Farmhouse 941

Chapter 941: Conditions for Selecting a Consort

The Emperor glanced at Jin Zijin and said in a low voice, "That's true, Zijin, what do you think?"

Jin Zijin stood up and replied, "The Empress Dowager is wise, I will listen to the Empress Dowager."

This obedience struck others as odd, but the Empress Dowager didn't think much of it and was naturally very pleased.

"Good, since that is settled... Empress, select some good candidates from among those suitable young ladies of good family in Beijing. I want to see them myself."

The usually reticent Noble Consort Sheng suddenly stood up, respectfully greeted the Empress Dowager, and said, "Mother, just last year concubines were selected for King Jin and Prince Qin. At the time, nobody knew there was another Prince who has now reached the marriageable age with good family credentials. The girls of suitable age and good family have all already been designated to King Jin and Prince Qin. Selecting for the elder Prince now, it naturally won't be possible to find someone whose family background surpasses those of King Jin and Prince Qin's wives."

The Emperor at her side furrowed his brows and looked at both Noble Consort Sheng and Jin Zijin with surprise. After a moment, he said, "My consort speaks the truth. Waiting another two years would indeed offer more choices. However, Zijin is already of age and cannot wait. Mother, for Zijin's selection of a wife, let's not focus on whether the family background is good or not. There are many women of less distinguished families who are talented and beautiful. Let us prioritize integrity and choose women of unblemished family backgrounds. What do you think?"

"That's fine, of course that would be acceptable. Since both Noble Consort Sheng and Your Majesty have said so, this time let's choose a woman who is both talented and beautiful... Then..." She glanced at the Empress whose expression had soured and continued, "Let Noble Consort Sheng handle this matter!"

The responsibility had been transferred from the Empress in an instant, and her expression worsened.

But the other concubines were delighted, firstly because Noble Consort Sheng was easier to talk to, and secondly, if family background wasn't a criterion, did it mean that those from lesser families also had a chance?

Right away they decided to send word to their families to see if there were any suitable women of both talent and beauty.

A Prince had appeared out of nowhere, and who the world would belong to in the future was yet uncertain. Moreover, he had just returned and had no one of his own; this was an excellent opportunity to get close to the elder Prince.

If their daughter could gain favor with the elder Prince, perhaps they could turn their fortunes around.

The Empress watched coldly as the excited concubines buzzed with joy. Her thoughts were different from those women's.

Focusing on talent instead of family background, wasn't this tailored for Gu Youyou?

Her gaze fell on Noble Consort Sheng, and her eyes gradually darkened.

Was Noble Consort Sheng truly grateful to her former mistress, or was there another reason she was so eager to please Jin Zijin?

...

Gu Youyou hadn't seen Jin Zijin for several days now, ever since he moved into the Imperial Palace.

Now she actually wanted her aunt to let her go out and visit the Imperial Palace to see for herself, but as soon as she mentioned entering the palace, Madam Lin reacted like a startled rooster, vehemently disagreeing.

Gu Youyou felt a warmth in her heart. She thought that her aunt’s firm opposition to her going to the palace was for her own good.

At least she didn’t blindly side with the Empress, and it was clear, she hadn’t betrayed Gu Youyou.

Unable to figure out a solution, Gu Youyou had no choice but to call over Searcy.

"Go out today and head to Sanqing Temple to find Yue Rujing. Tell her I need to see her."

"What do you need her for?" Searcy kept writing with the ball pen that Gu Youyou had specially made.

They had always been researching various antibiotics.

Gu Youyou replied annoyedly, "Just go, why all the questions?"

Chapter 942: Kill the Donkey as Soon as the Grinding is Done

"I’m not going; I don’t have the time," she refused flatly, "You tell Lun Yu to go. After all, he is the idlest one in this yard."

Gu Youyou sighed, "It would be good if he could go, but unfortunately, he’s being wanted and can’t leave the city. You’re the only one I trust here who can leave the residence without having to report. Hurry up, be obedient!"

"What are you all talking about me?" It was Lun Yu, who had nothing to do, that ran in.

"You’ve been looking so sullen these past few days. Come on, spill it. What’s got you down? Share it with me; maybe I’ll get a kick out of it."

Gu Youyou’s expression darkened as she said, "Go away, I don’t have the time to tell you stories."

"I’m sincerely trying to help you with your troubles, why don’t you appreciate that?"

These past few days, Lun Yu was so bored it was painful. He and Yin Shuang were brought in together, and Gu Youyou, fearing he would give himself away, kept him under close watch in the inner courtyard, thus he wasn't given any tasks to do.

He just really wanted to find something to do.

The pen in Searcy's hand didn't stop as she simply said, "She wants to enter the Imperial Palace to inquire about Jin Zijin's matter, can you help her?"

"Enter the Imperial Palace?" Hearing these words, his eyes seemed to light up.

Ah, how could he not have thought about entering the palace? Let the Emperor search for him everywhere—the most dangerous place could also be the safest. Besides, entering the palace didn't even require washing his face; it indeed seemed like a good place.

Rubbing his chin with a smirk, he said, "Sure, I'll help you make a trip to the Imperial Palace. By the way, it's been a long time since I last saw Zijin."

Gu Youyou: "..." How could she not have thought of having Lun Yu disguise himself and sneak in? It was indeed a plan.

"Alright then, think about who you could disguise as to enter the palace. When you see him... never mind, just go check on him, no need to carry any messages."

She was just letting her mind wander too much because of the lack of news; knowing he was alright would put her at ease.

Gu Youyou then sorted out the accounts again and threw them on Searcy's desk, "You still need to go out of the city. If not to Sanqing Temple, then make a trip to Jinxiu City. These are the ledgers; deliver them to Miss Du."

Searcy: "... You're already treating me like a maid."

"I can’t let you live here for free; you have to work. Look how much silver you’ve wasted on these things you’re studying. Every single one cost a fortune."

"You’re an ingrate. When the poison in your body was not yet cured, why didn’t you grumble about the silver wasted on these studies? You even said that no matter how poor we get, we can’t skimp on this laboratory."

"But I asked you to research things that save lives, and you bloody researched a bunch of poisons that harm people. Tell me, are the materials for the antibiotics ready?"

The two of them were now arguing so heatedly that it looked like a fight could break out any moment, and Xiang Chun, carrying a tray of pastries, watched from a distance, then turned and went back.

She was not about to be caught in the crossfire; better to stay as far away as possible.

Arguing with Searcy had somehow become an indispensable part of Gu Youyou’s dull life.

She often lamented the waste of her youth; how much better it would have been to use that time to make money.

...

Jin Moning put down his writing brush and gently took a sip from the cup of tea on his desk, his brow slightly furrowed.

Eunuch Wan attended by his side, busily taking the freshly written calligraphy from the Emperor.

"Is there something troubling Your Majesty? I see your frown has not lifted."

The Emperor sighed lowly, without really intending it: "The matters that worry me have never ceased."

Eunuch Wan had been by the Emperor’s side for many years now, having seen him rise from the Crown Prince to the throne, from his youth until his temples turned gray.

Chapter 943: The True Noble Consort Sheng

If anyone knew how hard the Emperor’s life was, it was him who understood it best.

Seeing the Emperor looking much older than his actual age, Eunuch Wan couldn’t help but feel a pang of heartache.

"Your Majesty, it is getting late, why don’t you head back to your sleeping quarters and rest?"

"Is it getting late?" the Emperor lifted his head to look outside the window.

Outside was pitch black; it indeed seemed late.

"What time is it now?" the Emperor asked.

Eunuch Wan glanced at the water clock in the palace and said, "It should be around the 7-9 PM period."

"The 7-9 PM period?" the Emperor stood up, and Eunuch Wan immediately bowed to straighten his clothes.

"The 7-9 PM period, it is late. Let’s go, we shall proceed to Chengqian Palace."

Chengqian Palace was the residence of Noble Consort Sheng, and Eunuch Wan couldn’t help but sigh at her good fortune. She had started as a maid accompanying her mistress in marriage, and after her mistress’s death, she became the apple of the Emperor’s eye.

It was very late, and the Emperor was extremely tired, yet he still did not forget to visit her in Chengqian Palace.

Inside Chengqian Palace, the level of luxury surpassed even that of Empress's Kunning Palace. It often made the other concubines in the harem green with envy, and the Empress would get angry each time.

To lose to Xiao Qinqin, the Empress could accept that. However, it was frustrating that both she and Xiao Qinqin were merely pawns used by the Emperor, who gave his true affection to this woman who had nothing to offer.

The Empress believed in her own abilities and with the support of the growing Ducal Residence, all the women who had competed with her for favor in the Crown Prince Residence, except Sheng Qiaoyue, had been eliminated. Yet this woman was tightly protected by the Emperor.

She had people inquire specially, reporting that the Emperor had loved to visit the Grand Master Residence since he was young, all because he wanted to see the maid Sheng Qiaoyue, which made her furious.

"Your Majesty..." Before Eunuch Wan could announce their arrival, he was stopped by the Emperor.

"It's late, no need to announce. I'll enter on my own."

Inside Chengqian Palace, the lights were still on, and Noble Consort Sheng hadn't rested yet.

Eunuch Wan tactfully withdrew to the side.

Soon, all of the palace attendants from Chengqian Palace came out, and the doors to the sleeping quarters were tightly closed.

The lights soon dimmed, leaving only a small lamp flickering on and off.

The palace attendants were all happy for their master, who was the only one in the palace to receive such divine favor.

Inside the room, once the door was closed, it was not the fragrant and lively scene the attendants imagined.

The Emperor sat on the soft couch, while Noble Consort Sheng knelt on the ground, her eyes brimming with tears.

"He came to me, asking for help, and I couldn’t refuse. Your Majesty, ever since my mistress left the Crown Prince Residence, I haven’t done anything for her. So, helping the Crown Prince this time, I thought of it as doing something for my mistress."

The Emperor sighed and said, "Stand up. I know these years have not been easy for you, but the woman he likes... she won’t be of any help to him. A woman without any family backing is not easy to protect, no matter how much he likes her. I just don’t want the tragedies of the past to repeat themselves!"

Sheng Qiaoyue stood up and remained to the side, never speaking.

"As for the selection of his concubines, you do what you have to do. As for the matter you’ve agreed to help him with... Don’t worry about it for now. I’ll talk to him myself. It’s getting late, you should go rest."

Sheng Qiaoyue wanted to say more, but seeing the Emperor’s face that seemed to have aged further, she ultimately bit her lip and said nothing.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She retreated behind the large dragon and phoenix bed, opened up a painting on the wall, and gently pressed a hidden mechanism. The wall shifted aside, revealing a small room with nothing more than a simple bed inside.

Chapter 944: Detained

It turned out that the vastly favored Noble Consort Sheng, who was rumored to be especially cherished by the Emperor, always referred to herself as a mere maid in front of His Majesty. She was never really the esteemed Noble Consort Sheng, just a maid.

...

Disguised as Yue Rujing, Lun Yu entered the palace. Yue Rujing sought an audience with the eldest Prince, who had just returned to the palace. Given the past identities and relationship between the eldest Prince and Yue Rujing, naturally, no one stopped him and he was directly led into Jin Zijin's residence in Zhongcui Palace.

Lun Yu, properly following behind a eunuch, also gave his respects to Jin Zijin in a very proper manner.

Jin Zijin frowned and commanded all the palace attendants to leave.

He stood up and looked at him, speaking indifferently, "Lun Yu?"

Lun Yu instantly felt it was not interesting, remarking, "You recognized me so quickly? Has my disguise technique deteriorated?"

Jin Zijin said, "Ajing and I grew up together from childhood, I am very familiar with every move he makes, not rigid and proper like you. In this world, the only ones capable of disguising themselves to the point where even I cannot recognize them are you, Lun Yu, and your mother Lun Tong. However, your mother Lun Tong is not in Zhuzhao Country, so it must be you."

Lun Yu joked with a strained laugh, "Does that mean my disguise technique is too good for you to see through? Alright, since you recognized me, there's no point in pretending anymore. Let me directly discuss the important matter."

"Hmm, sit down!"

Jin Zijin generously invited him to sit, and Lun Yu, not feeling reserved—they had known each other for over twenty years and had known each other since childhood—sat down.

"I recently have been seriously pursued by your father to the point where I had nowhere to hide, so I mingled into the Lin Residence and became a maid, a maid beside your young lady. She said she hasn't seen you for a long time and misses you a lot. She couldn't come herself, so she sent me to check on you."

Jin Zijin: "..."

After speaking, he earnestly observed Jin Zijin, commenting, "Seeing you with a glowing face, gaining some weight, it seems life has been good. Alright, I've seen enough. I'll go back and report to your young lady."

He got up and dusted his clothes but then heard a long-drawn eunuch's voice.

"The Emperor arrives..."

Lun Yu stumbled, hurriedly steadying himself against the back of a chair.

Now, neither staying nor leaving, he froze in place, signaling with his eyes for Jin Zijin to think of a solution.

Jin Zijin only gave him a look that said he was on his own and then got up to welcome the Emperor.

"Imperial Father!"

"Rise!"

Upon entering Zhongcui Palace and seeing the uneasy Yue Rujing, the Emperor paused.

"Ah Jing, you are also here by coincidence?"

Lun Yu said, "Looking for my senior brother, there's a bit of a matter."

"Hmm." The Emperor nodded slightly and asked, "Have there been any updates from the Heavenly Master recently?"

"Not yet..." Lun Yu glanced toward Jin Zijin before replying.

The Emperor’s expression grew serious, feeling that this Yue Rujing was very odd.

Why would Yue Rujing speak so uneasily? As if he had done something wrong.

He smiled a bit and instructed Eunuch Wan Decheng, "Wan Decheng, take the Princely Heir to the side hall to rest first. I have important matters to discuss with the eldest Prince."

Lun Yu hastily said, "Your Majesty, there’s no need; I—have finished what I needed to say, and I’ll be returning to Sanqing Temple now."

The Emperor signaled for Wan Decheng to stop him.

Having served by the Emperor’s side for many years, Wan Decheng naturally understood what that look from the Emperor meant. Since the Emperor wanted to hold him back, how could he possibly let him escape?

He then said, "Princely Heir, please stay, the plum blossoms ahead have bloomed beautifully. This old servant will take you to enjoy the flowers."

Chapter 945: Not Planning to Be Emperor

"Who would enjoy flowers with an old eunuch?"

Eunuch Lun Yu’s face showed difficulty as he said, "Still..."

"There’s nothing left to say, Princely Heir, please feel free to leave!" Eunuch Wan didn’t give him a chance to speak further, bustlingly pulling him aside.

After Eunuch Wan had pulled Lun Yu away, the Emperor finally asked, "Who is he?"

Jin Zijin didn’t hide it from him, saying, "Lun Yu! He said he has no place to hide from your pursuit."

"Oh, you know him?" the Emperor asked with a raised eyebrow, somewhat surprised.

Jin Zijin calmly said, "When my mother was dying, it was Lun Tong who stayed by her side. Lun Tong mourned her for half a year. At that time, she had no one to talk to, she might have found some solace in his company."

Jin Zijin also indirectly told him that he was aware of the story Gu Youyou had mentioned.

The Emperor’s face paled slightly, but he concealed the storm raging within his heart quite well.

He took a deep breath, hurriedly picked up a cup of tea, and drank it all in one gulp, saying, "Your tea is from Qi Mountain."

Jin Zijin let out a cold laugh. To drink tea in such a manner? Or was it to conceal something?

It was rare for him to even mention the origin of the tea.

He didn’t expose him but asked in a low voice, "What brings you here today, Your Majesty?"

Though Jin Zijin treated himself with all due respect, it was merely to maintain superficial appearances.

The Emperor was well aware of this.

Since he had chosen this path, there was no opportunity for regret. He wasn’t going to concern himself too much with it.

Compared to that, he was more keen on resolving the current issues.

"I am aware you've been seeking Sheng Qiaoyue for that female doctor. She is a talented individual, but alas, a mere woman. Even if she knows some medical skills, she has no backing. She is of no help to you. There's no shortage of women in Beijing, yet I have found someone better for you. The youngest daughter of Che Xiangyuan, only eighteen and yet to be promised to anyone!"

Jin Zijin sat opposite him, his eyes and brows carrying a hint of a smile, yet it didn't reach the depths of his eyes.

He gently sipped his tea and said, "A warrior's daughter? Just like the lawful daughter of the former Grand Master Residence, much like Che Xiangyuan's daughter, isn't she? You... indeed chose an excellent marriage alliance!"

The Emperor's gaze deepened, and he sighed, "I know you are unwilling, but we have no choice. It was not easy to conquer the lands, and it is even harder to safeguard them. If you are unwilling, do you have a better plan to take over the throne without bloodshed?"

Jin Zijin's hand holding the teacup paused for a moment, then he gently placed the cup back on the table and said in a low voice, "So you really are planning to hand over the throne to me? I've only been here a few days, shouldn't you consider it for a few more days?"

"You've been in the Dao Sect for many years, your ability is evident to all. You have the qualifications and the ability to govern this country better than I could, no further consideration is necessary."

Jin Zijin was silent for a while, then suddenly laughed, saying, "By doing this, you will truly provoke internal strife. You borrowed the power of the Ducal Residence to secure the throne, but if in the end, the throne doesn't fall to Jin Xiaoran's hands, the downfall may also happen at the hands of the Ducal Residence."

"I know," said the Emperor, "which is why I have been weakening their power over these years. Each member of the Ducal Residence is ambitious. Zhuzhao Country cannot fall into their hands. Tingyu is no match for them, but you are the best choice."

"However, I have no intention of taking over," Jin Zijin stood up, looking out the window.

This year’s snow was especially heavy, likely having claimed many lives.

"You might not have planned before, but perhaps you should consider it now," came the Emperor’s voice from behind.

After that, another silence followed.

As the snow fell heavier and heavier, many snowflakes drifted into the window.

Chapter 946: Persuasion

It was already the end of February, and March was quickly approaching. The snow that year was highly abnormal.

There were unusual signs in the sky, and I feared that this year would be a tumultuous autumn.

Jin Zijin’s thoughts suddenly turned to Gu Youyou. She always seemed to feel cold; with the continuous heavy snowfall, I wondered if she was too afraid of the freeze to leave her house.

In reality, she probably wanted to go out and see the snow, or perhaps build a strange snowman.

The emperor’s expression was somewhat unsightly as he watched Jin Zijin’s profile. To his surprise, he saw him smile slightly.

It was not the same insincere, mocking smile that didn’t reach his eyes—it weighed even heavier on his heart.

Being too sentimental was not good for him.

And especially for such a woman.

"No matter whether you plan to take the throne or not, such a woman is not suited for you. You deserve better."

Jin Zijin turned around and said in a low voice, "Do you believe that no one is better than her?"

"How could that be? There are so many women in Beijing, and there's Che Xiangyuan's daughter..."

"Then why did you stop Consort Sheng? Because you were afraid she would truly outshine those candidates. Aside from using the spear and the stick, I see nothing that Youyou cannot match Che General's daughter in," Jin Zijin interrupted.

The emperor felt a twinge of annoyance, but he made a concession, "Since you say so, if her performance is extraordinary, it's acceptable for you to marry her. However, with her status, she can only be a consort."

Jin Zijin replied calmly, "If she wins, she will be the chief wife. Those are the rules of the game, and the Empress Dowager has agreed."

He would not yield an inch on matters concerning Gu Youyou.

This obstinance made the emperor's face grow increasingly sour.

Had it been any other son, he would have already scolded them. But Jin Zijin was different, and the emperor was well aware of it. His other sons had requests of him, but Jin Zijin did not.

He owed him, so the emperor tried to convince him patiently.

"If you take her as your chief wife, she will become a target for all. A chief wife without any background or ability will have a worse life than a concubine." This much he knew very well.

Take Qinqin, for example. After the Xiao Family's great tutor died in battle, the family's influence in court plummeted. Qinqin was left without support, forcing him to seek other powers that would back him, leading to their downfall.

It seemed Jin Zijin could see the most vulnerable and meager helplessness deep within him.

He felt no sympathy, only disdain in his heart.

His thoughts were not the same as the emperor’s; confronting his helplessness, the disdain in his eyes grew stronger.

"I am not like you. I won’t give anyone the chance to hurt her. Therefore, I will only marry a chief wife, with no other concubines."

The emperor stared at him blankly. Jin Zijin didn’t speak these words boastfully; he was very calm, as if discussing the tea from Qi Mountain.

But his expression was firm, as if he had no doubts that he could achieve this.

The emperor’s face turned colder, knowing that he himself had been unable to accomplish this in his own time, not even daring to utter such words. Thinking this, he felt a twinge of envy towards this son.

"By doing this, you will have no support from influential external families. You will end up isolated and weak while your two brothers will marry chief wives and consorts from the best families in Beijing."

"Isn’t that all thanks to your arrangements?" Jin Zijin asked with a sneer.

The emperor sighed, "My choosing is at least better than if they chose on their own."

He knew whom he could offer, and whom he couldn’t. It was better to have him arrange the marriages than to let them form cliques behind his back.

Chapter 947: Persuading Him

"If that’s the case, what do you have to worry about? They’ve all been through your hands, and you know them well. Just because I didn’t choose one doesn’t mean I’m shutting them out. On the contrary, it’s fairest to them. I’m not related by marriage to any family, so I’m clean and unbiased. I think, the clever ones should know what to do."

Jin Zijin’s words didn’t meet with the Emperor’s opposition, but he couldn’t help but sigh in resignation, "You’re making sense, but unfortunately there aren’t many clever people in this world."

"That’s alright, just having the clever few is enough for me."

The two of them exchanged words, both calm and even-tempered in their discussion.

They attempted to convince each other, but it seemed that neither could persuade the other.

That their conversation hadn’t escalated to a point of intense confrontation was truly miraculous.

As noon approached and mealtime was nearing, they continued to banter one sentence at a time, still calm and occasionally, a strange smile could be seen on their faces.

The eunuch standing outside felt the scene was very odd. He could only occasionally hear a word or two, not knowing what they were discussing.

Jin Zijin warmed the last pot of tea and said softly, "This is the last of the tea leaves brought from Qi Mountain, I hope we can resolve this matter before this pot of tea is finished."

The Emperor accepted the cup of tea handed to him and, warming his hands, said, "You’ve just returned and are not familiar with the Imperial Court. Court matters are not as simple as those of the Dao Family, where you only need to deal with Xuanzong.

The power struggles at the Imperial Court are intricate and complex, one misstep could affect everything, and if you err, every step will be mistaken. When the time comes, if you want to recover the situation, you’ll have to pay a much higher price. It’s good if you still have the chance to recover, but what if there’s no chance left?"

Jin Zijin poured himself another cup of tea but also just held it in his hands.

"That’s why I’m extremely cautious with every move. If I were to marry General Che’s daughter today, others will perceive that I’m close to General Che, and the courtiers who have grudges with him will side with the other factions against me. Your approach is like picking up a watermelon and dropping a melon." He accidentally used Gu Youyou’s manner of speaking, which was both amusing and quite reasonable, naturally easing the tense atmosphere between them.

"So you’ve decided to marry that physician girl without any background?"

Jin Zijin nodded gently and said, "Beneath the prosperous facade of Zhuzhao Country, it has already become thoroughly rotten. This is not an issue that can be resolved through marriage alliances! Sometimes I despise you, yet at other times I admire you. Managing to straighten out these complex relationships and having them restrain each other, preventing chaos, must also have cost you dearly to achieve what you have now."

The Emperor felt somewhat relieved upon hearing these words.

All these years, he had been coping alone, delicately balancing everything, and no one had ever said such things to him.

"But this isn’t a lasting strategy because it’s impossible for future Emperors to be the same as you," Jin Zijin added.

The Emperor neither agreed nor disagreed, and he had no plan to carry on the discussion.

Because the more they talked, the more he realized that Jin Zijin’s return wasn’t sudden.

He understood everything clearly, even more clearly than he had anticipated.

He had his own arrangements and plans which might differ from what the Emperor had in mind but were very systematic and comprehensive.

He was purposefully doing certain things.

Chapter 948: Agreed Conditions

"Since you've already thought everything through, I won't stop you anymore, but I hope that the deeds you undertake in the future won't let me down."

Jin Zijin nodded slightly and said, "You've agreed to let Youyou enter the family; I promise to repay you with a bright and splendid world inside and out."

"Good!" The Emperor suddenly stood up, laughing loudly as he left.

Jin Zijin also laughed. Keeping the Dao Sect away from the court and returning the imperial power entirely to legitimate rule was exactly what his master intended!

After the Emperor had left, an immediate order was issued: to release Lun Yu, that mouse who had been dodging and hiding.

Of course, Lun Yu didn't know this yet.

When he returned to Zhongcui Palace, Jin Zijin was leisurely enjoying his midday meal.

Looking at the table full of delicacies that were a feast for the eyes as well as the palate, he couldn't help but swallow.

This was Lun Yu's first visit to the Imperial Palace, and indeed, the palace meals lived up to their reputation. How could he eat such a large tableful all by himself?

"You sit down and eat as well," Jin Zijin said indifferently.

Lun Yu felt it was the most pleasant sound he had heard in a while.

"Well, I won't be polite then." Lun Yu sat down happily across the long table, his reach falling short, unable to grab a bit of everything.

Jin Zijin was almost finished eating. A palace attendant brought water to cleanse his mouth and a brocade cloth to wipe his hands.

Once he had seen to his needs and dismissed the attendants, he said to Lun Yu, "Once you've finished eating, you can go back. Tell her that good news is on the way, and not to worry."

"Oh!" Lun Yu ate heartily, replying vaguely with his mouth full.

"Also, the order for your arrest has been rescinded. You are free."

Lun Yu gulped down his food with a single "glug" sound, and that turned out to be the most delightful thing he had ever heard.

...

Lin Qianqing had returned to the Lin Family, which came as a surprise to Gu Youyou.

That was because the Empress and Madam Lin were from the same family, and they usually shared similar values, both typically disliking the idea of women roaming around.

So, even though Lin Qianqing and Xie Qinyun were both married off, while Xie Qinyun often left the Prince Qin Residence under the pretext of visiting her aging father, Lin Qianqing could not do the same. Since her marriage, the number of times she had returned to the Lin Family could be counted on one hand, usually only during important festivals and holidays, with no chance of returning during normal times.

Gu Youyou said, "It's neither the New Year nor the festival season, so how come you're back?"

Lin Qianqing had noticeably more smiles than before, unclear whether it was because she had come to terms with something or if she was simply happy to return to the Lin Family.

She said, "King Jin mentioned I was stifled staying in the residence all the time. If I can be happier by going out more often, he's allowed me to leave the residence regularly. However, I must return by the rooster's crow every day."

"Oh? King Jin allowed you to leave the residence? Have your feelings for each other improved?"

Lin Qianqing's face flushed slightly as she said, "How can that be? He doesn't understand me, and I don't understand him. It's pretty good the way it is. Just like cousin said, when I'm bored, I'll just pull in those scheming concubines to deal with, and it keeps me from being bored."

... Such a multitude of women in the harem, Gu Youyou couldn't help but shake her head.

"By the way, is Real Person Jin truly the Crown Prince? That really is quite unexpected."

Gu Youyou softly laughed and said, "Since the Emperor has acknowledged him, then that's what he is. It's rare for you to come back, let's not talk about these matters. Come on, I'll make some desserts for you today."

Cousin's desserts were unique and delicious. After Lin Qianqing had one, she never had a chance to taste them again, so naturally, she was very pleased.

"Good, good, I didn't expect such good timing. I'm in for a treat today."

Chapter 949: Opening a Snack Shop

"If you want to eat them regularly, you could learn to make them yourself. Last time, you were drunk and I didn't get the chance to teach you. This time, I'll teach you!"

"Forget it, I won't be able to learn. I'll just stick to eating."

Gu Youyou did not insist. With Searcy in Jinxiu City and Lun Yu not yet back from the palace, and having nothing else to do, Gu Youyou had made some snacks for Lin Qianqing.

Firstly, to feed this little glutton, and secondly, she felt it was time to open a snack shop.

Over the past couple of years, Jisheng Hall's medicinal concoctions had monopolized the market in Zhuzhao Country, and business from other countries was plentiful. The clothes from Manxiu Building had become all the rage among the upper class, and every month brought in a lot of silver. Once she set up the snack shop, it would also be time to consider opening a bank for more convenient monetary transactions.

This time, she had made ten portions, calculating them just right.

She had sent one portion to the old lady's room, one to Madam Lin, and left one for Lin Xingyi. Gu Youyou and Lin Qianqing each had a portion, and then Gu Youyou also set aside one each for Searcy and Lun Yu, Xiang Chun received one, and two more were for Lin Qianqing to take back to the Prince Jin Residence to share with her husband.

The predicament of ancient women was such that when a man was happy, their life was smoother.

It was said that Lin Qianqing had been cold towards King Jin for a while, and since their relationship had recently improved, she added fuel to the fire.

"I remember Xie Qinyun used to love these snacks. It's a pity she can't come to the Lin Residence as often as before."

Gu Youyou laughed, "You're still thinking about her? Why don't you send these two portions to her, let her also 'offer Buddha with borrowed flowers'?"

Recalling her last encounter with Xie Qinyun at a family banquet, she smiled faintly.

"Why would she need to 'offer Buddha with borrowed flowers'? I hear Prince Qin dotes on her. The last royal banquet was supposed to be for official wives only, but while his wife wasn't seen, Qinyun attended with Prince Qin."

"Oh? Is that so? She really must be planning to become his favored consort; it sounds like she's living quite well."

Lin Qianqing nodded, saying, "Her status was never lower than Prince Qin's wife's. Becoming a consort must have frustrated her a lot. I don't know how many times a day she curseds Miss Du, saying that the esteemed consort dislikes her because of the chaos in the Jie Family's back yard."

Miss Du, a former concubine of the Jie Family, was slowly fading from their memories.

Miss Du was a person of deep feelings, having taken in the concubine herself, she surely ensured that the woman lived out her life in comfort.

"Ah, right, did you know before that Jin Zijin was actually the Crown Prince?"

Gu Youyou did not speak, just looked at her and asked, "Did you see him?"

"Yes, at the family banquet," Lin Qianqing replied. "The Empress Dowager proposed selecting consorts for him, and he agreed. I used to think that you two... well, never mind, you'll see."

Gu Youyou's expression shifted slightly as she bit her lip lightly.

Since he had agreed, had he already made arrangements?

"Ah, what is that delicious smell?" Lun Yu had returned, and before even entering, he had smelled the sweet aroma.

Gu Youyou gathered her thoughts and looked towards Lun Yu, deciding to ask him later.

Lin Qianqing, not recognizing Lun Yu, asked, "Who is this girl?" She felt that such unruly maids should not exist in the residence; her mother, Madam Lin, was not just for show. She wouldn't tolerate such ill-mannered maids, would she?

Gu Youyou replied, "This is a new maid I bought recently; she hasn't had time to learn the rules yet."

Chapter 950: Joy for Some, Sorrow for Others

Lin Qianqing watched him with a stern face and said, "No wonder, entering the master’s room without even knocking. Cousin, send this maid to my mother’s place, and I guarantee she’ll be well-trained within three days."

Gu Youyou couldn’t help but give a wry smile and replied, "Alright, I’ll send her over tomorrow."

Lun Yu was quite smart; while Lin Qianqing was scolding him, he stood quietly aside and didn’t say a word, or else Gu Youyou really feared he might talk back and give himself away.

Lin Qianqing didn’t bother with the unruly maid anymore, put on her cloak, picked up her food box, and prepared to leave.

"I have to return today, but when the weather improves, I’ll host a flower-viewing event, cousin, you should come too."

"Sure, just send me an invitation, and I’ll be there, provided that your mother allows it," Gu Youyou said with a smile.

"Don’t worry, with an invitation from Prince Jin Residence, she won’t refuse."

There’s a solution for every policy, and that solution was using the influence of Prince Jin Residence—they both laughed.

...

After sending Lin Qianqing away from the residence, Gu Youyou hurried back to her own courtyard.

"How did it go?"

Lun Yu only mentioned that he was fortunate enough to enjoy a hearty meal at Jin Zijin’s and had Gu Youyou’s pastries to look forward to upon his return; he almost didn’t want to leave.

He said, "He’s doing very well, attended by a personal servant, dining on fine dishes every meal, looking hearty and well-fed."

Thinking about the phrases "fine dishes" and "well-fed," Gu Youyou couldn’t help but shiver with disgust. Her expression darkened, and she snatched the cake from Lun Yu’s hands, angrily saying, "Speak properly, did he ask you to deliver any message to me?"

Lun Yu swallowed his mouthful, eyes fixed on the object in Gu Youyou’s hand, and said, "Yes, he mentioned that there will be good news soon, and told you to be ready and not to worry about him."

Good news? Gu Youyou recalled what Lin Qianqing had said earlier, almost guessing it completely—she gleefully pursed her lips and asked, "What good news?"

Lun Yu shook his head and replied, "He didn’t specify, but you’ll know when the time comes."

Lun Yu didn’t reveal to Gu Youyou that he no longer needed to hide; thus, he continued to pretend to be a maid, living a comfortable and lazy life in her courtyard.

Soon, the imperial decree was posted—Empress Dowager was personally going to select a consort for the newly returned Crown Prince. Any marriageable woman of good family and outstanding beauty could register to participate; such criteria set the whole city abuzz.

Did this mean that even commoners had a chance?

It wasn’t just Beijing; upon receiving the news, nearby cities, whoever could make it on time, rushed to Beijing to try for the position of Crown Prince Consort.

The Emperor announced to the world that the long Princess was an imposter, and the real Crown Prince had returned. It hadn’t been long before this rapid announcement to select a consort for the Crown Prince under such criteria—naturally, this sudden appearance of the Crown Prince became the talk of the town.

Everyone was jubilant, except for that imposter Princess.

Her loyal servants, most of whom had been detained in the Imperial Palace, while those few left at the General Residence, knowing that she wasn't the true princess, naturally changed their attitudes completely.

Today, Jin Fengzhao hadn't yet managed to have breakfast, and as noon approached, her stomach growled with hunger.

She picked up a vase intending to throw it, then thought twice; if broken, she wouldn't have plenty of silver to buy another, so she hastily put the vase down and drew her hand back.

"Has everyone gotten itchy skin? I'm hungry, serve the morning