. He kissed her forehead and kissed her lips for a while.

'Wife, do you want to do it in the middle of the day with your husband?' Pei Jin asked.

'Do you want to die?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Wife, it appears you've learned bad habits from Xiao Hui,' Pei Jin said. 'I think I have to change your personal guards. You only know how to follow their bad habits. Soon you'll learn to eavesdrop well like Xiao Zai.'

'Pei Jin, don't change my personal guards,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai are amusing guards.'

'Alright,' Pei Jin said. 'Shi Ning, you didn't tell me why Huang Guo's daughter-in-laws came to visit you.'

'I think they came to see if I'm pregnant,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Perhaps I've given away the secret about our child.'

Pei Jin listened to Yan Shi Ning recount about the bracelet and how the women behaved strangely.

'What does Huang Guo want?' Pei Jin asked. 'The empress is dead. He should be satisfied Consort Chen's death is avenged.'

'Will it be troublesome if he knows I'm pregnant?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I'm worried our peaceful days are over,' Pei Jin said.

'What should we do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'We'll silently follow them and deal with them at the right opportunity,' Pei Jin said.

In the palace Wang Fu Mu announced the emperor's arrival in the imperial court.

The court officials who supported Pei Zhang were surprised to see why Huang Guo was at the palace.

The emperor sat on his throne, his head and heart was plagued with the deaths of the empress and his tenth son.

'Your majesty, I have something important to report,' Official Zai Ci said.

'What is it?' the emperor asked.

Wang Fu Mu gave the emperor the petition Official Zai Ci prepared.

'Your majesty, I and many other court officials recommend seventh prince to become the crown prince,' Official Zai Ci said.

The emperor hid his displeasure. He couldn't bring his tenth son back to life but he was dissatisfied with his seventh son's black heart.

'Huang Guo, what do you think?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty, I disagree,' Huang Guo said.

Everyone was silent and thought Huang Guo was daring to openly oppose Pei Zhang.

'Your majesty, I believe ninth prince is more suitable to be the crown prince,' Huang Guo said.

Chapter 59

The emperor listened to Huang Guo's opinion.

'Ninth prince is intelligent, humble and patient,' Huang Guo praised. 'That year in Xuan Qing, he worked tirelessly day and night to find ways to prevent severe floods and saved the livelihoods of many citizens. But he humbly gave the credit to others. In Southern Jiang, his strategies helped to subdue the rebels. Everyone here can clearly see that ninth prince is a selfless and diligent person.'

The other court officials thought Pei Jin deserved Huang Guo's praises. In the past they didn't acknowledge Pei Jin's achievements because they knew the emperor didn't favor Pei Jin.

The emperor's expression darkened. No one dared to dispute Huang Guo's words. It implied everyone hid the extent of his ninth son's contributions to the Dian Kingdom and his court officials deceived him!

'Everyone here also knows ninth prince is a gentle and kind person,' Huang Guo said. 'He is respectful and compassionate toward citizens. If he becomes the crown prince, it'll be a blessing for all the citizens.'

The court officials who supported the empress and Pei Zhang kowtowed in front of the emperor and agreed with Huang Guo's recommendation to make Pei Jin the crown prince. After the empress and Pei Lam died, they were scared Consort Mu and Pei Zhang would eliminate them. So Huang Guo's words gave them a chance to live.

'Your majesty, seventh prince is the most suitable candidate to be the crown prince,' Official Zai Ci said. 'Your majesty, you also need to consider your grandchildren.'

'Your majesty, I agree your majesty should consider your grandchildren,' Huang Guo said.

'Huang Guo, what are you saying?' the emperor asked.

'Congratulations your majesty,' Huang Guo said. 'In a few months your majesty will have a grandson.'

'Huang Guo, why are you the only one congratulating me?' the emperor asked.

'Recently my daughter-in-laws visited ninth prince's wife and accidentally found out ninth prince's wife is pregnant,' Huang Guo said.

'Truly?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty, if you don't believe me then your majesty can send your imperial physicians to examine ninth prince's wife,' Huang Guo said.

The emperor wasn't certain if Huang Guo's words were true, but his fingers trembled. He was angry why his ninth son didn't inform about his ninth daughter-in-law's pregnancy.

Pei Zhang was shocked to hear his ninth brother's wife was pregnant. His mother's imperial physician reported that Yan Shi Ning had a chest infection and he knew Gentleman Zheng wouldn't dare lie to him and his mother.

The loud commotion in the imperial court made the emperor angrier. The emperor dismissed everyone and he summoned Official Hu to the imperial calligraphy room.

Inside the imperial calligraphy room the emperor sat on the highest chair and he gave permission for Official Hu to sit.

'Hu, between seventh prince and ninth prince who do you think is more suitable?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty is wise and knows who is more suitable,' Official Hu said.

'I don't want to hear pleasantries!' the emperor said. 'I won't punish you if you give me your honest opinion.'

'Your majesty, I believe ninth prince is more suitable,' Official Hu said.

'Why?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty, truthfully I'm not close to neither seventh prince nor ninth prince,' Official Hu said. 'Your majesty, forgive me for my ignorant thoughts.'

'Alright,' the emperor said. 'You're free to speak your thoughts.'

'Your majesty, ninth prince is truly someone who is fair and merciful which makes him more suitable to be the crown prince,' Official Hu said.

The emperor silently reflected Official Hu's words. He knew citizens of the Dian Kingdom needed a ruler who was fair and merciful to guide the kingdom through calamities and peaceful periods.

'I understand,' the emperor said. 'Hu you can leave first.'

Official Hu bowed to the emperor and left the imperial calligraphy room.

On the way back to the Hu Manor, Official Hu remembered his daughter's shame six years ago. That year he and Pei Jin caught his daughter seducing Pei Zhang when his daughter was betrothed to Pei Jin. Pei Jin didn't expose his daughter's shame in front of the emperor. If it wasn't for Pei Jin's mercy and forgiveness then he would have lost his position in the imperial court six years ago. So he wanted to repay Pei Jin for sparing his reputation.

Official Hu thought his dead daughter was foolish while alive. If his daughter was wise then she would be alive and become the empress. Even though it wasn't certain Pei Jin would become emperor, he didn't know why he felt it was inevitable Pei Jin would become emperor. He admitted in the past he didn't expect the carefree and powerless Pei Jin would one day have many court officials support Pei Jin to become emperor.

Chapter 60

Oblivious to the internal battles between the court officials in the palace, the guards at Pei Jin's manor were competing for grilled meat.

'Why aren't you pushing me higher in the air?' Xiao Zai asked. 'You need to use all your strength otherwise we won't get to eat ninth prince's grilled meat!'

Pei Jin wanted to motivate his lethargic guards during the colder days. He organised competitions like who could jump higher than the wall would be rewarded with grilled meat.

Everyone wanted to eat the delicious grilled meat from Southern Jiang, especially Xiao Zai.

Xiao Hui's arms were tired from supporting Xiao Zai's weight and he used his last strength to push Xiao Zai into the air... Xiao Zai flew over the wall... and landed in front of the emperor.

Xiao Zai thought if he died and Dizang asked him how he died, he would say he jumped too high and landed in the wrong spot.

After the commotion the emperor looked sternly at the people who knelt in front of him. Earlier he was scared to death, he thought an assassin flew over the wall.

'What was everyone doing?' the emperor asked.

'Imperial father, forgive me,' Pei Jin said. 'Recently the days have been colder. I wanted everyone at the manor to be active. I didn't expect to trouble imperial father. I deserve to die.'

The emperor glanced at the ropes and cuju balls on the ground and he knew Pei Jin wasn't lying. But he couldn't calm his anger until he glanced at Yan Shi Ning who was kneeling too.

'Everyone stand,' the emperor said. He turned around to look at his imperial physicians. 'Hurry and examine ninth prince's wife!'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were surprised to see the emperor but they were frightened after they heard the emperor's order. They looked at each other and realised Huang Guo was the culprit.

The emperor brought six imperial physicians to Pei Jin's manor. Outsiders would have thought Yan Shi Ning had a contagious illness if they didn't suspect she was pregnant.

Pei Jin gave Yan Shi Ning a don't-worry-I'm-here look and she gave him a your-father-is-troublesome look.

While the six imperial physicians examined Yan Shi Ning thoroughly, the emperor assessed everyone at Pei Jin's manor. Afterward he smelt a delicious grilled meat scent and it made him hungry. He didn't have an appetite for many days but the grilled meat also looked appealing.

Pei Jin noticed his father's eyes focused on the grilled meat so he brought a bowl of grilled meat to his father. 'Imperial father, this grilled meat is delicious.'

Wang Fu Mu inserted a silver needle into the grilled meat and assured the emperor they were safe to eat.

The emperor slowly ate the grilled meat.

The emperor chewed the grilled meat but he didn't say if it tasted delicious or awful.

Pei Jin and Wang Fu Mu didn't know what the emperor was thinking.

'Congratulations your majesty,' the head imperial physician said.

The emperor swallowed the grilled meat and didn't look like he heard the good news.

'Ninth son, follow me,' the emperor said.

Pei Jin followed the emperor into the calligraphy room. The emperor looked at the three portraits on the wall, they were all portraits of Yan Shi Ning. Then the emperor looked at Pei Jin who looked shy to let the emperor find out how much Pei Jin loved Yan Shi Ning.

'Why did you deceive me?' the emperor asked.

Pei Jin knelt in front of his father. 'Imperial father, I wouldn't dare to deceive you.'

'Don't dare?' the emperor asked. 'You've already dared and you can still say you don't dare! Can you say that you don't know your wife is pregnant more than three months?'

Pei Jin silently lowered his head.

‘Why did you deceive me?’ the emperor asked.

‘Because I want to protect imperial father’s grandson,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What are you implying?’ the emperor asked.

‘Imperial father, I only want to live a peaceful life but while I’m alive I need to be cautious,’ Pei Jin said.

The emperor understood Pei Jin’s words. He didn’t know who saw Pei Jin as an eyesore until he remembered the commotion at the palace and suspected who those people were.

‘Who do you need to be cautious of?’ the emperor asked.

‘Imperial father, I don’t know who,’ Pei Jin said.

‘You dare say you don’t know!’ the emperor said.

‘Imperial father, don’t be angry,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Imperial father, I truly don’t know. I was scared since the harvest festival incident. The person behind it still hasn’t been caught.’

The emperor was still troubled about who dared to send assassins into the palace. If he was in Pei Jin’s position then he would be worried about others finding out Yan Shi Ning’s pregnancy too.

‘You can stand and talk,’ the emperor said.

‘Thank you imperial father,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Ninth son, what are you hiding from me?’ the emperor asked.

‘Imperial father, I wouldn’t dare,’ Pei Jin said.

The emperor didn’t believe Pei Jin. But he knew if he forced Pei Jin to tell him what Pei Jin was hiding, Pei Jin would give him a reasonable

explanation. He wasn't certain if Pei Jin was satisfied to be a carefree prince.

'Ninth son, did you know earlier many court officials recommended you to be the crown prince?' the emperor asked.

The emperor assessed the strange look in Pei Jin's eyes. 'Ninth son, tell me if you want to be the crown prince.'

Pei Jin knew his father's smile meant if he gave the wrong answer then he would lose his life.