Farmhouse 1041

Chapter 1041: Discussing Troop Deployment

"Ducal Lord, you are getting on in years, so I will be brief," the Emperor said. "You are aware that Jin Mocong of Xining is causing turmoil, and sooner or later he will rebel. The courtiers all feel that rather than waiting for him to turn against us, it would be better to strike first. Therefore, deploying troops to Xining is inevitable."

The Ducal Lord squinted his eyes, pretending not to understand, and said, "Who then does Your Majesty plan to send out? My son just recently sent a letter from home, mentioning that the border at Beiping has become somewhat unstable lately, and the military situation is pressing. If it really gets out of hand, I fear the Imperial Court will need to provide support. In the past, I wrote him a reply, telling him to stand firm against any adversity, as Your Majesty has been preoccupied with the disaster areas and the situation in Xining, with no time to concern yourself with him."

A smile appeared on the Empress's face. She knew her grandfather was formidable. Beiping was already in such difficulty; surely they couldn't expect her fourth uncle to abandon Beiping and go off to fight in Xining, could they?

They had long since agreed to firmly oppose sending troops. If the Emperor took this opportunity to weaken the power of the Ducal Residence, their fate would be the same as that of the Grand Master Residence of yore.

After the Xiao Family's downfall, the fate of Xiao Qinqin still sent shivers down her spine just thinking about it. Even if she were posthumously crowned as Empress after her death, what use would it be? She did not care for such honors.

"Your Majesty," the Empress said, "my fourth uncle has already had a hard time. The barbarians of the north are formidable indeed, and the troops of Beiping absolutely must not be mobilized."

The Emperor's icy gaze swept towards the Empress, and she immediately fell silent.

She thought to herself that this man truly had no heart. If it weren't for the power of her family, the Ducal Residence, at this juncture she would have ended up just like Xiao Qinqin, returned to dust.

"Beiping must be defended, and Xining cannot be ignored," the Emperor stated indifferently. "In that case, what do you, Ducal Lord and Empress, suggest we do?"

The Emperor had directly passed the ball to them.

The Empress did not join in the discussion; as a woman, it was improper for her to participate in politics. She would speak when it was time to speak and otherwise remain silent.

Under such circumstances, of course, she would say no more.

"Your Majesty, as a woman, I do not understand these matters," she said.

The Emperor sneered. She understood very well when it suited her, but feigned ignorance otherwise.

This woman daringly played the role of the clever one; otherwise, all those women from the Crown Prince Residence back then wouldn't have fallen at her hand.

Jin Yushu thought she had been flawless in her schemes, but the Emperor knew everything. He kept quiet and pretended not to notice, because those women had driven Qinqin to her death—they all deserved to die.

All the old maids who had forced Qinqin to leave the Crown Prince Residence that year were gone, save for the Empress alone.

Someday, she would be the same.

Reflecting on the past, the Emperor's thoughts took many twists and turns, and a chill emanating from his very marrow almost froze the air around him. The Empress was suddenly startled, frightened by the Emperor's current demeanor.

Was he not just unwilling to send troops? Why was he looking as if he wished to devour someone?

That invisible pressure bore down on the Empress, and her silence now was born of fear of the Emperor.

The Ducal Lord, who was old and his eyesight failing, could not see the Emperor’s expression clearly, so he did not perceive the subtle shifts in the atmosphere between the Emperor and the Empress.

"Let the Yue Family of Lingnan take charge," he suggested. "They have a large army, twenty thousand strong. Yue Tingfang is brave and adept in battle, and it is said that even the ladies of their family are capable of taking to the battlefield, quite imposing indeed. Nanzhao Country, on the border of Lingnan, is but a small nation and poses no significant threat. He is the best choice for the task."

The Emperor shifted his gaze to the Ducal Lord and spoke in a low voice, "I sent a secret edict to Yue Tingfang a few days ago; he claims he has been in declining health recently and fears he may never see battle again in this lifetime."

Chapter 1042: Make You Bleed a Little

His only son, Yue Rujing, was also a member of the Dao Sect, and currently, the affairs of the Dao Sect were no less busy than that of the Imperial Court. Yue Rujing really couldn’t leave. It would be impossible to send his own daughter to war. "Ducal Residence, if we let the eldest daughter of the Yue Family lead the army to attack Xining, would the men of Zhuzhao Country still have any pride left in living in this world?"

After saying this, he looked at the Ducal Residence with a slight smile.

However, at this moment, the Empress interjected, "I heard that yesterday Yue Rujing left for Lingnan. It seems that the affairs of the Dao Family are not as troublesome as they appear!"

The Emperor whispered, "No, that’s because Yue Tingfang is seriously ill, and he had no choice but to return to Lingnan to assess the situation."

The Empress was left speechless.

"With such a vast area of Lingnan, is Yue Tingfang really the only one capable of leading troops into battle?" the Ducal Residence grunted.

The Emperor said, "Of course not, the Ducal Residence himself just said that the sons and daughters of the Yue Family are all brave and good at fighting; the young ladies of the Yue Family are also capable of entering the battlefield."

"That still doesn't mean we should actually let a young girl fight this war!" the Ducal Residence retorted coldly.

The Emperor laughed, "That's more like it."

"So, Ducal Residence, what do you think should be done?"

The problem was thrown back, and the Ducal Residence's expression had already become very ugly.

"What about the East Sea then? General Che's forces are numerous and capable, surely it's not like Lingnan, where you can't dispatch a single commander?"

General Che was a relative by marriage to the Ducal Residence, and he did not wish for Che Xiangyuan to go, but compared to sending troops from Beiping, he preferred to let General Che take charge.

After weighing the pros and cons, since Lingnan was not an option, the only choice was Che Xiangyuan.

Since the Emperor had approached him, it would obviously be impossible to expect the Emperor to pull his own feathers.

"Would the Ducal Residence take responsibility for persuading General Che?"

The Emperor said this so lightly that it almost made the Ducal Residence stumble.

With the Emperor already finding it extremely difficult to issue orders, what use would there be in sending an old man like him?

Che Xiangyuan is not foolish; he would definitely prefer Beiping to supply the troops.

Beiping and the Northwestern Desert were the closest; if not for the interest factor, Beiping would actually be a good choice.

The Ducal Residence stroked his beard, troubled, "Sending General Che... might not be a good idea either! Your Majesty, perhaps allow this old servant to return and think it over carefully, as the matter of dispatching troops is of great importance!"

He needed to go back and discuss it properly with his sons.

"There's no need," the Emperor said.

"I have already thought of a solution, but it requires the Ducal Residence's cooperation."

The Ducal Residence and the Empress's expressions changed.

They thought: Why didn't you say you had a plan earlier? You made us fret needlessly.

"The Emperor, please speak; your servant will surely cooperate."

"It's like this, Lingnan, Beiping and Dongzhou, none can be destabilized lightly. We in Zhuzhao are situated in the Central Prefecture, surrounded by enemies on all sides. Stirring up one area could potentially bring great disaster upon Zhuzhao Country, so deploying troops to suppress the rebellion in Xining is not a matter for one party alone. Beiping's military situation is shocking, but they must also deploy troops!"

"Oh, Your Majesty, that won't do..." the Ducal Residence sobbed, "In recent years, the military camps in Beiping have been self-sufficient, and they are already facing severe hardships. The Barbarians are fierce, and one can fight like two. If we withdraw the troops from Beiping, then Beiping won't be able to hold back the Barbarians anymore."

The Emperor said, "Ducal Residence, be calm, I will not leave you at a disadvantage. The deployment of troops is not the concern of one family alone. Fifty thousand from Lingnan, fifty thousand from Dongzhou, I will have General Lu bring fifty thousand, and Beiping must also send fifty thousand. This way, it will reflect my fairness."

Chapter 1043: Understood

"This..." The Duke's expression changed repeatedly, and he looked troubled.

The Emperor said, "It stands to reason that since the Northwestern Desert is closest to Beiping and Beijing, if the deployment of troops were to happen, it would certainly be from the nearest to the farthest. I have already arranged it this way, which has put Lingnan and Dongzhou at a disadvantage. If the Duke has reservations... You may want to go back and think about the consequences."

The Emperor's tone remained calm throughout until at the end, when it carried a palpable chill.

The Empress looked anxiously at the Duke, thinking, "The Emperor has already made himself very clear; if he doesn't agree now, it would definitely provoke him. If he gets provoked and passes the throne to Jin Zijin, then real trouble would ensue."

"Grandfather, what the Emperor said is reasonable," the Empress said softly.

With this, the Empress even managed to elicit a gentle smile from the Emperor.

She only hoped that the Emperor, considering the many years of support from the Ducal Residence, would carefully weigh the pros and cons before deciding to pass on the throne.

The Duke, after much deliberation, thought, if I disagree, wouldn't the biggest losers be the Emperor and the Ducal Residence if chaos breaks out in Xining at the end?

Replacements for the Emperor could come and go; Lingnan would remain Lingnan, and Dongzhou would stay Dongzhou while only the Emperor and the Ducal Residence would be replaced.

After assessing the pros and cons, he said, "In that case, if Lingnan and Dongzhou each contribute 50,000 soldiers, I shall indeed find a way to assemble 50,000 elite troops from my son. However, when soldiers from different regions each act on their own authority, who will lead as the General?"

"First, let the soldiers head to Xining. As for the General, the ablest will take the position."

...

With Beiping sorted, Lingnan had Yue Rujing along with Jin Zijin's handwritten letter on the way, so there should be no significant issue at the Marquess's end.

Currently, the greatest difficulty lies in Dongzhou.

The evening breeze was gentle, and like Jin Zijin, Gu Youyou was studying military strategies.

Someone reported that Huo Li of Xuanzong had come to visit.

Gu Youyou, surprised, turned to Jin Zijin, "Why is Huo Li here so late?"

Jin Zijin's lips curled into a slight smile, put down his military book and whispered, "Good news!"

Gu Youyou sneered, "What good can come in the dead of night? At this hour, it's either conspiracy or theft!"

Listening to approaching footsteps, Gu Youyou set down her book and slipped behind the screen.

She did not want to see Huo Li; it was better to avoid him.

Besides, no woman belonging to a household in this era would meet a man from outside late at night.

Huo Li, dressed in black, emerged from the darkness, with the servant holding a lamp that could not illuminate his dark figure.

Jin Zijin brightened the lamp in the study more and brewed a pot of tea.

"Please sit!" he said to Huo Li, then personally poured a cup of tea for him.

This night was likely to be sleepless; drinking more tea would help to stay alert.

"Hmm!" murmured Huo Li, nodding lightly. He then thanked Jin Zijin with a salutary fist then sat down.

"Have you figured it out?" Jin Zijin sat down opposite him, sipping his tea lightly.

"Heh..." Huo Li laughed bitterly, his face expressing immense bitterness. He said, "He has always been the person I trust the most, and I've always followed his word, striving to execute his orders perfectly and strictly disciplining my subordinates – all for the sake of Xuanzong. I don't understand, why did he do this? He may seek immortality, but why does he treat me kindly on one hand while guarding against me on the other?"

"Isn't that normal? A student grows to outshine the master, yet the master doesn't aim to die," Jin Zijin replied lightly.

Huo Li discomfortedly picked up the teacup and downed it in one gulp.

Who to blame? Only that he followed a perverse master.

Chapter 1044: Sneaking into Yu Jizi's Secret Room

He had regained his courage during the day and sneaked into Yu Jizi's secret chamber.

Yu Jizi held an inviolable sacred status in Xuanzong; without Jin Zijin's words, Huo Li would have never dared to trespass into Yu Jizi's chamber.

Yu Jizi was well aware of this, which is why he felt so at ease.

The secrets within that chamber, concerning the medicinal man and that array, were exactly as Jin Zijin had described, which made him even more terrified as he thought about it.

Thinking about his master appearing before him with a young face, he felt immensely horrified.

After sighing, Huo Li drank another cup of tea and asked, "So, what did you tell me all this for? What do you want to do?"

Jin Zijin would not have warned him without a reason; so, what was he seeking?

"I want to stop Yu Jizi and save the Dao Family," Jin Zijin, looking seriously at Huo Li, said.

Huo Li narrowed his eyes slightly and asked, "What do you mean?"

Jin Zijin said, "You probably still do not understand what he really wants to do."

"Do what?" Wasn't it just to switch to a younger body, let that young body replace him as the Grand Master Brother of Xuanzong, and then continue to be the State Preceptor?

No, naturally not.

Jin Zijin said, "Yu Jizi is a wild man by nature, his secular surname is Jin, and he was once part of the Imperial Family."

Huo Li, holding his empty teacup, looked puzzledly at Jin Zijin.

"Besides longing for immortality, he has another desire—to hold both the Dao Family and the Imperial Court in his hands, to truly unify Zhuzhao Country. He wants to be the eternal king of Zhuzhao Country,

and those of us who try to stop him, the candidates for the State Preceptor, should not expect to survive. By then, there will be no Dao Sect."

"Really?" Huo Li's complexion turned somewhat pale, seemingly in disbelief of Jin Zijin's words.

Yet, upon saying the word "really," he felt rather foolish.

Over the years, the things he had done for Yu Jizi, gradually penetrating the Imperial Court, he knew better than anyone.

But with the prestige of the Dao Family in Zhuzhao Country, why would they infiltrate the Imperial Court? It was too strange.

So, he wanted to grasp both the Dao Family and the Imperial Court!

"Do you want the Dao Family to merge into the Imperial Court?" Jin Zijin's voice was very deep, carrying a hint of enticement in the quiet night.

"Do you wish for the Dao Family to disappear?"

If his guess was right, Yu Jizi's plan was indeed to assume Jin Ziyuan's identity, using his identity to legitimatize the former Rebel King. Jin Ziyuan was the only son of the three brothers; it was righteous for him to be the Emperor.

And if he became the Emperor, then naturally there would be no purpose for the Dao Sect to exist. How could a man like him allow the Dao Family with immense power to coexist equally with the dignity of the Emperor?

Thus, although he helped Jin Moning defeat the Rebel King's party years ago, he also left an opportunity for the Rebel King's party to rise again.

A cold sweat broke out on Huo Li's face; he had grown up in the Dao Family, Sanqing Temple was his home. In his worldview, the Dao Family was different from the secular world, and he naturally did not want the Dao Family to become secular.

"What do you want to do?" Huo Li asked.

Jin Zijin said, "You help me with one thing, and I assure you, the Dao Family will be separated from the imperial power, and everyone in the Dao Sect will be able to safely retreat from the world, and Tianzong and Xuanzong will return to the harmony of a thousand years ago."

Jin Zijin's words deeply moved Huo Li; he did not harbor ambitions like Yu Jizi. His greatest ambition was only to lead Xuanzong and be the State Preceptor of Zhuzhao Country.

To him, leading Xuanzong and being the State Preceptor of Zhuzhao Country made no difference, he didn't want to use the position of State Preceptor to control anyone.

Chapter 1045: Seeing the Gu Family Members Again

"What's the matter?" Huo Li seemed somewhat excited, "If it's feasible, I can agree to your request."

Master's return was uncertain, and should he truly not come back, Huo could not always lead his junior brethren from the Xuanzong with tails between their legs. Making this deal with Jin Zijin seemed like a good choice.

Of course, it all depended on the terms Jin Zijin would propose.

"You go to Fusang City in the East Sea and meet with General Che. Get him to agree to dispatch fifty thousand troops to attack Xining. Don't hurry to refuse; I know you can do it."

Huo Li looked at Jin Zijin in surprise, then lowered his head and drank a cup of tea.

Holding the empty teacup, he asked, "This tea is delicious; what tea is it?"

"Old tea from Qi Mountain!" Jin Zijin said.

Qi Mountain, the ancestral land of the Dao Family. It had been so many years, and Huo Li, always residing in Sanqing Temple, had never visited Qi Mountain.

Suddenly, he felt a desire to see Qi Mountain—to see what sort of place the sages of the Dao Family had established.

...

After resting in Beijing for a few days, Gu Youyou was finally allowed by Jin Zijin to leave the house.

"Be careful on your way and come back early."

Gu Youyou said, "Don’t worry. I’m only going to Jinxiu City; it’s not far, and the imperial road is very safe."

"Ah, every time I let you go out, there’s trouble!" Jin Zijin sighed helplessly.

At the same time, he knew that Gu Youyou couldn’t stay home all day like an ordinary woman. Of course, ordinary women didn’t face as much trouble when they went out.

Gui Yunxi was driving the carriage, and Gu Youyou was inside with Searcy, who was fiddling with a jar. She said with a sly smile, "This time I’m fully prepared; this jar is full of poison bees."

Beside her was a leather backpack, which contained her prized personal belongings.

Gu Youyou disagreed, believing that people from Xuanzong wouldn’t attack her and that the forces of the rival king had all withdrawn to Xining. She couldn’t think of who else might suddenly attack her.

The last time she and Searcy went to a mountain, upon returning, she had handed over the map to Jin Zijin, who then, under the guise of bandit suppression, cleared the mountain. However, by the time he got there, it was deserted; there was no one left.

They safely reached Jinxiu City and, led by Miss Du, arrived at a compound.

The Gu Family lived there; the courtyard was quite large and perfectly accommodated them.

"Youyou?" Huang Xiangwen was hanging laundry.

"Big sister?" Erya was teaching Yue Ya how to walk.

Hearing their voices, people from inside the house gradually gathered in the courtyard.

Gu Youyou greeted them with a smile and had someone bring gifts from the carriage.

"Is everyone getting used to living here?"

Years had passed since Gu Youyou had been the family burden, lying in that forbidden dark room, to now, where her brilliance shone, becoming the pillar of the family. All this seemed like a dream, surreal and distant.

When they had nowhere else to go, she bravely entered the disaster area, found them on that mountain, and truly saved them during their darkest times.

Remembering the past, Huang Xiangwen wept like rain.

"Youyou, I am sorry!" she exclaimed.

The reunion of relatives was joyful, yet a touch of sadness lingered in the courtyard.

They had once treated her so poorly.

"What happened in the past is in the past. Every dead relative is one less; it is important for everyone to live well and have a good life."

Grandfather was just an ordinary farmer, but many of his words were worth deep reflection.

Chapter 1046: Arrange everything for them

Becoming relatives with blood ties in this life was not easy; over two lifetimes, maybe Gu Youyou was destined to be incompatible with her relatives, but nothing is absolute. After all, hearts are made of flesh; no matter how they treated her before, now everything had changed.

"Right, it's better if everyone is alive. Sister-in-law, please don't be sad anymore, don't let the children get upset," Shunzi's mother supported Huang Xiangwen, pulling her to one side.

Gu Youyou hadn't seen Shunzi's mother for a long time. She remembered that back in Lotus Village, during her toughest days, besides Jin Zijin, who treated her the best, this neighbor's mother had also been kindest to her.

"Aunt Wang, thank you!"

Shunzi's mother laughed and said, "What are you thanking me for? I should be thanking you! Youyou, it's really unexpected, you and Jin... oh, no, the Prince, have had such a twisted fate. It really hasn't been easy."

Miss Du smiled and said, "Now that everyone is fine, let's go inside and talk."

Lotus Village could no longer be returned to. After being washed by landslides, the whole village was filled with mud and sand, with low areas completely covered.

There wasn't just one village like Lotus Village; several nearby villages were in the same situation, and the villagers had all been relocated to other villages.

Since the Gu Family had Gu Youyou as a relative, they naturally didn't need to be arranged separately by the local Governor's Office.

Three families lived in this courtyard, and Gu Youyou had bought three houses for them. The temporary residence they were staying in belonged to Miss Du, so it had to be returned.

Shunzi's mother was a very skilled seamstress, which Gu Youyou still remembered, so she found her a job. She helped at Manxiu Building's clothing department, making five silver per month, which delighted her greatly.

Shunzi's father also got a job, helping with transporting goods. When he got a bit older, he would be arranged to do some lighter work.

The couple was overwhelmingly grateful to Gu Youyou.

Erya loved to eat fish. To win over his wife's heart, Shunzi had developed a talent for cooking fish. Gu Youyou had left a lot of chili peppers when she left Lotus Village, and they had been growing them ever since. The fish, spiced with the chilies they grew in their yard, tasted even better. His biggest wish was to open a restaurant specializing in fish.

Over the years, they had been diligently saving money for this dream. Just when the savings were nearly enough, and they were planning to find a place in the town once the children were older, Qingshui Town suffered a natural disaster.

The money they had saved might have been enough to rent a storefront and open a restaurant in Qingshui Town, but a while back, when Shunzi went to inquire, he found that the price of real estate in Jinxiu City was worth its weight in gold, even more expensive than in Beijing, and their little savings were nowhere near enough.

When Gu Youyou asked what they wanted to do, Shunzi hemmed and hawed for a long time before telling her.

In their eyes, not having enough money was a big problem, but to the wealthy and generous Gu Youyou, it was a small matter.

She smiled and said, "Having a dream is a good thing. There isn't a restaurant in the entire Zhuzhao Country that specializes in fish, especially the spicy kind. Shunzi, I love fish too. I support your idea."

And so, Gu Youyou planned to finance him to start the restaurant. However, having skills alone wasn't enough to open a restaurant in a place like Jinxiu City, so Gu Youyou suggested that Shunzi first find a restaurant and become an apprentice to learn how they managed their business.

Miss Du had a wide network of contacts, so they left it to him to handle the task.

Chapter 1047: Time to Do Big Business

Erya had to stay at home to watch the two children, so she had no way to go out and find a living. Sanbao was following his brother-in-law Shunzi to become an apprentice, and in the future, he could also open his own restaurant.

Sanbao was no longer young, and in another two years, it would be time to discuss marriage. He happily said to Gu Youyou, "Big sister, my sister says I have to save money to get myself a wife."

That comment made everyone burst into laughter.

Dabao was a simple and honest man. Since Lei Qianqian's incident, he had become even more silent than before. He was a few months older than Erya, and now Erya already had two children, while his wife was still nowhere in sight. Aunt Huang Xiangwen was most worried about Dabao's lifelong event.

"Youyou, Auntie just hopes you can help Dabao find a wife. I've saved some private money, which should be enough for his marriage," she said.

With that, she brought out a small chest.

Shunzi's mother said, "You don't have to worry about Dabao not finding a wife because of money, it's mainly because Dabao himself can't get over it. You should put this money away quickly."

For years, Dabao had not moved on from what happened with Lei Qianqian. Given his family's conditions, along with his decent appearance and hard-working nature, countless girls would be willing to marry into the Gu Family—it was just that he himself was unwilling.

According to local customs, the eldest brother must marry first before the younger ones could discuss marriage. Seeing that Erbao was already fifteen or sixteen, Huang Xiangwen naturally became anxious.

Huang Xiangwen cursed angrily, "It's all that little tramp Lei Qianqian's fault for tormenting my Dabao so much."

Ice cannot be formed in a single day, and melting it was not an easy task either.

Gu Youyou sighed softly and said, "Auntie, it's been so long, you shouldn't keep thinking about it. If you keep talking about it, it will only make Dabao feel worse. How about this, Dabao can also work in the factory. There are many people his age there, and everyone jokes and talks together. Gradually, he'll come around on his own."

Shunzi's mother also tried to console her, "Right, you shouldn't mention that matter anymore. Let's all forget about it. From now on, we will live here; no one knows us, and as long as we don't talk about it, who would know that Dabao once encountered such a person?"

Dabao's inability to move on was naturally related to the gossipy women of Lotus Village; wherever he went, people pointed at his back and talked about those matters. How could he feel good inside?

In a new environment where nobody knew those matters, he would definitely get better gradually.

Thinking this, Huang Xiangwen's heart was rekindled with hope.

For Gu Youyou, such a big CEO, arranging a few small jobs for relatives to support themselves was no big issue.

After she had settled things for them, Gu Youyou followed Miss Du to Manxiu Building.

Searcy had been waiting in Manxiu Building all this time, finally letting out a sigh of relief at seeing Gu Youyou return safely.

"It’s been more than half a day, if you don’t go back, it would be getting dark."

Gu Youyou looked at the sky, only then realizing she had been busy for most of the day.

The villagers didn’t have the habit of eating lunch, so both the Gu Family and Wang Family did not have lunch. That was why Gu Youyou hadn’t eaten her morning meal and was starting to feel hungry.

Miss Du considerately said, "I had food prepared early. Let’s go inside and eat while we talk."

"Okay!" Gu Youyou nodded.

At the dining table, Gu Youyou told Miss Du about opening chain pastry shops and expanding the market.

Her expansion plans weren’t only domestic but international as well.

Chapter 1048: Discussing Merits

At that time, very few people thought about opening stores in other countries; they mostly engaged in some trade of goods with neighboring nations. Otherwise, how could the Silk Road have lasted for so many years?

Like Gu Youyou, she was the first to actually go to another country and open a branch.

"Doctor Gu, your idea is quite bold, but opening a branch in a neighboring country is not so simple; it involves a wide array of issues, first and foremost you need the local Governor’s Office’s approval. If we go to another country, we still have to deal with customs, and it’s always quite troublesome."

Gu Youyou smiled and said, "That’s not a problem. I’ll provide the capital and technology for the store, and all employees will be hired locally. I asked Zijin, and there won’t be much trouble."

She was opening a pharmacy, which was beneficial and harmless to the local people, so naturally, there wouldn’t be much of a problem.

And even if she didn’t go to the neighboring country to open a store, the wealthy people from the neighboring country would still come to Jinxiu City to order beautiful clothes; then she might as well open a ready-to-wear store in Jinxiu City in the neighboring country, which would be less troublesome.

Gu Youyou had almost finished eating, and it was getting late. Thinking about what Jin Zijin had told her before she left made her worry that he might be concerned, so she decided to go back early.

Gu Youyou said, "I originally planned to gather all the store managers today to discuss this matter, but it’s getting late, so let’s leave it at that for now. Tell them to be prepared, and in three days, you and all the store managers come to Beijing. This is a big deal and we must have everyone’s support."

Gu Youyou’s business group had grown significantly, and the store managers were like her board of directors, though some from farther away couldn’t always come; still, sixty to seventy percent of the store managers were gathered in Beijing and near Jinxiu City.

She was working so hard and even planning to raise funds because a war was imminent, and war was costly in terms of silver. Jin Zijin was definitely going to go.

...

Mr. Xie dealt with the disaster area’s issues and returned to Beijing.

Speaking of this disaster relief, Gu Youyou was undoubtedly the greatest contributor.

Then came the question. Previously, the emperor had said that whoever made a major contribution to disaster relief would be established as Crown Prince.

But Gu Youyou had claimed the greatest merit!

Mr. Xie said, "The Crown Prince and his wife are one, and it’s thanks to the Crown Prince’s support that the Crown Princess could achieve the highest credit."

The emperor was well aware of why the rebels hadn’t taken advantage of the most intense rumors to stir public opinion and revolt; it was only because Jin Zijin had been traveling around secretly suppressing them.

Of course, Gu Youyou’s contributions were indeed visible to everyone.

Jin Zijin’s contributions were in the shadows, while Gu Youyou’s were in the light.

The emperor gave a bitter smile. He had done it deliberately. If he truly wanted to be named Crown Prince, he could have easily come forward and taken care of these matters himself.

"Mr. Xie!" The one who spoke up this time was not the Duke of Protection but Prime Minister Zhang.

"Mr. Xie, you can’t really say that. The emperor’s move examines the princes’ capabilities, not their wives’. I heard that the Crown Prince only stayed in the disaster area for one day. Even if we attribute the merit to him, that doesn’t quite show capability, does it?"

After saying this, he turned to the emperor and bowed, "Your Majesty, I acknowledge that the Crown Princess is capable, but to establish the Crown Prince, surely, Zhuzhao Country cannot rely on a woman to sustain it in the future? I think Mr. Xie’s words are inappropriate."

"I concur!"

"I concur!"

Soon, many similar voices rang out in the court. The Duke of Protection hadn’t spoken, but so many people had already spoken for him.

Chapter 1049: No One Can Benefit

He stroked his beard and smiled.

The Emperor’s face didn’t look too good, but he didn’t say much either, as this was something he had anticipated. He just disliked the fact that the Ducal Residence had too many claws, severely affecting the government discipline.

It seemed that appointing Jin Zijin as the Crown Prince was not going to be an easy task, unless he truly made remarkable achievements.

"Your Majesty, none of the three princes were able to take the lead in this natural disaster. I think it’s time to rotate rewards. The First Prince’s Consort should take the first share, then the second share should definitely go to King Jin. Among the three princes, King Jin stayed in the disaster area the longest and was most sincere. He was the first to leave and the last to return. Compared to the other two princes, such sincerity is truly rare."

The moment Jie Minister, who had witnessed King Jin’s actions in the disaster area, scoffed, the talking Minister’s face turned extremely unsightly.

Jie Minister saluted the Emperor, "I have no objections if the First Prince’s Consort takes the lead, but to give the second reward to King Jin, I feel it’s unjust for Prince Qin."

"What do you mean? Are you implying that King Jin is inferior to Prince Qin? Ha, Jie Huanzhi, don’t tarnish the reputation of the Jie Family." Upon hearing Jie Minister’s words, the Lord Protector couldn’t sit still.

The Jie Family held a unique place in court, known for their loyalty only to the Emperor and not favoring anyone. But with Jie Huanzhi expressing it was unjust for Prince Qin, others had something to say because Jie Huanzhi’s only daughter was married to Prince Qin, although not as a primary consort, but as a favored consort.

Everyone spread the rumor that Prince Qin indulged Jie Consort solely to please Jie Huanzhi. Everyone guessed that, with Jie Minister’s stubborn character, Prince Qin’s flattery would only reach the horse’s hooves, but now it seemed to serve some purpose, huh.

"Jie Minister, you must hold your water steady," someone chuckled.

Jie Huanzhi, frustrated, said, "I, Jie Huanzhi, act uprightly and sit straight, never favoring anyone. What, am I not even allowed to speak a fair word now?"

"No, no, if Jie Minister speaks fairly, we naturally love to listen. But if Jie Minister favors Prince Qin, then people might not love it."

"Hmph!" Jie Huanzhi snorted coldly and pulled a few memorials out of his sleeve to present to the Emperor.

"Your Majesty, I've thought several times to present these memorials I wrote, but for the sake of the bigger picture, I held back. Now that everyone suspects I am biased, let them see what good deeds King Jin has done in the disaster area."

Inside the memorials, naturally, were accounts of King Jin punishing rumor-mongers, using lifesaving steamed buns to entice the people.

People, desperate for a bite of steamed buns, accused wildly, and finally so confused they didn't even know who was spreading the rumors, were taken by King Jin to be severely beaten, many losing their lives.

After reading it, the Emperor passed it around to the various Ministers to see, and when they had finished, each had a very vivid expression on their face.

Jie Minister said, "If not for the timely arrival of the First Prince and the First Prince's Consort and her efforts to avert disaster with her own resources, this natural disaster could indeed have turned into a man-made calamity."

"How absurd, how could the First Prince use such absurd methods to find the spreader of rumors?"

The speaker was the straightforward Lin Xingyi.

The Lord Protector's face didn't look too good as he glared fiercely at him.

Prime Minister Zhang was pleased; he was pointing out that King Jin was shunning the Lin Family, waiting for Lin Qianqing's misfortune, and then supporting his own daughter to the principal position.

At this time, the three princes were waiting outside Taihe Hall, unable to know the situation inside the hall.

Chapter 1050: Reporting a Complaint

Prince Jin seemed far from calm, for he was too eager to know the situation inside.

He considered his contributions the greatest. Having eaten plain rice and greens for so long, if he still did not obtain the Crown Prince position, wouldn't his efforts be in vain?

Looking at the other two, Jin Zijin was serenely composed, frustratingly so. The other, Jin Tingyu, seemed as if it were none of his concern.

"Second Brother, keep your composure," he said.

Previously, Jin Tingyu would call him Elder Brother. At that time, he looked down on this half-blood brother, thinking that being called Elder Brother by him was an insult. After so many years of hearing Elder Brother, now being called Second Brother felt even more piercing to the ears.

Prince Jin snorted coldly, "It's not your turn to speak."

Prince Qin shrugged and said, "I don't care."

...It infuriated him.

Prince Jin then looked towards Jin Zijin and said, "You were here for just one day before leaving, and the imperial decree stated not to help. I admit Gu Youyou has merit, but that has nothing to do with you."

"I know!" Jin Zijin said.

He remained composure personified, much to Prince Jin's annoyance.

Actually, at this moment, Prince Jin especially wanted to pick a fight with the two of them, but one was exceedingly calm and the other indifferent.

In the royal court, the matter of which prince should become the Crown Prince was causing great anxiety and debate.

Some people believed that commitment should be taken into account, that Prince Jin had been the most devoted to duty. Even if he was wrong, at least he made efforts and showed a good attitude.

Prince Qin arrived late and lacked personal conviction, doing no more than scurrying about after Gu Youyou. The little work he did, any servant could do, and faced with two legitimate brothers, his status became a significant issue, and he was swiftly dismissed.

Others felt that since Gu Youyou and Jin Zijin were husband and wife, her merits should be attributed to Jin Zijin, and agreed that the eldest prince should be made Crown Prince.

Especially since the eldest prince had not yet been made a king.

This matter was not handled well, stirring up too much gossip, so the Emperor decided to select none of them at the moment. Who would secure the position of Crown Prince would be determined by further observation of the princes' conduct.

The intensely arguing ministers were dumbfounded.

All their efforts seemed to have been in vain.

The Lord Protector was the first to stand up and express his position, laughing heartily, "The Emperor is wise. The position of heir to the throne is tied to the lifeblood of the nation, how can it be decided based on this single disaster? I agree we should continue to observe."

Since the Lord Protector had said as much, naturally, no one else objected.

The Emperor said, "Since everyone is in agreement, let’s have the three princes called in."

Eunuch Wan left Taihe Hall and quickly invited the three princes, who had been waiting outside for a while, into the hall.

When the Emperor announced that the Crown Prince would not be appointed for the time being, Prince Jin felt so wronged he nearly fainted.

Among the three, he was the first to leave and the last to return, and when it came to eating plain rice with greens, he had endured the most.

On hot days without ice, he, sweating profusely under the sun in the tents, bore it all without complaint, and now it was as if it counted for nothing?

No, it could not end like this.

Prince Jin, grinding his teeth, cupped his hands to the Emperor, "Father, during this disaster relief, Elder Brother scarcely participated. He vanished after just one day because he couldn’t handle the hardships of the disaster zone. Father, if the Crown Prince position is not to be established, so be it, but I implore you to punish Elder Brother for his neglect."

"What have you done for the people of the disaster area?" Jin Zijin asked indifferently, "Should the compensation for the families of those killed be paid by your Prince Jin Residence?"

Prince Jin’s face turned ashen. He hadn’t expected Jin Zijin to take this opportunity to report his wrongdoing.