Farmhouse 1001

Chapter 1001: Rumors Abound

Gu Youyou's face was pale, and she whispered to Yuancheng in consolation, "They will definitely come out. Don't worry too much for now, eat more and fill your stomach."

Gu Youyou emerged from the carriage and suggested to Jin Zijin that they find someone to take Yuancheng back first.

This was an extremely sensitive child. Gu Youyou vividly remembered how he had cried his heart out when Doctor Zhou had passed away. With no kin to care for him, over the years Qin Changlin had provided him with great care, and he had come to regard Qin Changlin as his only family. If they had indeed met with disaster, Gu Youyou did not wish to tell him under such circumstances.

Yuancheng was sent back to Beijing, and Gu Youyou's group continued south.

Along the way, they distributed most of the food and medical supplies they had brought to treat the refugees, keeping only a small portion to continue their search.

During this time, they encountered another person, Doctor Zhou's head disciple, Cao Tianyou.

Cao Tianyou, to repay his master's kindness, had already joined Gu Youyou's ranks, changing the name of his pharmacy to Jisheng Hall.

With Cao Tianyou at the helm, the Jisheng Hall in Yangguan City had become the transportation hub of Jisheng Hall in the entire Zhuzhao Country, as well as the branch with the largest volume of goods traded.

He should have been making money hand over fist, so why did he now look like a beggar mingling among the crowd?

Gu Youyou sent someone to invite him into the carriage, and as he saw Gu Youyou, he kept sighing.

"Youyou, Cao feels truly ashamed. I thought I would have to beg all the way to Beijing, but unexpectedly, I ran into you halfway."

Gu Youyou surmised that the flood in Yangguan City must have caused heavy losses to Jisheng Hall, and she felt guilty.

She hurriedly said, "Man-made disasters can be avoided, but natural calamities are hard to dodge. Shopkeeper Cao, those are just external possessions. You needn't feel guilty."

After chatting with Cao Tianyou for a while, she learned that he had noticed something amiss with the rain and immediately had people transport their inventory elsewhere. Since there was so much stock, and the flood had come too quickly, even his precautions had been too late.

Most of the goods had been moved ahead of time, but many were still destroyed by the flood.

His family had already been evacuated, and he was the last one to leave.

Cao Tianyou, along with two house servants, had been rushing along the road in a horse-drawn carriage. With too many starving refugees along the way, the carriage had been looted, and he had lost touch with the two house servants. He had been begging for two days before he met Gu Youyou.

For days on end, Gu Youyou had been searching along the way and had encountered the last of the evacuees, but she had yet to see any members of the Gu Family or Qin Changlin.

Gu Youyou couldn't help but grow even more worried.

"Shopkeeper Cao, you go ahead to Beijing. I need to take this road to Qingshui Town."

Cao Tianyou sighed, "Qingshui Town was the worst hit, with severe casualties. If you're waiting for your family, I'm afraid... Sigh, it's still good to look for them, but you must be careful. It's no place for people right now."

Gu Youyou nodded gently, "I understand, Shopkeeper Cao, you go ahead to Beijing."

Cao Tianyou, however, waved his hand, "I'll not go to Beijing. I had heard about the fame of Jinxiu City a long time ago, and as soon as I found something wrong, I made arrangements for my family to go there. Yangguan City is unreachable now, so I'm heading to settle in Jinxiu City."

"If that's the case, then I'll take leave of you here." Gu Youyou called someone to send Cao Tianyou to Jinxiu City.

Since he had made arrangements early, he should be alright.

Along the way, apart from the wailing and crying of the disaster victims, they heard some unusual voices.

"The current emperor is heartless, angering the heavens, yet making us common people suffer such a great calamity. Where is the justice in this?"

"Yes, the first mountain to collapse was none other than Tianmen Mountain. If it hadn't been for the emperor's obstinate search for fairies on the mountain, we wouldn't have angered the fairies and brought down this torrential rain."

Chapter 1002: Questioning Imperial Authority

"I've also heard that the Emperor isn't the legitimate heir to the throne at all. It's said that when the rebellion happened years ago, the Third Prince wasn't actually rebelling; he had the Sacred Edict of Succession from the late Emperor and should have been the rightful successor. But he was executed as a traitor by the current Emperor. Heaven has eyes, retribution will come, not immediately, but in time. It's just the common people like us who suffer."

Such talk was extremely detrimental to imperial power, and Gu Youyou looked worriedly at Jin Zijin.

A shadow of unease passed over Jin Zijin's calm expression. If he guessed correctly, these rumors weren't just randomly spreading; there must be someone intentionally behind it.

Who would do this? Who wanted to, and if the imperial authority were put into question, who would benefit the most?

"Heh..." Jin Zijin let out a cold laugh, it seems he's still not giving up.

Back then, even with the Sacred Edict and a large base of supporters, they couldn't bring down Jin Moning, let alone now without the Sacred Edict, and dealing with the current Jin Moning.

If a few rumors paired with a natural disaster could topple Jin Moning, the world would likely be in chaos by now.

"That's his problem, no need to worry," Jin Zijin said.

Two more days passed, and they rarely encountered any refugees on the road now, only occasionally seeing the elderly, women, children, or the sick.

They had asked around and learned that these were people from a few villages around Qingshui Town.

Gu Youyou's heart sank further. These people made it this far, yet there was still no sign of the Gu Family.

Jin Zijin stood behind her and said in a low voice, "They might be trapped somewhere, it doesn't necessarily mean they've encountered disaster."

The rain had stopped, and the floodwaters were gradually receding.

After being trapped for more than ten days, there probably weren't many who had survived.

"I want to go to Lotus Village to have a look," Gu Youyou said.

They were nearly at Qingshui Town. Now that the rain had stopped and the flood was receding quickly, even if all the houses in Lotus Village had been destroyed, she still wanted to see for herself.

"Alright, I'll come with you," Jin Zijin brought two horses over.

"Mm," Gu Youyou nodded at him, then turned to Searcy and the others, "You all head back first, maybe find a place to wait for us. The road ahead might be tough for the carriage."

They were all exhausted from the past few days' journey. Many fell ill on the way, and Searcy always complained that saving people was more troublesome than poisoning them.

She was the most tired after Gu Youyou and was already reluctant to continue. She simply nodded and agreed.

"Then you be careful too, if you really can't find them, let it be. Each has their own fate. This is a natural disaster, nothing can be done."

"Alright, I know," said Gu Youyou. She was a doctor and faced life and death more candidly than most; there was no sense in demanding the impossible.

...

Below the mountain was a relentless flood, while above were villagers from Lotus Village who had managed to evacuate in time.

When the flash flood struck that day, they couldn't escape in time. Qin Changlin suggested climbing higher, so they ended up trapped on top of that mountain.

The provisions they'd escaped with were nearly gone, and Gu Wen, who had been severely ill, was close to his last breath.

The Gu Family, taking care of Gu Wen, had to separate from the other villagers, with Qin Changlin staying by their side.

Huang Xiangwen’s face was streaked with tears, as by now, Gu Wen had nearly lost consciousness, breathing heavily, with more breaths out than in, occasionally raving about how the Gu Family’s house was his, the Silver was his, and all the fields were his.

He also berated Huang Xiangwen as a spendthrift, accusing her of squandering their Silver Coin and property on outsiders.

Chapter 1003: The Death of Gu Wen

Huang Xiangwen bitterly complained, "You’re nearly out of breath, yet you can’t forget about those worldly possessions."

"With the state you’re in now, even if you had all the land in the village, could you even farm it?"

Qin Changlin informed them that today would be the day, urging them to make preparations.

But in the current situation, how could they prepare? And what was there to prepare?

At home, they could at least make preparations for his death garments, a coffin, incense, and paper money—every necessary item—but now they didn’t even have a straw mat.

"Dabao, your father has suffered so much, wu wu..."

Recalling that Gu Wen had struggled all his life and now didn’t even have a straw mat at the end, Huang Xiangwen was overwhelmed by grief and burst into loud sobs.

Their children were also heartbroken, and Qin Changlin consoled them, "Auntie Gu, life and death are predestined. You mustn’t grieve too much. We’ve been trapped on this hill for so long, and the water is about to recede. We still need to conserve energy to survive."

On the other side of the hilltop, the villagers, hearing the crying from the Gu Family, turned to look. Erya put down her child and said to Shunzi, "I'll go take a look; you keep an eye on the child."

Since Gu Wen had contracted tuberculosis, which was contagious, others kept their distance for fear of infection, especially under these circumstances, where contracting the disease could be deadly.

"Auntie," Erya said to Huang Xiangwen and Sanya as she helped them up, "let uncle go in peace."

After Erya was driven out of the Gu Family, they had become enemies, even though she managed to separate from them later with Youyou's help; the bitterness in her heart remained unresolved. It was the first time in years that Erya had called them uncle and auntie.

Gu Wen finally stopped breathing, and the hill reverberated with the heart-wrenching cries of the Gu Family.

The villagers, on the other hand, seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

With the floodwater rapidly receding at the foot of the hill, they would soon have to move on, and no one wanted the Gu Family to lug Gu Wen's half-dead body along with them.

"Mother, what do we do now? Dad... when the water recedes, should we take him back to the village to bury him?"

The village was not far from Lotus Village, but even without seeing, one could guess the devastated state of Lotus Village, right?

Somebody shouted, "Is there even a Lotus Village left now? It's probably been buried under the mud. Gu Huangshi, I think you should just bury Gu Wen here; after all, it's not far from the village. Gu Wen contracted tuberculosis, don't let the living contract his disease."

Right then, Huang Xiangwen coughed, startling the villagers.

They quickly stepped back, worrying about infection.

The Gu Family members also had a difficult time. Now, they couldn’t afford to think about taking Gu Wen back to the village; they had no choice but to dig a grave and bury him on the spot.

Qin Changlin took Huang Xiangwen’s pulse, his brow gradually furrowing.

Throughout the journey, Huang Xiangwen, fearing Gu Wen’s disease would infect others, would not allow Dabao and Erbao to care for him; she did it all herself. If someone were to contract the disease, she would definitely be the first.

"How is it?" With the situation being so grave, Huang Xiangwen could no longer afford to grieve and looked anxiously at Qin Changlin.

Qin Changlin said, "It’s difficult to say at the moment, it might be just a cold."

"Auntie, you should bury him quickly. I’ll ask Shunzi to come help you dig the pit."

By now, Huang Xiangwen was not so afraid of death herself, but she was worried about it affecting her children; she hastily said, "Alright, alright, then you guys start digging a pit quickly. Dabao, dig it deep. After the flood, there won’t be anything to eat; don’t let stray dogs dig your father out."

"Don’t worry, mother."

...

Chapter 1004: Youyou Comes Looking

After the flood subsided, the villagers hastily left the mountaintop.

The Gu Family, having buried Gu Wen, still followed the old custom of mourning on the mountaintop, a practice that everyone found ominous.

Years had passed among the folks of the village, and no one knew if there would be another chance in this lifetime to be neighbors again.

But under the current circumstances, with life and death uncertain, no one could afford to look after anyone else.

Moreover, Huang Xiangwen might have contracted the illness, and people are selfish; they naturally did not wish to take the Gu Family members with them in their escape.

Erya insisted on staying behind, waiting until the funeral rites were done before leaving. Shunzi, a man of kindness and loyalty, naturally wanted to stay as well.

Shunzi's parents were loath to part with their eldest son but could not persuade the Wang Family to stay.

But now, with everyone looking out for themselves and the limited amount of food they could carry, who would want to feed extra mouths? Thus, under normal circumstances, the Wang Family would certainly not wish for them to leave—they still needed to work after all. But now, they eagerly wished for them to go; fewer mouths to feed meant more chance of survival for the others.

Therefore, the Wang Family's eldest daughter-in-law incited the old lady to take the meager leftover food and leave first; as for the second branch, whoever wanted to follow could do so on their own.

Because of this, the Gu Family's group now had a few more people.

Shunzi's parents, along with a younger brother and sister.

Huang Xiangwen was grieving and couldn't be bothered with these matters.

When Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin found them, they were on the mountain wailing.

The cries were pitiful and loud, which carried especially far in this silence where even the sound of birds was rare.

Moreover, Gu Youyou's hearing was more sensitive than most, so she had heard Huang Xiangwen's voice from several mountains away.

Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin exchanged a glance and hurried toward the mountain from where the sounds came.

With limited items they had brought, they took one of the white linen clothes they wore, tore it up, and tied it around their heads—albeit a crude attempt by the younger generation to demonstrate mourning and filial piety.

Gu Youyou paused, then stepped forward.

Sanya, her eyes red, was the first to see Gu Youyou, as if she couldn't believe her own eyes.

"Isn't big sister in Beijing? How come she's here?"

"Big sister?" she called out, surprised.

"Who, who has died?" Gu Youyou asked, stunned.

Qin Changlin turned around and explained to Gu Youyou, "Sister Youyou, it's your second uncle who has passed away. He... he had tuberculosis."

Qin Changlin had sent a message to Gu Youyou, but by then the flood had already started, so Gu Youyou had not received his letter.

Tuberculosis, or consumption in ancient times, was incurable due to the lack of medical equipment, people's limited understanding of medicine, and the absence of antibiotics.

But Gu Youyou had already started researching antibiotics and other medicine, so just because others couldn’t cure it didn’t mean she couldn’t.

But the person was already dead.

Gu Youyou said nothing, simply bowing her head a few times in front of the newly formed grave mound, like any ordinary younger relative might.

"There’s no one left around here; come with me," Gu Youyou said.

When facing Huang Xiangwen, Gu Youyou really didn’t know what to say.

Similarly, Huang Xiangwen seemed not to have much to say to Gu Youyou either, making the scene rather awkward.

They turned their gaze to Jin Zijin, who stood behind Gu Youyou. After a long thought, Huang Xiangwen asked, "Is it for real this time?"

Jin Zijin’s identity had been announced to the whole country, including the matter of him selecting a consort and choosing Gu Youyou.

"Yes, it’s for real," Gu Youyou said.

Chapter 1005: The Opportunity to Harass

Erya laughed and walked closer to Gu Youyou with the child in her arms.

Although she didn’t fully understand why Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin had to go through such a struggle, they ended up together after all, didn’t they?

She said, "Lotus Village is destroyed, and I was worried about what to do next, but it’s great that you’re here, big sister."

Gu Youyou smiled and asked her, "What about the other villagers?"

She had heard that the people who escaped from Lotus Village together were all trapped, but here, she only saw people from the Gu Family and Wang Shun’s family.

Wang Shun’s mother said, "They were afraid of catching the disease, and as soon as the flood receded, they fled, unknown in which direction. Perhaps those with relatives have gone to seek refuge with them, and after this disaster passes, they might come back."

Spring plowing had long since ended, and by now it was too late to return home to farm. This meant that they would have no harvest this year and would have to endure hunger.

Gu Youyou managed a weak smile and nodded, saying, "The Imperial Court won’t ignore us. As long as we get through these few months, by autumn, there will be plenty of food."

"I still want to go back and take a look," Huang Xiangwen said hesitantly.

Sanshun’s parents agreed, saying, "We’ve always lived in Lotus Village, and we can’t bear to leave without seeing its destruction with our own eyes."

Everyone’s mood was very somber, and even seeing Gu Youyou did not lift their spirits.

At such a time, having a powerful relative to rely on was good, but could it ever be better than one’s own home?

There’s a saying, "A gold cage or a silver cage is not as good as one’s own dog house."

Gu Youyou accompanied them toward the direction of Lotus Village. Due to the unique geography of the village, it still resembled a vast ocean.

Only then, having seen it and lost hope, could they follow Gu Youyou northward.

...

Searcy and her group were initially waiting for Gu Youyou in a small town near Yangguan City, but as the Imperial Court issued successive disaster relief decrees, they could no longer stay in that town. She was deployed to a refuge nearby that had gathered disaster victims.

Since tuberculosis was discovered among the refugees, and the number was not small, Searcy, being a doctor from Jisheng Hall, was forcibly conscripted.

Reluctantly, she had to let Gui Yunxi continue waiting for Gu Youyou and the others in that small town while she went to report to an official nearby.

Although Searcy's understanding of tuberculosis was not as thorough as Gu Youyou's, she knew that the disease was contagious and that once contracted, one could only wait to die.

She wore specially made isolation clothing and gathered the infected people in one place. Whether they could be cured was secondary; the priority was to control the spread of the disease.

In the isolation area, the sound of coughing never stopped, and there were severely ill patients emitting agonizing groans of pain.

When King Jin heard that Searcy was treating the disease in the isolation area, he rushed in urgently and, without a word, tried to pull her out.

"What are you doing? Don't you see I'm busy?"

Perhaps King Jin saw it as a suitable opportunity to bother her. Searcy thought she would be safe among the patients, but she hadn't expected King Jin to be so audacious as to run into the isolation area.

"Come, you need to get out with me. You can't stay here," King Jin said with a face full of concern.

His grip was strong, and he quickly pulled Searcy out.

Searcy, resisting the urge to hit him with a Poison Needle, gritted her teeth and said, "Don’t worry. Even if you die, I won’t. You dared to directly enter the isolation area; you mustn’t be far from catching tuberculosis yourself."

Had she known King Jin was there, she wouldn’t have come, not for anything.

Chapter 1006: No Meat to Eat

"Do you care about me?" King Jin’s face lit up with joy as he said, "With you here, I’m not afraid. Even if I contract tuberculosis, you can definitely cure me, can’t you?"

Doctor Searcy replied indifferently, "You’re thinking too much, I can’t cure tuberculosis."

But King Jin didn’t believe her and laughed, "I know how good your medical skills are. Despite your young age, you’re much more capable than those old coots at the Imperial Medical Bureau. You’re even better than Gu Youyou!"

Doctor Searcy rolled her eyes, unable to bring herself to tell him that his impotence was actually revealed to her by Gu Youyou—a mess of her own that she was now expected to clean up.

Doctor Searcy removed her mask, looking at King Jin with disdain, "I don’t like talking to an idiot; it insults my intelligence."

These were all things she had learned from Gu Youyou; naturally, King Jin couldn’t quite understand them.

But he got the gist of it—this female doctor just didn’t like him.

King Jin felt helpless and puzzled.

With his status and looks, why wouldn’t a mere doctor like him, even looking at him with disdain?

This made him somewhat angry.

After disinfecting her hands, Doctor Searcy started nibbling on a white steamed bun.

She had her faults, but also her merits.

Despite being born into a wealthy family, she was never picky about food. Her pursuit of food was purely to fill her stomach.

The food served in the disaster area was basic and aimed solely at alleviating hunger. Being able to eat white steamed buns was considered good fortune; many others could only have coarse ones.

Of course, King Jin had the best food available.

He had white rice and two plates of Xiaoqing vegetables.

This modest spread was the envy of many, but for King Jin, it was unpalatably bland.

He complained constantly, "Jie Huanzhi, why is there no meat again today?"

Minister Jie approached King Jin, bowing slightly and said, "Your Highness, King Jin, the vegetables are also specially transported for you. This is a disaster area; there’s no meat."

King Jin was taken aback, then asked, "What is Doctor Searcy eating?"

Minister Jie honestly answered, "The same as the refugees—a steamed bun and plain water."

"Steamed bun? Plain water?" King Jin swayed, put down his chopsticks, and said, "How can that be enough? She’s a woman, inherently weak, and also caring for so many sick refugees. If this continues, her health will surely decline. No, take this plate of vegetables to her."

Minister Jie took the plate of vegetables with an expressionless face and carried it toward Doctor Searcy.

To him, King Jin might be of noble status, but he was not cut out for significant endeavors.

Jin Shien pulled King Jin to the disaster area precisely because he feared the crown prince might grab all the credit alone. But upon their arrival, they found no crown prince—only his household servants.

Realizing they had misunderstood, the crown prince had not come for disaster relief at all, and so he slackened off immediately.

Since he had taken up the task, he couldn’t simply go back without losing face.

Not only was he of no help here, but he was also harassing the doctors and required individual service.

Minister Jie honestly wanted to draft a memorial to the Son of Heaven, proposing to recall him.

But whispers among the refugees made him hold back the memorial.

"The current Son of Heaven is not the rightful heir to the throne, having incurred the wrath of both heaven and the people and bringing punishment upon the subjects of Zhuzhao Country."

"First came the floods, and now tuberculosis. Tuberculosis is incurable, and those quarantined in the tent area are surely doomed."

"To end these disasters, the true Son of Heaven must take the throne..."

Chapter 1007: Confrontation in the Imperial Court

Jie Minister narrowed his eyes and whispered to his guard, "You go check who spread those words."

"Yes, Minister."

Jie Minister stroked his palm-length beard as he entered the tent, thinking to himself, Someone can’t hold back and wants to take this opportunity to revolt.

Just as well, King Jin is here.

Floods, epidemics, and rumors abound.

Since the Protector of the Nation instigated King Jin to take over this mess, let’s see how the Ducal Residence handles it.

Jie Minister’s guard soon returned, his face somber.

"What’s the matter?" Jie Minister asked.

The guard said in a low voice, "Minister, those words spread even before we arrived; it seems they originated near Qingshui Town. It’s too late to trace the source now."

"Qingshui Town?" Jie Minister pondered, tilting his head.

Qingshui Town, Lotus Village, Tianmen Mountain.

There are no secrets that don’t leak out. Although everyone deliberately covered up the incident on Tianmen Mountain, it still spread to some extent, unspoken but understood.

The collapse of Tianmen Mountain, last year’s struggle between Tianzong and Xuanzong from the Dao Family, was it a coincidence?

Whether it was or wasn’t, he didn’t believe the heavy snows in the north or the flooding in the south could be faked.

It’s just that someone is using this year’s unique weather to stir up trouble.

Indeed, the fear of public opinion was truly troublesome.

The guard expressed his worry, "Minister, the disaster relief this time seems challenging; we..."

"Ah, never mind!" Jie Minister raised his hand, his face showing a hint of a smile. "I'm just a humble censor with no real power. How could I be the one to decide such matters? When the sky falls, the tall ones will hold it up, ah, the tall ones. Tell the people in charge of food distribution to add a dish for King Jin's meal tomorrow, get him a chicken."

The guard didn't quite understand his master's words, but the minister's orders were always right, so he confusedly passed them on.

Jie Minister was immensely grateful that the Protector of the Nation and King Jin had stepped in; otherwise, if the Crown Prince's disaster relief was just for show, he alone really couldn't handle such a situation.

...

News of the disaster area quickly reached the ears of the Emperor in Beijing, who, holding Jie Huanzhi's memorial, threw it onto the table.

"Let the ministers have a look as well," the Emperor said indifferently.

Wangong Gong picked up the memorial that the Emperor tossed on the table and presented it to the ministers in the hall, who hurriedly examined it.

The Imperial Court took this disaster very seriously, dispatching all available grain for relief efforts. They thought it would surely earn the people's praise, but instead of praise, there was a litany of complaints.

The Court had done so much for disaster relief, only to face the people's doubts about the current Emperor's legitimacy.

The mountains of Tianmen were sealed, and the Emperor was said to mimic the First Emperor in his greed for eternal life, inviting the wrath of the deities.

Xian Huang saw that the Emperor was unkind, so he did not pass the throne to the Crown Prince but to the benevolent and filial Third Prince.

However, the current Emperor framed the Third Prince as a rebel and had him executed, an affront to the heavens.

The Protector of the Nation held up the document and loudly denounced it.

"This Jie Huanzhi, what has he written? Treasonous, truly treasonous! Your Majesty, I speak boldly to request your order to have that Jie Huanzhi brought back to Beijing for trial. Today's civil officials are becoming increasingly unspeakable, truly uncensored."

Lin Xingyi stepped forward and spoke calmly, "Protector of the Nation, your words are mistaken. If civil officials dare not speak, what use are they?"

Chapter 1008: The Conditions to Become Crown Prince

"Ah, you..." The Protector of the Nation had not expected to be contradicted by Lin Xingyi. Although Lin Xingyi was known for his outspokenness, due to the relationship between the Lin Family and the Ducal Residence, as a junior, he rarely contradicted him.

Before the Protector could finish speaking, Lin Xingyi continued, "What Minister Jie has written in his petition merely repeats what the common people say; he is merely passing on their words."

Chancellor Zhang had always sided with the Protector of the Nation, but the affairs of his two daughters had deeply hurt him, so he decided to give the Ducal Residence a warning and, rarely for him, contradicted the Protector of the Nation.

"Protector of the Nation, perhaps what Minister Jie says is putting it lightly. The words actually spreading out there are even harsher. Isn't King Jin also carrying out disaster relief in the afflicted areas? Didn't you send a private letter to inquire?"

The Protector of the Nation was so angry he was practically gasping for air. Did he not check the almanac before leaving home today? Why were these two men, who normally stood by him, the first to contradict him today?

Wasn't it always Jie Huanzhi who used to do things like this?

He had been waiting for an opportunity to impeach him when Jie Huanzhi was absent.

Unexpectedly, these two troublemakers popped up halfway.

The Protector of the Nation, bristling his beard in anger, said, "Jie Huanzhi is a senior official devoted to his duty. As a subject, being loyal to the Emperor is his obligation. How can he be compared to those troublesome commoners?"

With several slaps, more petitions landed on the desk.

The Emperor seemed somewhat weary, his appearance always seemed older than his years.

He said, "These petitions, too, come from various prefecture governments and all concern discussions among the common people about the legitimacy of imperial authority."

The Emperor's petitions successfully silenced them. Eunuch Wan took the petitions and distributed them to the ministers, and then everyone stopped speaking.

Especially the Protector of the Nation, whose face was metaphorically slapped by the petitions.

As expected, the words in Jie Huanzhi's petition were nothing compared to what the other prefecture governments had submitted, which were even more offensive.

The petition that the Protector of the Nation held from Ji Prefecture had a royal decree that faintly revealed discontent with the Imperial Court and the Emperor through the writer's strokes.

He was feeding off the Emperor’s grace, yet he felt vaguely double-hearted.

"This is outrageous," the Protector of the Nation slammed the petition to the ground.

This act was a major disrespect to the Emperor, but at this moment, the assembly was so grave that no one cared to bother about an eighty-year-old man throwing a fit over a petition.

"My dearest subjects, have you nothing to say?" The Emperor said, looking exhausted.

At his side, Eunuch Wan sighed painfully and silently signaled to the Palace Maiden serving sweet tea; she quickly replaced the Emperor’s cup with a fresh one steaming hot.

He had been by the Emperor’s side the longest. Although he could not be privy to everything the Emperor thought or did, he understood enough to know just how difficult it was for the Emperor to have made it this far.

"Nothing to say?" the Emperor asked again when no one responded.

The assembly, previously noisy, now fell deathly silent.

He thought: Perhaps they have become complacent from long peaceful times. Once real trouble arises, they fall silent.

And those who do have ideas keep to themselves, not wanting to be the ones to stick out.

Well then...

The Emperor sighed and said to Wan Decheng, "Issue an imperial decree that among the three Princes, whoever can resolve these natural and man-made disasters will be appointed as Crown Prince."

Upon the Emperor’s words, the entire court was in uproar.

The hall which had just been silent as a graveyard was now buzzing like a sparrows’ conference.

Chapter 1009: Identify the Rumor Spreader

The elderly face of the Protector of the Nation squeezed out a smile. Who else could accomplish such a grand task if not the King Jin whom he supported?

The Emperor indeed was a wise monarch.

"Your Majesty, appointing the Crown Prince is a matter that concerns the lifeline of the nation, this is too..."

Of course, besides the joyful Protector of the Nation, there were opposing voices in the Imperial Court.

Because in their view, the Emperor’s action was undoubtedly an endorsement of King Jin, for with the power of the Ducal Residence, they were the ones most likely to pull off such a task.

The Emperor stopped the person who was speaking and said, "It is time to train them, let them do it themselves, and all my beloved subjects must not help. This is also an imperial edict." He finished speaking and glanced at the Protector of the Nation, intentionally or otherwise.

The Protector of the Nation’s face, which had been blooming like a chrysanthemum, stiffened and instantly withered.

This season was the time of year when food was most scarce.

The new year’s crops in the fields had not yet matured, and last year’s food was almost exhausted. Even though the Imperial Court placed great emphasis on the current famine, seeking aid was futile.

Thus, the people in the disaster-stricken area fundamentally survived on a bun or a large pancake per person per day to sustain their lives.

Those who were ill also needed to have thin porridge, making the daily cost of food not a small amount.

Jie Huanzhi clearly felt the pressure of the disaster relief and had no choice but to seek an audience with King Jin.

It was just that His Highness King Jin, recently, did not even think about whether the famine victims had enough food to eat. He was solely focused on investigating the source of those rumors.

If today's Son of Heaven wasn't the Chosen One, then what was he? So, for him, this was the priority.

Of course, this was also because he had received the imperial edict from Beijing, amongst them princes, whoever resolved this matter would become the Crown Prince.

After contending with his mother for so many years and seeing the position of the Crown Prince right in front of him, how could he have any concern for anything else?

As for beauties, once he became Crown Prince, and later the Emperor, what kind of beauty couldn't he have?

That hot, thorny, and poisonous one would certainly be his.

"Your Highness King Jin, the food is running out again. Should we perhaps..."

"I say, Lord Jie!" Before he could finish, King Jin impatiently interrupted, "What matters now is not whether those troublemakers will starve to death but who is spreading rumors everywhere. Once I find out, all those rumor-spreading troublemakers deserve to die. With fewer people, wouldn't the food be enough?

Lord Jie, instead of worrying about food all day, you might as well help me think how to expose those rumor-spreading troublemakers. Don't forget, you were appointed with me, and once this is settled, neither the Emperor will forget your merit nor will I."

The imperial edict stated that all the ministers in the court could not help, but Jie Huanzhi was an exception.

As he had already been appointed for disaster relief, he was most familiar with the situation in the affected areas; the court would not recall him at this time.

So, all things considered, King Jin had caught a bargain, Jin Zijin and Jin Tingyu had no one to help them, but he, at least, had Jie Huanzhi.

Jie Huanzhi was a capable man, everything was good about him except for being somewhat rigid.

Lord Jie had no interest in participating in the struggle for succession; in his heart, he only remembered the task entrusted by the Emperor.

His expression was as grave as a piece of wood, looking at King Jin in this state, he felt both helpless and heartbroken.

All King Jin cared about was the position of the Crown Prince, the throne itself, and he was completely indifferent to the suffering people outside. How could such a person become Emperor?

But while King Jin could afford to be indifferent, Jie Huanzhi could not.

Chapter 1010: Full Belly Rebellion

He had always been a pragmatic man.

"Your Highness King Jin, I feel you might have misunderstood the Emperor’s decree."

"What misunderstanding?" King Jin’s heart skipped a beat.

Edicts, the throne—these were matters that could instantly agitate his nerves.

Lord Jie bowed and said, "The Emperor meant that only the one who resolves this natural and man-made disaster could be named Crown Prince, yet Your Highness, you have only focused on the rumors of man-made calamities, neglecting the natural disaster that preceded it.

Now, the common people are displaced and starving. Coupled with some deliberately stirring the pot, that is why we see rampant rumors today.

Because they are living in hardship and barely surviving, they think this is a divine punishment, believing the Emperor has angered the heavens. However, if Your Highness could enable them to survive and live well, they would naturally feel blessed by heaven and awed by imperial mercy, shattering the rumors without a fight."

Lord Huanzhi spoke with such relevance. If he wasn't a top-tier loyal official, who would offer such candid and heartfelt advice during such sensitive times?

It was a shame that his advice fell upon the wrong ears.

That's what Huanzhi thought, but King Jin did not see it that way.

He believed the situation was clearly orchestrated by someone intending to use the disaster to usurp the imperial power, while Huanzhi was talking about it as if it was merely a matter of people not eating and drinking well.

He himself had been staying in this godforsaken place, and even was struggling to eat well.

See, he never complained; he could swallow down the steamed buns and vegetables just fine.

King Jin, with furrowed brows, said dryly, "Lord Jie, you are a scholar and a minister. I understand your thoughts very well, but Lord Jie ah, you are thinking too simply..."

He pulled over a stool and invited Huanzhi to sit down.

"Lord Jie, please have a seat. I will explain this slowly to you."

Huanzhi wore a long-suffering expression, not needing to listen to know what King Jin would say.

It was like playing the lute to a cow or preaching to birds—how could their thought patterns, one focused on the people, the other on power, ever align?

But the man was King Jin, and no matter how impatient Huanzhi was, he could only sit down and listen to his lofty speeches.

"Lord Jie, in recent days, I've noticed these seditious commoners harbor thoughts of rebellion. Why haven't they rebelled yet? Isn't it because they've not eaten their fill and lack the strength to do so?

Do you believe, if they had enough food now, they would surely seize you and me, perhaps even kill us to make a statement?"

Huanzhi couldn't even muster a bitter smile, just sat dumbly, waiting for King Jin to expound further.

"We can't be so naïve. Let's not discuss our current lack of food. Even if we had vast amounts, we certainly can't satiate them, thus giving them the strength to rise against us."

Huanzhi silently shifted his gaze to the window, looking at the frail women and children.

"Unless we capture and execute those instigating rumors, I dare not devote myself wholeheartedly to rescue these disaster victims. If we feed them and they rise in rebellion, wouldn't I become a criminal to the nation?"

Huanzhi's lips twitched slightly as he responded faintly, "But they are nearly starving to death. The young may cope, but the elderly and children are already frail; they can't endure much more."

"Isn’t that even better?" King Jin laughed, pointing at an old toothless woman, "Look at her, she must be over seventy, no teeth left, can’t even eat properly. Even if she survives this half year, how much longer can she live? One year? Two years? Or three?"