Farmhouse 1031

Chapter 1031: Disloyal, Unfilial, Unkind, Unrighteous

"Really? That's very strange then, so are you telling me he was fully prepared? He acted really swiftly!"

"Yes, he acted really swiftly!" Jin Zijin said in a soft voice.

"Could it be..." Yue Rujing suddenly gasped, "Did they capture Supervisor Gu? No, that can't be right because of the timeline. According to what they said, Supervisor Gu had already disappeared by the time you arrived. Unless they are clairvoyant and took preventative measures."

"That is indeed the strange part!" Jin Zijin said lightly.

After sitting with Yue Rujing for a while, Jin Zijin returned. Since Prince Huanzhi was fully prepared to follow him to Beijing, he would, sooner or later, bring out his bargaining chip.

Jin Zijin stood with his hands behind him, facing Prince Huanzhi.

In the silent night, only his calm voice could be heard.

"Tomorrow you will go to Taihe Hall to face the emperor, and the charges of your rebellion will be listed one by one. Once the evidence is conclusive, you will be rendered speechless and never return to Xining again."

Prince Huanzhi raised an eyebrow and said, "You mean to say you have already made clear my charges? Tomorrow's session in Taihe Hall is just a formality?"

"Exactly." Jin Zijin replied indifferently.

"Then..." Prince Huanzhi drew out his words, eyeing Jin Zijin, and suddenly chuckled, "Then you are in trouble!"

Jin Zijin furrowed his brows, his hands behind his back tightening.

"If I can’t return to Xining, then your princely consort won’t be returning to this estate either."

He stood up, looking out beyond the bed. Under the moonlight, the estate held a different kind of charm.

Prince Huanzhi didn’t pay any attention to Jin Zijin’s angry face and continued on his own accord: "This estate is truly nice. Although not extravagant, it has a scenery that’s intriguing."

In the silent night, it took a long time before Jin Zijin’s voice was heard again.

"Alright, I will make sure you return safely!"

Atop the Taihe Hall, the emperor sat calmly on his elevated Dragon Throne, with Prince Jin Mocong standing below, while ministers one by one presented memorial after memorial, then pointed at him, talking nonstop about his various charges, not only about his spreading of rumors during the disaster to create panic among the people, hoping to take advantage of the chaos to rebel.

They also dug up the old history of King Jin’s third brother’s rebellion, accusing him of being ruthless and preserving his own strength by betraying his elder brother.

Among them, Minister Jin Shien was the most eloquent in speaking.

The jesters of the royal court, such as Jie Huanzhi, were still in the disaster area and hadn’t returned, so it was Jin Shien’s turn to take over.

It was normal for the Ducal Residence, which had assisted the current emperor, to be utterly at odds with the rebels; it was understandable that enemies would be extremely hostile upon meeting.

Secondly, King Jin’s handling of the disaster relief was utterly disappointing. Although he couldn’t interfere, it didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of the situation in the disaster area.

He had to seize this opportunity to throw all the blame onto Prince Huanzhi, hoping to turn things around for King Jin.

"Jin Mocong, you incited civil unrest in the country, causing the people to be displaced, which is disloyal; you went against the late emperor's last wish, instigating fratricide, which is unfilial; additionally, during the disaster, you spread rumors carelessly, disregarding the lives of the victims, plotting to profit from the disaster, which is inhumane; ignoring the lives of 150,000 soldiers, you entrusted the Tiger Talisman to a woman and did not return it to the emperor, which is an act of injustice. Someone as disloyal, unfilial, inhumane, and unjust as you deserves to die a thousand times over. However, our emperor is merciful, in consideration of the former emperor's legacy and brotherly affection, as long as you write a letter allowing Madam Ru to send someone to deliver the Tiger Talisman, which commands the 150,000 troops in Xining, back to the capital and restore it to the emperor, your life will be spared."

Chapter 1032: Confrontation in the Court

The Fifth Prince looked at the Protectorate Duke with a smile that was not quite a smile and said in a low voice, "But just a moment ago, the Protectorate Duke said that this Prince deserved a thousand deaths. How come now I just need to hand over the Tiger Talisman and you would spare my life?"

"You..." The Protectorate Duke fumed and glowered, "Don't act like you won't take a toast only to be forced to drink a forfeit. Handing over the Tiger Talisman is your duty, and your rebellion is proven; you cannot deny it."

"No, no, this Prince has never denied anything. I admit that, a decade ago, when the princes rebelled, I, too, harbored treacherous thoughts just like them. My question is, can I really save my life just by handing over the Tiger Talisman?"

The Protectorate Duke bellowed, "As long as you give up the Tiger Talisman, what's wrong with sparing your life?"

"Oh?" The Fifth Prince looked up at the Emperor seated high above and chuckled, "Could it be that the world has changed now, that this Jin is not the same as that Jin, or perhaps the two Jins no longer differentiate between you and me? Has the Protectorate Duke actually begun making decisions for the Emperor? Brother Emperor, what do you say?"

The Emperor above spoke indifferently, "As long as you are willing to give up the Tiger Talisman and the complete military authority, considering the kinship we have shared over the years, it’s not impossible to spare your life."

"Hah..." The Fifth Prince found it amusing, glanced at Jin Zijin, who stood beside the Emperor without uttering a word, and suddenly laughed again.

A moment later, he said coldly, "Spare my life and then confine me in Zongrenfu to fend for myself? To forever bow and kowtow before you? Jin Moning, forgive me, but that is something I cannot do!"

The faces of the courtiers changed drastically, and the Protectorate Duke raged, "For your crimes, even a million deaths would not suffice. The Emperor is already being lenient and righteous beyond reproach. You say you cannot do it? As a subject, shouldn’t you always bow and kowtow before the Emperor?"

The Fifth Prince snorted coldly and said, "What sort of Emperor is he, Jin Moning? A Crown Prince who fell from favor, who will never be able to ascend to the imperial throne. In order to secure his position, he caused the death of our father, the death of my third brother, invalidated the late Emperor’s will—he, Jin Moning is but a thief who stole the nation. He does not deserve..."

No one dared to call the Emperor by his name in Taihe Hall, no one had ever dared to insult the Emperor like this. He was the first throughout history.

After a brief silence in the court, there followed a series of denunciations against the Fifth Prince.

"Jin Mocong is brazen and reckless; this official pleads with the Emperor to have him executed immediately."

"Jin Mocong distorts truth and falsity, dares to slander the Emperor; this official pleads for him to be executed by dismemberment to serve as an example."

"Behead him!"

"Tear him to pieces by five horses."

"This official seconds the motion!"

"..."

For years, courtiers who were part of the rebel princes' faction had been dealt with cleanly by Jin Moning. Xining was the only place where he couldn't reach, so it ended up fattening Jin Mocong.

The Fifth Prince watched the courtiers who were furiously spitting at him, and he finally realized where he had lost.

Jin Moning was inseparable from their interests. He had balanced the various factions, pulling one hair to affect the whole body; hence, if one person did not act, the others did not act, for no one dared to be the one to break the balance.

Their actions in those years had been too extreme.

The one who cursed him the most during the denunciations was the Protectorate Duke, Jin Shien. Though old and lacking force in his voice, his aged voice was the most distinguishable among the crowd.

The Ducal Residence, oh, the Ducal Residence. Besides Jin Moning himself, the one who benefited the most was the Ducal Residence.

They, ruler and minister, had long ago conspired to use an imperial edict to summon him to Beijing and then set up this banquet that was a trap.

Chapter 1033: Seeing Jin Ziyuan Again

Yesterday, no matter what he said or did, his charges were not to be reduced by a single count, and his death was certain.

Avoiding the noisy clamor, the Fifth Prince's gaze fell upon Jin Zijin.

He was the only one in the hall who had remained silent from beginning to end.

He said with a mocking laugh, "What’s the matter? Isn’t the Crown Prince taking this opportunity to claim credit?"

Faced with his provocation, Jin Zijin remained silent as if all the noise had nothing to do with him.

He appeared as an outsider observing everything.

Seeing Jin Zijin’s calm demeanor, the Emperor almost imperceptibly furrowed his brows.

"Someone, take the King of Xining away. Lock him up in Zongrenfu."

This was a place specifically for imprisoning members of the royal family.

As the Emperor’s voice echoed, the hall finally fell quiet.

Soon, two guards came in and carried the Fifth Prince away, one on each side.

The Emperor said indifferently, "You have three days to consider, whether to return the Tiger Talisman or not." He waved his hand and said, "Take him away."

...

Jin Ziyuan went to Xining, marking his first visit to the royal palace since his return from Tianmen Mountain.

He had heard that in order to lure him out, You Jiang had captured Youyou, who was later brought to Xining.

It had been a long time since he had seen her; she had married, finally wedded openly to that man. She must be content.

But now she faced great peril, and he too desired to know how much she truly weighed in that man's heart. Would he really trade the Fifth Prince for Gu Youyou, as they anticipated?

The guard hurriedly rushed to Madam Ru's compound, knelt on one knee, and said, "Madam Ru, the Young Prince has returned."

Coincidentally, this guard was a former servant of the Third Prince's residence and recognized Jin Ziyuan.

Madam Ru's basket clattered to the ground, and she quickly lifted her skirts to follow the guard out.

At the entrance of the royal palace, she saw the familiar face, the son she had longed for day and night.

"Ziyuan, I thought you would never come to see me..."

Jin Ziyuan cut her off, "You're overthinking it; I'm here to see Gu Youyou, I've heard you've captured her."

Madam Ru paused, but her face still lit up with joy.

It didn't matter that her son misunderstood her. The truth would come to light one day, and he would understand the necessity of her past actions.

"Yes, she's in our palace, follow me."

Jin Ziyuan snorted disdainfully, looking down on her, "It's his palace, you're just a concubine."

These piercing words didn't dwell in Madam Ru's heart.

As long as he had come, that was all that mattered; to see him was all she needed, nothing else was of importance.

Madam Ru led Jin Ziyuan to where Gu Youyou was staying; she was idly watching the fish.

Crafting a large fishpond here was no easy feat, hence the fishpond in the courtyard was quite small.

Gu Youyou was actually discussing her own rescue plan in whispers with Searcy; she was irate.

Because Searcy's advice involved either poisoning the food or the well, and now they were talking about poisoning this fishpond.

The mere mention of poison gave Gu Youyou a headache.

In her view, setting a fire would be far more satisfying.

However, upon hearing someone approaching, she ceased talking.

Over these days, they had developed an unspoken understanding. Seeing Gu Youyou's expression, Searcy knew someone was coming again.

But this visitor was a surprise; this was the inner court of the King of Xining's palace, where usually only women would come, typically Madam Ru, and now a man had come, brought by Madam Ru herself.

Chapter 1034: Why Do You Like Me?

It's an old acquaintance.

"Jin Ziyuan?" Searcy said, surprised.

Jin Ziyuan glanced at Searcy, then shifted his gaze to Gu Youyou, and asked in a low voice, "Are you alright?"

Gu Youyou seemed a bit embarrassed. She looked at Madam You who was slightly frowning and responded quietly, "I'm fine."

Jin Ziyuan sighed with relief and said to Madam You, "I need to talk to her alone."

Madam You glanced at Searcy and said, "Alright then."

Searcy tactfully followed Madam You and left, understanding the need to bow one's head under someone else's roof.

Only the two of them remained in the courtyard, which was very quiet.

Jin Ziyuan said, "I never thought I would see you again, especially not under these circumstances."

Gu Youyou gave a bitter smile. "Yet you came."

"Hmm?" Jin Ziyuan furrowed his brows.

Gu Youyou said, "You Jiang said he captured me to lure you out, so I said you came eventually."

"I had to come when they used you as bait."

Ever since he had confessed his love for her, Jin Ziyuan felt there was no need to hide it anymore.

Looking into Jin Ziyuan's eyes, filled with an intense affection that could not be dissolved, Gu Youyou felt a sense of guilt.

She couldn’t give him anything, nor could she embarrass Jin Zijin.

She was a respectable woman.

"I’m married now. You probably know about the grand wedding."

"Yeah, I know," he said.

After a moment, he asked again, "Is Jin Zijin treating you well? If not, I’m always here..."

"No, he treats me very well." Gu Youyou moved a few steps to the side, fearing he would say something that might embarrass her.

"You don’t need to be nervous," Jin Ziyuan said with a bitter smile, observing her small movements.

"So, does that mean I stand no chance at all? What do you like about him? Can you tell me?"

Gu Youyou hoped that she could leave with Jin Ziyuan’s help. Moreover, she truly wanted to clarify things to avoid holding him back.

She thought for a moment and countered, "Why do you like me?"

Why did he like her?

Jin Ziyuan suddenly fell silent.

Recalling their moments together, he thought it was perhaps because, in that lonely mountain, her sudden intrusion had brought a glimmer of light into his dark world. Since then, that light had propelled him forward in life.

He said, "It was you who led me out of that ancient tomb; it was you who made me see the sunlight for the first time in over a decade. The moment I walked out of the tomb, I felt like I was reborn. I think we are alike. In the darkness, it’s people like us who can huddle together for warmth, licking each other’s wounds..."

"You are wrong," Gu Youyou’s soft voice interrupted him.

She said, "Neither of us likes the darkness, yet we are forced to live in it. We yearn for the sunlight, and to you, I am not sunlight but rather darkness and cold. You are not the sunlight I seek either. Together, we can only make each other colder, not warmer. We are alike, I’ve never denied that. I’ve helped you many times precisely because we are alike. When you suffer, I feel a sense of empathy, a pang of sorrow for you."

Jin Ziyuan’s expression gradually darkened, realizing that she had repeatedly saved him behind Jin Zijin’s back, thinking this way.

Thinking of Jin Zijin, Gu Youyou suddenly revealed a hint of a smile on her porcelain-like face and continued with a smile, "Jin Zijin is different. He feels warm like the sun to me. I spent ten years in that tomb-like dark room, and it was he who brought me out and showed me the sunlight. In the cold and solitude, what he gave me was the warmth I longed for.

Chapter 1035: I Will Break Into the Prison

"Jin Ziyuan, you’re mistaken. What you want isn’t someone as cold as you. You and I are of the same kind, I know what you want. We both need someone warm, but I am not that person."

The silent courtyard became even more tranquil, and it was a long while before Jin Ziyuan was seen dejectedly walking out of it.

Fish do not know the joy of fish, since you are not me, how can you know what my sunshine is like?

Gu Youyou, he is your sunshine, but you are mine.

...

The Emperor gave Prince Jin Zijin three days to consider, but on the second day, Jin Zijin came to discuss with him the matter of prison break.

The Emperor simply could not believe his own ears.

He felt that there must be something wrong with his ears; as one ages, various parts of the body indeed start to fail.

"What did you say?" For the first time, the usually serious Emperor looked at the person opposite him like a fool.

"I'm going to break into the prison!" Jin Zijin said once more with a calm voice, "I'm going to get Jin Mocong out."

The Emperor was stunned for a moment before showing an ugly smile, "Are you joking?"

"I'm not. Look at my face, do I seem like I'm joking with you?" Jin Zijin remained very calm.

"Reason!" The Emperor's face was already looking quite unpleasant.

"Youyou is in Xining," Jin Zijin said straightforwardly.

Gu Youyou had disappeared, and no one knew where she went, but that didn't mean the Emperor was unaware of her disappearance.

He had been suppressing this news all along, not allowing the Prefecture Government to report it, so he had known all along.

The Emperor took in a deep breath of cold air and said, "She's just a woman, you don't need to..."

"Just a woman?" Jin Zijin suddenly repeated angrily, interrupting him.

"Back then, did you think the same? Just a woman, how could you let her be the stepping stone for your ascent to the throne? So, in the face of interests, did you choose to abandon her without hesitation?"

This speech left the Emperor instantly rigid and speechless.

He sat in his chair, looking at Jin Zijin indifferently.

"I am not like you, I will not use Youyou to exchange for anything. What I want to obtain, I will take myself. You can't protect them because you lack the ability, it has nothing to do with them."

"You can't be swayed by your emotions, letting him go will inevitably stir up a bloody storm."

"Why don't you ask the common people if they would agree? You should not forget if it wasn't for her saving us from the natural disaster, Zhuzhao Country would now be engulfed in war flames. At that time, with just one cry for the rebel king, the disaster victims would rise up; do you think you could still sit securely here?"

"I don't deny her contributions; in the future, you can posthumously confer her as Empress, but I will not allow you to disregard the land and its people for the sake of one woman."

Jin Zijin couldn't help but sneer. So Xiao Qinqin was posthumously conferred as Empress? But did she want that? Had he ever asked her what she wanted?

Taking a deep breath, Jin Zijin calmly said, "I came here today to tell you that I'm going to break into the prison, merely to inform you. Whether you agree or not is your business."

After saying this, he left with large strides, but those steps were too determined, lacking the usual calm and warmth.

The Emperor's thoughts could not calm down for a long time. Much later, he was heard murmuring softly.

"I've already given so much, there's no turning back..."

Jin Zijin didn't just talk idly; that very night, the Emperor received word that Zongrenfu Prison had been broken into, and the prisoner who went missing was the newly imprisoned Prince Jin Mocong.

Chapter 1036: Take for Exchange

No one knew who had kidnapped him, but aside from the bloodstains left on the prison walls, no clue could be found.

Pandemonium broke out in the court, with each minister's face uglier than the next, and beyond the ugliness, there was a hint of panic.

"Ah, no wonder, on the court previously, that Jin Mocong was so arrogant and domineering, not showing any fear at all. It turns out he already knew someone would rescue him. Right under the Son of Heaven's nose, in full view of everyone, how did the other party even get to Beijing to carry out the rescue?"

"To have let him stay in Xining for over a decade, he has grown thoroughly capable. What are we to do now?"

"Emperor, once he returns to Xining, he will be like a tiger returning to the mountain. It will be harder for us to capture him again."

"Emperor, his return to Xining this time is surely for rebellion. Perhaps we can prepare ahead of time..."

The discussions in the court were heated as if nearly lifting the roof of Taihe Hall.

On the other hand, the Emperor seemed much calmer.

Eunuch Wan thoughtfully replaced the Emperor's tea with a hot one and quietly said, "Emperor, it might be more comfortable to speak after a sip of tea."

"Mm!" The Emperor hummed softly, picked up the teacup, and gently sipped.

Looking again at the chattering ministers, he merely said, "Zijin is already in pursuit. We'll discuss this further upon his return. Court is adjourned."

The ministers: "..."

The court suddenly fell silent, everyone gaping as they watched the Emperor leave.

Speaking of Jin Moning as the Emperor, these court officials were most pleased.

The Emperor's temperament was not to blow things out of proportion; he strove to maintain a balance of power among all parties. Although no one gained any advantage, neither did they suffer any loss.

They were living in peaceful times, their lives at home were comfy; who would like to be at war all the time?

So long as they conducted their affairs cautiously and didn't cross his red lines, they could live safely.

Thus, if anyone truly wanted to overthrow Emperor Jin Moning, it would be something no one wished for.

The rebel kings of the past had lost, and perhaps this was one reason.

...

Jin Ziyuan had no way to release Gu Youyou and also told her the reason for being held at the palace in Xining.

It turned out that, besides summoning Jin Ziyuan, they wanted to use her in exchange for the Fifth Prince, who was to head to Beijing.

Gu Youyou did not trouble him but merely requested that he help Searcy return safely.

Several days had passed, so Searcy was likely safe now.

That day, shortly after she had her breakfast, she was suddenly seized by a few guards who had barged in.

"What's this about?" Gu Youyou looked at the leading Madam Ru.

Madam Ru sighed softly and said, "I know Ziyuan is fond of you, and I like you too. But to exchange you for the Prince, we must put you through this. Take her away!"

Gu Youyou was put onto a carriage, with Madam Ru also inside. Although trapped in the carriage, she knew that many people followed outside, and an army lay ahead, ready to meet them. However, after exchanging a few words with Madam Ru, they left.

A bitter smile crossed Gu Youyou's lips—she would likely be taken for the exchange. Weren't there just too many people for this?

After traveling towards Beijing for two days, the carriage stopped at a pavilion, and then Gu Youyou was tied up and brought out.

She smiled wryly: Now she truly looked like a criminal.

It wasn't long before she saw a familiar man in a field, dressed in a suit of red clothes, allowing Gu Youyou to spot him at first glance.

Madam Ru behind her pushed Gu Youyou gently and said in a low voice, "Go on."

Her ropes were untied, and she began to walk towards Jin Zijin.

Chapter 1037: Regretting

Jin Zijin had many followers behind him, and only when he saw Gu Youyou approaching did he order the release of Prince Five.

The forces on both sides were about a hundred paces apart, and Gu Youyou felt a complex mixture of emotions as she moved closer, while also being cautious, her hand already gripping the silver needle hidden in her sleeve.

Prince Five appeared calm and composed, revealing a meaningful smile as he approached Gu Youyou.

This only made Gu Youyou more uneasy.

How could Jin Zijin release her so easily in exchange for Prince Five? She was so important to him; how could these people let her go so easily?

Wouldn't this group of fickle people continue to use her as a threat?

Both groups were so far away from Gu Youyou, she felt that if there were to be a problem, it surely lay with Prince Five.

She tried to keep her distance from Prince Five, but he seemed to discern her intent and subtly closed the gap between them.

Gu Youyou's heart skipped a beat, and she slowed her approach.

Sure enough, the old man was up to no good.

Jin Zijin's brow furrowed as he drew a red dagger.

Behind him, Searcy, who had met them en route, took out a short bamboo tube and placed it to her lips.

The closer they got, the more oppressive the air felt.

Gu Youyou was somewhat nervous; she had never seen Prince Five make a move, but from her experience, the men of the Jin Royal Family were likely skilled in martial arts. As a fragile woman, the silver needle in her hand was her only chance, but using it effectively was not so simple.

Thirty paces!

Twenty paces!

Ten paces...

As she drew nearer, at less than ten paces away, the seemingly smiling Prince Five's expression changed as he suddenly burst forward, swiftly reaching Gu Youyou and seizing her slender neck.

At the same time, in Jin Zijin's direction, a bright red dagger whistle through the air towards Prince Five, trailed by a long flame.

One after another, three delicate silver needles shot from the bamboo tube at Searcy's lips; aiming to anesthetize rather than kill, she used paralyzing darts rather than lethal poison.

Prince Five, who had captured Gu Youyou, suddenly extended a blade the length of a finger from the ring on his hand, striking back in a swift move. The blade met the dagger thrown by Jin Zijin with a crisp clang, and the finger-thick blade snapped, embedding itself in the ground.

The red dagger's fierce assault did not cease; although the block dissipated much of its force, it still forced Prince Five to retreat several steps.

Jin Zijin had already started using his Qinggong to rush towards the scene, and the three silver needles from Searcy were now in close proximity. Prince Five, his nerves shaken, had barely dodged Jin Zijin's dagger when he was suddenly faced with three more approaching needles.

Gu Youyou was ruthlessly thrown forward by him, used as a human shield.

Upon being pierced by the three potent tranquilizing needles, Gu Youyou could only curse, "Fuck your grandfather."

But she did not come out worse; she managed to plunge the silver needle she had hidden into Prince Five's body in the last moment.

It was too late by the time Prince Five noticed, and although he avoided his vital spots, his arm was penetrated by the needle. In the blink of an eye, he lost sensation in his right hand, and Gu Youyou crashed to the ground.

Enraged, he reached for the fallen Gu Youyou with his left hand but was interrupted by a short sword flying from behind.

The chilling sound of the sword whistling entered his ears, causing a painful twinge. Prince Five had no choice but to withdraw his hand and avoid the sharp edge of the oncoming blade.

Chapter 1038: The Knife He Drew

All of this happened in the blink of an eye. The next moment, everyone came to their senses, and both sides angrily charged toward each other, clashing fiercely.

Prince Wuyi lost his best opportunity for a surprise attack, and now his right hand had lost all sensation.

Jin Zijin arrived in an instant. He could only sigh at the missed opportunity.

This woman was his weakness, perhaps his only weakness. If he couldn't have her, dealing with Jin Zijin would become difficult.

Picking up the dagger, Jin Zijin scooped up Gu Youyou in his arms, his eyes dark as he glared at the despicable gang.

He, Jin Zijin, was determined to level the desert of Xining and personally slay Jin Mocong.

The owner of the short sword, through the fighting crowd, looked at Gu Youyou in Jin Zijin's embrace. Jin Zijin covered her with his cloak and nodded gently at him.

Searcy galloped over on his horse and urgently asked, "How is she?"

"She's fine, only hit by your needle," Jin Zijin replied.

Searcy pursed his lips and quickly stuffed a pill into Gu Youyou's mouth.

Moments later, Gu Youyou awoke. The first thing she saw was a familiar face, and nearby, the sounds of men's combat.

She suddenly hugged him tightly, urgently saying, "We must go, there's an army nearby."

Once the troops arrived, their escape would be difficult.

It seemed that the sound of a large army was already approaching from afar. Jin Zijin's cold gaze lightly drifted toward Prince Wuyi. With a wave of his hand, he led his men away swiftly.

"Quick, chase after them, don't let them escape!" Madam loudly commanded.

Prince Wuyi waved his hand and said, "No need to chase."

Was Jin Zijin so easily pursued?

With one arm hanging limp, he turned his gaze to Jin Ziyuan standing in the distance.

Had it not been for that last blow from him, he could have taken Gu Youyou back.

Jin Ziyuan gave him a mocking glance and galloped away on his horse.

Madam sighed, "This woman is a fortune, but she could also be a disaster."

...

After all the trouble, they finally made it home.

Lying in the bathtub, Gu Youyou took a bath and then waited for Jin Zijin to return.

He had gone to report to the Emperor; the matter with Prince Wuyi was far from over.

Only when night fell did he return. Jin Zijin took off his outer robe, kissed her deeply on the lips, and then turned to the bathroom.

They were both exhausted from the journey, needing a good rest before preparing for the next battle.

"Are we going to war?" Gu Youyou asked softly from the bed.

Though they no longer needed to lie in bed to discuss matters, over the years, it had become a habit.

They were used to lying in bed, wrapped in each other's embrace, sharing their hearts, and discussing the great matters of the world.

"We are," Jin Zijin answered her simply, starting to become mischievous.

...

Chapter 1039: Making a Deal with Huo Li

Jin Zijin's consultation with the Emperor naturally ended with the decision to fight. The more one wishes to avoid the use of force, the more rampant the opposition becomes.

Had the Emperor not been so neglectful for years, Xining wouldn’t have grown so strong as it is today.

With the various powers in equilibrium, the imperial officials could drown that army of 150,000 with their spit without speaking of battle. But once the topic of fighting came up, everyone fell quiet.

Most people watched the situation unfold with the detached interest of onlookers, turning their eyes towards those with military forces in their hands.

And the generals, each and every one of them, looked away.

I don’t know, I can’t hear.

It’s no wonder Xining managed to grow so large with the Imperial Court in such a state.

Fortunately, Zhuzhao Country hadn’t faced any large-scale invasions from foreign enemies in these years; otherwise, the nation would have had real cause for concern.

After resting for two days, Jin Zijin went to visit Huo Li at the Xuanzong in Sanqing Temple outside the city.

Huo Li had always kept a low profile, downplaying his actions by a great deal, hoping merely to wait for Yu Jizi’s return.

But unexpectedly, despite lying low and not leaving his residence for several months, Jin Zijin still managed to find him at his door.

He was vexed and had someone invite Jin Zijin inside.

"Great Prince." Huo Li bowed, looking exhausted, "What exactly do you want? Don’t forget, you were once a member of the Dao Family. You were raised by the master. Just because you are now part of the Imperial Family, will you ruthlessly drive Xuanzong to extinction?

Tianzong and Xuanzong both belong to the Dao Family, and only by combining the strength of our two sects can we have an absolute power in Zhuzhao Country. Without Xuanzong, even Tianzong alone might not be able to hold its ground."

"You're thinking too much. I think, you might have misunderstood me," Jin Zijin said, finding a chair and sitting down.

"Ha! What are you here for then?" Huo Li obviously didn't trust Jin Zijin very much.

Jin Zijin said indifferently, "To tell you some things, to make a trade."

"Trade?" Huo Li's mouth twitched instinctively, feeling that nothing good was coming.

Because before Jin Zijin's visit, Yue Rujing often sought him out for trades, after which it always proved that he was the one being duped.

Jin Zijin was even more fearsome than Yue Rujing; he did not want to discuss any trades with him.

Huo Li shook his head, saying, "I'm sorry, but I am not interested in making any trades. Please, do as you like."

"I haven't said anything yet. Aren't you refusing a bit too early?"

"There's no need to listen," Huo Li said, somewhat annoyed.

They were pushing him far too much, going overboard.

"Don't want to listen?" Jin Zijin seemed very interested in telling a story, his smile not quite reaching his eyes as he looked at Huo Li, "For instance, why has Yu Jizi been raising medicinal humans over the years, and what are you to him?"

For Huo Li, if there were any topics he could discuss with Jin Zijin, it would be about Yu Jizi and Tian Jizi.

Huo Li was a bit agitated as he said, "Where are they?"

"Calm down. I don't know where they are," Jin Zijin replied.

"What do you want to say?" Huo Li settled back down; he had indeed been too excited.

The morning light was just right, with the sun shining through the window and into the room, adding a touch of warmth to the coolness of the morning.

Jin Zijin sat beside the window, and as the story unfolded, Huo Li's face grew increasingly grim with the passage of time.

These things were the secrets of the Dao Family: the raising of medicinal humans and the array that the master had secretly manipulated—what they were for, how they were done, all were secrets of the Dao Family.

Huo Li had always thought that the time was not right, so Yu Jizi had never told him.

Jin Zijin was raised by Tian Jizi from a young age; Huo Li himself was also raised by Yu Jizi since he was a child, and he had great faith in his master. He never questioned or asked for details. He would simply carry out his master's commands dutifully.

Chapter 1040: Starting to Doubt the Master

He had always thought that his master would one day reveal the secrets of the Dao Sect to him, perhaps when he won the title of State Preceptor, but he had never imagined that all of it had been in his master's calculations; he had never been regarded as a disciple worthy of inheriting his master's mantle. To Huo Li and Yu Jizi, he might just be a pitifully obedient worm.

A worm sacrificed as soon as the deed was done.

Huo Li’s face turned pale, his lips quivering slightly.

Looking at Jin Zijin, he took a long while before he could utter a word.

"How do you expect me to believe you?"

Jin Zijin said, "I am only responsible for telling you these things. Whether you believe them or not is up to you. I’ll give you three days to think it over, if you decide, come find me in the city."

Huo Li watched Jin Zijin walk out the door, his heart troubled for a long time.

He had never heard of these Dao Sect secrets before, but Jin Zijin knew them very clearly because Tian Jizi had not hidden them from him.

He still remembered the time he brought food to his master and saw him drawing something, but his master, angry, had driven him out. Thinking back to his master’s demeanor then, he still felt intimidated.

His master had always been a kind old man, seldom showing such an expression.

Could it be as Jin Zijin said, that he had always been researching a method to extend life? That drawing was the Blood Sacrifice Soul Transfer Array. His master, old as he was, wished to swap into a younger body to continue living in this world, and the reason he was reserved with him was because he never planned to hand over Xuanzong, the Dao Family, and the Imperial Court to anyone.

His goals were not just the Dao Family but also the Imperial Court.

At this thought, Huo Li was abruptly startled.

...

The Emperor was going to send troops against Xining, and certainly wouldn’t use only his own soldiers.

No one who held significant military power could escape.

Yue Rujing was heading back to Lingnan and would gladly lend troops to Jin Zijin, but as for aiding Moning in fighting Mocong, it was uncertain.

Meanwhile, the Emperor had summoned the Ducal Residence's old man into the palace, not meeting him in Qianqing Palace but directing someone to bring him straight to Jiaotai Hall, used by the Empress to receive guests.

The old man from the Ducal Residence, who had lived over eighty years, surely understood what the Emperor wanted.

Initially, he had been unwilling to come, feigning illness at home.

After all, he was old, and feigning illness was not a rare occurrence for him, quite a normal thing, but this time it seemed the Emperor was not so easily fooled, sending Wan Decheng to convey a message to the Ducal Residence that the protective Duke was old and frequently fell sick, yet often attended court as well, which was really inappropriate. It would be better for him to abdicate early and return home to enjoy his remaining years.

Was this their way of stripping him of his power if he didn't show up, citing his illness?

How could this be acceptable? As long as he, this old frame, lived another day, he intended to hold the power of the Ducal Residence in his hands.

At his age, if he couldn't see King Jin ascend as Crown Prince, he wouldn't relinquish power unless he died.

"Old minister pays his respects to the Emperor and the Empress."

Genuinely an old man of over eighty, he wasn't like Yu Jizi or Tian Jizi who could defy age. It was evident, as he entered Jiaotai Hall, that the Ducal Protector was somewhat out of breath.

"Protector of the Nation, please take a seat."

The Emperor had already prepared a chair, perhaps anticipating a prolonged confrontation.

The Empress sat beside the Emperor, looking at the Ducal Protector’s somewhat trembling frame with concern.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, the Emperor went straight to the point.