

Es. Benefits 601

Chapter 601: Does the Prince Have a Hostage Candidate in Mind?_1

Under the cover of night, a unit of soldiers clad in heavy armor was rapidly advancing northward. As they passed through a forest, suddenly a soldier on horseback appeared in the distance, galloping wildly.

The soldier collided head-on with the heavy cavalry, tumbling directly off his horse, appearing to be at death's door.

The leader of the heavy cavalry immediately raised his hand to stop his soldiers from moving forward, and hastily dismounted, approaching the fallen soldier.

"I am He Ran, commander of the Azure Dragon Guard. Tell me, what happened in Youping County?"

Upon hearing this, the soldier on the ground hurriedly produced an intelligence report from his bosom and said, "Generals Zhan and General Xu have met with disaster."

After speaking, the soldier fainted. It was evident that he had hardly rested in his rush to deliver the report.

After listening to the soldier's words, He Ran's expression darkened instantly. He immediately said to a nearby soldier, "Take him to rest, and make camp right here."

As soon as he finished speaking, He Ran opened the report that the Messenger Soldier had just handed to him. Seeing He Ran scrutinizing something, the soldiers quickly brought over torches to provide better light for him to see more clearly.

Reading the content of the report, He Ran was immediately shocked. Their unit of heavy cavalry was heading north primarily to cover the retreat of Great Wu's main forces.

Unexpectedly, both Generals Zhan Hong and Xu Xingwen, two Grandmasters, had gone missing, and those two hundred thousand soldiers of Great Wu had actually surrendered. If this news were to reach the Capital City, the Martial Emperor would most likely fly into a furious rage.

Though the report said that Generals Zhan and Xu were merely missing, He Ran immediately guessed they must have encountered foul play.

The report also mentioned that their mission to Lingyun City was to execute a beheading plan to kill two of North Country's Master Level Military Generals. They entered the city but never came out again, which could only mean they had met with misfortune.

He Ran could not believe that these two loyal subjects of Great Wu, Generals Zhan and Xu, would defect to the North Country.

But to kill two Grandmasters, at the very least, North Country would need Grandmaster level forces in Lingyun City, or perhaps North Country already had weapons capable of killing a Grandmaster. If that were the case, North Country's true strength might be even more terrifying than they had estimated.

With this thought, He Ran couldn't help but look back at the heavy cavalry behind him.

The twenty thousand heavy cavalry he led, even if they reached the frontline, would probably just be crushed by the North Country's forces.

This information had to be reported to the court immediately. Thinking this, He Ran quickly started writing a report and gave it along with the earlier letter to several soldiers, instructing them to send the news of the misfortune that befell Generals Zhan and Xu back to the Capital City overnight.

Several days later.

The Great Wu court.

Today, the Great Wu court was unusually quiet. The Martial Emperor sat on the Dragon Throne with a gloomy face, his mood worsening as he saw the ministers keeping silent.

"Normally you ministers love to quarrel in court. Why have you become mute at such a critical moment, unable to utter a single word?"

The most important issue for discussion in today's morning court was whether to continue fighting or to seek peace with the North Country.

Most ministers on the court favored peace negotiations, given the terrifying nature of North Country's secret weapons. If the war continued, Great Wu would sustain numerous casualties without any guarantee of victory.

If victory was not assured, they may as well seek peace quickly and find a way to steal the secrets of manufacturing those weapons from North Country.

Once Great Wu also possessed weapons like those of North Country, they could then launch an offensive against them.

Although this was what the ministers thought, no one dared say it outright, well aware that the Martial Emperor was a hardliner who would never compromise with the enemy. If anyone suggested peace negotiations at this time, it would likely enrage the Martial Emperor.

So the ministers simply kept quiet, dragging out the issue.

At that moment, the Martial Emperor's gaze fell upon Chai Jiliang. Ever since Princess Junwan's status had been revoked, Chai Jiliang hadn't been as proactive in his petitions as before.

Nowadays, officials from Princess Junwan's faction had largely defected to other princes, leaving Chai Jiliang's side noticeably depleted. However, it was precisely Chai's officials who were the doers, and with Junwan's fall, the number of active workers had significantly diminished.

The Martial Emperor then asked, "Chai, do you think the war should go on, or should we actively seek peace with the North Country?"

Hearing this question, Chai Jiliang stepped to the center of the hall and, bowing with his hands folded, said, "Your Majesty, at present, our only option is to seek peace."

Hearing this, the Martial Emperor's face grew even darker.

Chai Jiliang continued, "Your Majesty knows my deep respect for your ambition, but the power of North Country's weapons far exceeds that of Great Wu's. Continuing the war will only increase our casualties."

The Martial Emperor let out a mocking laugh and then said, "Seek peace? Do all of you ministers really think that if Great Wu initiates peace talks, North Country will immediately cease hostilities?"

At this point, Chai Jiliang said, "Your Majesty, following the occupation of Youping County, the North Country's forces have not advanced south. If they truly intended to attack Great Wu, they would have sent troops southward long ago. Given North Country's current military strength, it's not impossible for their forces to capture several more counties."

Just then, a minister stood up and angrily rebuked, "Mr. Chai, are you a subject of Great Wu or North Country? How dare you boost the morale of others while undermining the pride of Great Wu!"

Chapter 602: Does the Prince Have a Hostage Candidate in Mind?_2

At this time, the Martial Emperor, his face dark with anger, stared at Chai Jiliang and demanded, "So, Chai, in your opinion, why has North Country not continued its advance southward?"

Chai Jiliang replied indifferently:

"The reason North Country has not continued south is that their strength is not yet sufficient to eliminate a dynasty. If North Country were to continue southward, it would inevitably make other dynasties even more wary of its existence. Eventually, several great dynasties might join forces to deal with North Country.

Therefore, I believe that even if North Prince truly has ambitions to swallow the land, he would not actually attack Great Wu at this time."

"North Prince dispatched troops to occupy Youping County mainly to deter the major dynasties and demonstrate to them that North Country already possesses the power to dominate."

"In my view, if North Prince wishes to seek control over the world, he must first go after the throne of Great Sum."

Having heard this, the Martial Emperor's eyebrows raised slightly, and he fell into deep thought.

At that moment, the sound of a soldier's voice came from outside the grand hall, "Urgent report from Youping County!!!"

The grand hall immediately grew even quieter, and the faces of the ministers showed anxious expressions. They couldn't help but speculate whether the North Country army had already advanced southward.

Soon, a Messenger Soldier entered the grand hall, knelt on the ground, and presented an envelope with both hands raised, "Your Majesty, General Zhan and General Xu are missing, and Great Wu's two hundred thousand soldiers have surrendered to North Country!"

Upon hearing this, the grand hall erupted into chaos.

Missing??? What kind of joke is this?

How could Zhan Hong and Xu Xingwen just suddenly disappear?

These two were the pillars of Great Wu—their disappearance would be a crushing blow to the nation.

After snapping back to reality, the eunuch beneath the Dragon Throne quickly took the envelope from the hands of the Messenger Soldier and presented it to the Martial Emperor.

The Martial Emperor snatched the envelope from the eunuch's hands, tore it open, and began reading. After seeing the contents, the Martial Emperor fell silent once more.

At this time, the atmosphere in the grand hall became incredibly oppressive, as if a tremendous pressure made it difficult for people to breathe.

After what seemed like an eternity, the Martial Emperor finally spoke, "After retreating to Youping County, Zhan and Xu intended to assassinate two of North Country's Grandmaster Military Generals, but upon reaching Lingyun City, they simply vanished. Without their leadership, two hundred thousand troops ultimately surrendered to North Country..."

The Martial Emperor said this and slammed his palm down on the Dragon Throne. One side of the throne instantly shattered, and an aura of martial authority released from his body, knocking to the ground those Civil Officials in the court who lacked martial skill.

The ministers bowed their heads, trembling, not even daring to breathe too loudly.

After an indeterminate amount of time, the anger in the Martial Emperor's heart subsided somewhat. He then gathered his aura and said, "My ministers, tell me, do you think Zhan Hong and Xu Xingwen have defected to North Country or have they been slain?"

No sooner had the Martial Emperor finished speaking than an official from the Imperial Prince Faction stood up, "Your Majesty, the two venerable generals have shown undying loyalty and love for their country, claiming half the territory for Great Wu, and serving several monarchs. Moreover, their families are all still in Great Wu; they could not have possibly betrayed us!"

Xu Xingwen and Zhan Hong were both patrons of Prince Lu Yi's faction. If they had betrayed Great Wu, countless associates of the Zhan and Xu families would be implicated.

Even if they had indeed betrayed Great Wu, those of Prince Lu Yi's faction could never admit it, so it must be that Zhan Hong and Xu Xingwen died for their country—and indeed, they were already dead.

At this time, the Secretary of the Ministry of War also stood up and said, "The two venerable generals must have fallen into a trap set by North Country and died for their country!"

Then, many other ministers stood up to speak, all refusing to acknowledge that Xu Xingwen and Zhan Hong had betrayed Great Wu.

About half an hour later, the Martial Emperor's gaze once again fell on Chai Jiliang, "Chai, do you also believe that the two generals died for their country?"

Chai Jiliang stepped forward and said, "Yes."

The Martial Emperor queried, "Both were Grandmasters. If they wanted to escape, who could have stopped them?"

Killing a Grandmaster is no easy feat, and if a Grandmaster is determined to flee, another Grandmaster may not necessarily be able to catch up.

However, once Zhan Hong and Xu Xingwen entered Lingyun City, they vanished without a trace, as if they disappeared into thin air. This forced the Martial Emperor to suspect that they may have already defected.

Chai Jiliang then spoke, "Your Majesty, Great Wu has Grandmasters, and so does North Country. Combined with North Country's possession of so many mysterious weapons, and possibly other means we are unaware of, it's very likely the two venerable generals fell into one of North Country's traps and died for their country."

"I believe that these two venerable generals could not possibly betray Great Wu, betray Your Majesty."

With both Xu Xingwen and Zhan Hong having thousands of family members still residing in Great Wu, how could they abandon their relatives and defect directly to North Country? If they did betray us, with the Martial Emperor's temperament, blood would inevitably run rivers in the Xu and Zhan households. Hence, the only possibility is that they are dead.

The Martial Emperor fell silent once again.

As seconds and minutes passed, the Martial Emperor's silence lasted for a full quarter of an hour, during which none of the ministers in the grand hall uttered a single word.

Finally, it was as if the Martial Emperor had come to a realization. He stood up from the Dragon Throne and declared, "Court is adjourned!"

He then flung his sleeves and departed from the grand hall.

In the half month that followed, the Martial Emperor did not hold court, and rumors circulated that he had fallen seriously ill.

Chapter 603: Does the Prince Have a Hostage Candidate in Mind?_3

The Martial Emperor fell ill at this time, sending his councilors into a frenzy. The North Country's army was stationed in Youping County, poised to march south at any moment, and the emperor, the sovereign of the nation, ironically became an "absentee landlord."

Fortunately, the Martial Emperor eventually issued an imperial decree, instructing Prince Wu Ming to lead a diplomatic mission northward to sue for peace with the North Country.

When the imperial decree was announced, the officials aligned with Prince Lu Yi felt very pleased within. Seeking peace was hardly an enviable task.

On one hand, the Martial Emperor was known for his hardline stance; he had waged many wars in his life and had never sought peace with any power before. This was his first time doing so, which, for the Martial Emperor, was a humiliation and a stain on his reputation.

In the future, the Martial Emperor might see Prince Wu Ming and be reminded of this blot on his rule, and consequently harbor feelings of disgust toward the prince.

That was on one front, but there was also the fact that Great Wu had been defeated in the war with the North Country, which would surely make hefty demands. Concessions of territory and indemnity were a given; if Prince Wu Ming failed to handle negotiations well and increased Great Wu's losses as a result, he could say goodbye to any chance of being the Crown Prince.

After hearing that the Martial Emperor intended to send an envoy to the North Country, Wu Junwan tried every possible way to persuade the emperor to choose her for the mission. Despite all her efforts, the Martial Emperor completely ignored her, although Chai Jiliang mentioned it several times to him. Not only did the emperor not agree, but he also demoted Chai Jiliang.

The reaction of the Martial Emperor left Wu Junwan in utter despair; it seemed that her father had lost hope in her, and she would never be allowed to participate in politics again.

North Country.

Today, the weather was fair and the winds were gentle. Lu Chen took the rare opportunity to enjoy afternoon tea with his wives and concubines in the courtyard.

The first phase of the war had ended, and now it was time for peace talks.

Lu Chen sat on a stone bench, sipped some Dragon and Phoenix Tea, and then playfully teased the child in Chu Yuqin's arms.

At that moment, Dongfang Longyue, dressed in plain white clothes, entered the courtyard. She had been working at the newspaper office earlier that day. While writing, she suddenly thought of the peace talks between Great Wu and the North Country and hurried back to the Prince's Mansion to find Lu Chen, wishing to discuss what demands North Country would propose during the negotiations.

This is how political consultations work: when emissaries from one country are to visit another, both countries engage in maneuvering to gain the upper hand.

With Great Wu's emissaries coming to North Country, it was time for the latter to shape public opinion and release some conditions for the peace talks to mentally prepare Great Wu.

Dongfang Longyue held a notebook in her left hand and a pen in her right as she approached Lu Chen and asked, "Prince, since Great Wu will soon be negotiating peace with North Country, may I know what terms North Country plans to propose?"

Lu Chen replied, "That still needs to be discussed in the Hall of Political Affairs along with the officials, so nothing has been decided yet."

Although Lu Chen was a prince, such a matter of state still required the deliberation of the Small Court of North Country before any decisions could be made.

Hearing Lu Chen's response, Dongfang Longyue quickly jotted something down in her notebook, then continued to inquire, "What are the Prince's thoughts on the matter? What do you think Great Wu should offer to North Country in reparation?"

Lu Chen thought for a moment and then said, "As for reparations, gold comes first, and then land."

"Of course, these two are just the basics. Additionally, I plan to demand that Great Wu open up more trading cities and that all trade between Great Wu and North Country from now on must be conducted with the currency that North Country is about to introduce."

Dongfang Longyue quickly took notes and, noticing that Lu Chen had stopped speaking, probed further, "Are there any other conditions?"

Lu Chen said, "To prevent Great Wu from seeking revenge against North Country in the future, Great Wu must send hostages to North Country."

At these words, Dongfang Longyue was taken aback, as were the women in the courtyard; none of them were fools. As soon as Lu Chen mentioned hostages, they thought of a certain person.

Without missing a beat, Dongfang Longyue asked directly, "Is the Prince going to decide who the hostage will be, or will Great Wu have a say in the matter?"

Lu Chen responded, "Since the individual is to serve as a hostage, they must indeed fulfill the role of a hostage. If we leave it to Great Wu to decide, they might send someone of no importance to North Country, which would render the notion of a hostage meaningless. Therefore, the hostage must be chosen by North Country."

Hearing Lu Chen's answer, the women in the courtyard became even more convinced of their suspicions.

Dongfang Longyue pressed on, "Does the Prince already have someone in mind for the hostage?"

Chapter 604 The Great Wu Delegation Arrives in North Country_1

As Dongfang Longyue's words fell, the eyes of all the women in the courtyard fell upon Lu Chen.

All the women were eager to know whether the hostage Lu Chen mentioned was the one they were thinking of.

Seeing his wives and concubines staring at him, Lu Chen suddenly felt a little guilty. "Why are you all looking at me like that?" he asked.

At this moment, Wang Qingci said with a smile, "Prince, the hostage you have in mind couldn't possibly be the Princess of Great Wu, could it?"

Uh...

Lu Chen then said, "I originally thought of the Prince Lu Yi as the hostage, but now that Qingci mentions it, I've come to realize that if anyone has more capability and ambition in Great Wu, it is the Princess of Great Wu. She's more important to Great Wu, so I've decided to make her the hostage."

"Qingci, thank you for reminding me."

Hearing Lu Chen's words, the women chuckled inwardly, how could they not know what he was really thinking.

In his heart, Lu Chen had probably thought of the Princess of Great Wu from the start.

Just then, Wang Qingci spoke with a smile, "However, as far as I know, Wu Junwan is no longer the Princess of Great Wu. Her title has been revoked, and many officials from her faction have already pledged allegiance to other princes. She shouldn't be that important to Great Wu anymore, should she?"

Lu Chen said indifferently, "Even though her title has been removed now, with her abilities, she will rise again sooner or later. She remains the most important person to Great Wu."

At that moment, Xiao Wenyao asked innocently and curiously, "If the Princess of Great Wu becomes a hostage in the North Country, does that mean North Country is entering into a marriage alliance with Great Wu?"

Hearing this, Lu Chen gave Xiao Wenyao a speechless look; seeing through Lu Chen's ruse, the women couldn't help but cover their mouths and laugh.

Soon, the courtyard was filled with a joyful atmosphere.

At this time, Chu Yuqin offered an explanation for Lu Chen, saying, "Yaoyao, a hostage is a hostage, and a marriage alliance is a marriage alliance; the two are different."

Xiao Wenyao, puzzled, asked, "After the Princess of Great Wu comes to North Country, will she live in the North Prince Mansion?"

This...

Hearing Xiao Wenyao's question, Chu Yuqin paused and turned to look at Lu Chen.

Knowing Lu Chen as she did, Chu Yuqin suspected that the day Wu Junwan arrived in North Country, Lu Chen would have her in his bed.

Seeing Chu Yuqin did not answer, Xiao Wenyao's gaze fell back on Lu Chen. Lu Chen coughed and then said, "In order to better monitor the hostage's every move, when Wu Junwan comes to North Country, she naturally has to live under my watchful eye to prevent her from doing anything detrimental to North Country."

Xiao Wenyao said, "But if that Princess moves into the Prince's Mansion, won't she become the Prince's woman? If the Princess of Great Wu marries the Prince, doesn't that become a marriage alliance?"

Uh... this...

The women fell into silence.

Upon reflection, it indeed sounded like a marriage alliance.

"Cough cough, Yaoyao, you're overthinking it. A hostage is about sending an important person to another country as a bargaining chip, and that person is expected to return home. A marriage alliance involves sending an important woman to marry into the other side, and that woman will ultimately become part of the other side and not return," Lu Chen explained.

At that moment, Zhou Youyou asked curiously, "Then why did the Prince choose the Princess of Great Wu to be a hostage rather than directly enter into a marriage alliance? After all, once she enters the Prince's Mansion, she will become the Prince's woman and won't return to Great Wu, wouldn't a direct marriage alliance be better?"

Hearing this, Lu Chen chuckled, then raised his hand and used his spiritual power to sweep Zhou Youyou, who was sitting on a stone bench, into his arms. "You daring Youyou, daring to slander me. Do you think in your eyes, any woman who enters the Prince's Mansion will be seized by me!"

As his words fell, Lu Chen placed Zhou Youyou on his lap and lifted his hand to deliver a "smack" on her bottom. After Zhou Youyou let out a "yelp," she quickly pleaded, "Prince, your concubine shouldn't have spoken out of turn, your concubine realizes her mistake, wailing."

Seeing Zhou Youyou being spanked, Xiao Wenyao trembled slightly. She had also wanted to ask this question because in her eyes, any beautiful woman entering the Prince's Mansion, except for maids and servants, could hardly escape Lu Chen's grasp.

Xiao Wenyao felt a small sense of relief inwardly, thankful she hadn't asked that question, or she would probably be the one getting spanked now.

Being spanked in front of so many people, how embarrassing would that be.

After admonishing Zhou Youyou, Lu Chen did not let her go, but instead held her in his embrace, letting her sit on his lap while his arms encircled Zhou Youyou's slender waist.

"Remember what Madam Chu just said, a hostage is a hostage, and a marriage alliance is a marriage alliance; one cannot conflate the two," Lu Chen reminded everyone.

As Lu Chen finished speaking, Yelv Nanyan said, "The reason the Prince didn't choose a marriage alliance is probably to prepare for the future. If we were to enter into a marriage alliance with Great Wu, the Martial Emperor would become the Prince's father-in-law. Should North Country decide to wage war against Great Wu in the future, we would not hold the moral high ground."

Hearing Yelv Nanyan's explanation, Xiao Wenyao had an epiphany and said, "I see, now I understand."

Wang Qingci then asked with a smile, "Yaoyao, what do you understand?"

Xiao Wenyao answered, "If it was a marriage alliance, the Princess of Great Wu would never be able to return to Great Wu. The Princess is so important to Great Wu, they surely wouldn't agree to that."

"But by using the term 'hostage,' the Prince could first trick the Princess of Great Wu into coming here, then once that's done, turn 'raw rice into cooked rice' by making her his own. This way, he doesn't have to be related to Great Wu through marriage, and he can still possess the body of the Princess of Great Wu."

Chapter 605 The Great Wu Delegation Arrives in North Country_2

Upon saying this, Xiao Wenyao looked at Lu Chen and praised him, "Prince, you're truly clever! The biggest trouble with Great Xia is all the nepotism!"

Chu Yuqin: "..."

Yelv Nanyan: "..."

Wang Qingci: "..."

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Although Lu Chen might indeed have such thoughts, saying them directly was a bit improper...

Did she think Lu Chen hadn't visited her room for too long?

At this moment, the gazes of all the women fell on Lu Chen, wanting to see his reaction.

Lu Chen, with a smile, said, "Yaoyao, come to Youyou's room tonight."

Upon hearing this, Xiao Wenyao was momentarily stunned, unable to help but swallow her saliva and clench her legs together.

Then, Lu Chen spoke to Dongfang Longyue, "Longyue, these are my terms for now. Start spreading some rumors so that Great Wu's delegation gets wind of it."

Dongfang Longyue immediately set down her pen and said, "Certainly, Prince."

"Then I'll return to the agency for today."

Lu Chen nodded and replied, "Hmm, good."

After Dongfang Longyue left, Chu Yuqin, worried, spoke, "Chen'er, that Princess Wu from Great Wu, she's a person with real power back in her homeland. Will she willingly become your woman once she arrives in North Country?"

Before Lu Chen could even speak, Wang Qingci interjected, "In the Prince's Mansion, which woman wasn't conquered by the Prince? With the Prince's capability, no woman can escape his grasp. Initially, there were some in the Prince's Mansion who were dead set against marrying the Prince, but now, aren't they all in bed calling 'darling, dear brother' non-stop?"

At these words, Chu Yuqin's complexion instantly darkened, and she shot Wang Qingci a glare before saying, "You shameless bitch, what do you know!"

Chu Yuqin wasn't a fool; how could she fail to perceive that Wang Qingci was referring to her?

Lu Chen, who was holding Zhou Youyou in his arms, caressed her delicate body while saying, "She is indeed a very ambitious person, but as soon as she enters the Prince's Mansion her ambition will soon wear away."

Seeing Lu Chen's confidence, Chu Yuqin sighed softly and then said, "As long as you have a plan."

Compared to Wang Qingci, who clung to Lu Chen daily like a possessive bitch, Chu Yuqin was more concerned about Wu Junwan, a person like her. Although both Yelv Nanyan and Wu Junwan were once figures with real power, Yelv Nanyan no longer had any backing.

Wu Junwan, however, was different; she still had the support of the Great Wu dynasty behind her, and even if Great Wu did nothing, just the fact that Wu Junwan thought of them backing her might give rise to some inappropriate aspirations within her.

At this moment, Zhou Youyou, lying in Lu Chen's arms, suddenly let out a light "yng" sound, causing all the women to turn their eyes to Zhou Youyou. Zhou Youyou, feeling extremely embarrassed and blushing from the stares of the women from the Prince's Mansion, wished she could sink into the ground.

After all, she was the mother of two children, yet here she was being held in Lu Chen's arms like a child.

Lu Chen whispered in Zhou Youyou's ear, "Youyou, you're not being good, letting your mind wander in front of so many people."

With that, Zhou Youyou's cheeks turned even redder, and she wished she could vanish into thin air.

Fortunately, Lu Chen didn't continue to tease her. He then let go of Zhou Youyou and said, "Alright, I have things to do, you all chat."

Having said this, Lu Chen stood up and walked straight out of the courtyard.

The women unanimously said, "Farewell, Prince."

Lu Chen had just left the Wind Cloud Court when a female soldier came rushing over, "Prince, the Great Wu delegation has already arrived in Yan County."

Hearing this, Lu Chen paused. He had not anticipated that the Great Wu delegation would arrive in Yan County so quickly.

He then said, "Tell Li Rui to arrange someone to receive the Great Wu delegation. I won't go."

Being the victor, Lu Chen naturally had no need to personally receive a delegation from the defeated Great Wu.

Lu Chen not only had no intention of personally receiving them, but he also planned to ignore the Great Wu's envoy for the next few days, leaving them to cool their heels.

Upon hearing Lu Chen's words, the soldier immediately said, "Yes, my Prince."

Then the soldier turned and left the courtyard.

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A quarter of an hour later.

The southern gate of Yan County.

Wu Ming sat in the carriage, looking through the window at the crowds coming and going on both sides of the road, and seeing that the North Country had arranged no reception ceremony, feeling very disgruntled inside.

This reminded him of the humiliation he suffered the last time he came to the North Country, thinking he would never come to the North Country again, but unexpectedly, he was once more en route to the North Country as an envoy.

And this time, he was coming as the envoy of a defeated nation seeking peace, which made the unpleasantness in Wu Ming's heart deepen even more.

Wu Ming thought to himself, it was all that woman's fault. If it weren't for her incorrect intelligence, how would the Great Wu Dynasty have waged war against the North Country? Without

the war, the Great Wu Dynasty wouldn't have faced this disastrous defeat, and without the defeat, he wouldn't be here as the emissary of the vanquished, seeking peace in the North Country.

This status as an envoy would bring him significant trouble in the future; his emperor father would inevitably think of the defeat upon seeing him, and thus be unwilling to see him.

He expected that this time the North Country would surely demand an exorbitant price, and if they failed to secure terms acceptable to Great Wu, he, upon his return to Great Wu, would likely be cursed by the people. This made the possibility of him becoming the Crown Prince even slimmer.

Wu Ming even doubted whether his emperor father already considered him a pawn, intending to make Prince Lu Yi the Crown Prince, and that's why he was sent to the North Country to seek peace.

As Great Wu's procession approached the city gate, Wu Ming saw several North Country officials standing at the gate waiting.

At that moment, an official said to Wu Ming's carriage, "Prince Wu Ming of Great Wu, I am the Prefecture Governor of Yan County, welcome to the North Country."

Upon hearing this, Wu Ming's expression darkened instantly, they had only sent a local official to receive the Great Wu's delegation.

Although he was displeased inside, Wu Ming knew well that as the envoy of the defeated nation, he had no right to complain, nor did he dare to complain. If he offended the North Country this time and caused them to demand even less favorable peace terms, upon his return to Great Wu, he would certainly face many impeachments.

He had to endure patiently.

With this in mind, Wu Ming calmed the anger inside and then said, "Thank you for coming to receive us, Prefecture Governor."

The Prefecture Governor of Yan County continued, "We have already arranged accommodation for the delegation. Please follow us into the city."

Under the Prefecture Governor's guidance, Great Wu's delegation entered Yan County.

After arriving at their accommodations, Wu Ming sat in the courtyard and immediately sent people to gather intelligence on North Country officials. He planned to bribe some North Country officials before the negotiations so they might speak for Great Wu during the talks, perhaps reducing the price Great Wu would have to pay.

By dusk.

Wu Ming sat in the pavilion drinking tea; he was a restless person by nature, finding it hard to stay put. The last time he came to the North Country, he had his subordinates arrange plenty of women for his pleasure.

But today was different. He sat alone in the pavilion until night fell without ordering his subordinates to arrange for female company. The key issue was that he was in no mood for it.

He worried about the conditions the North Country might demand if they decided to ask for more than what his emperor father was prepared to concede. He wondered how he would deal with it upon his return.

Just then, a guard from the delegation hurried into the courtyard, holding a newspaper, and said to Wu Ming, "Your Highness, the Eastern Newspaper Agency has just published a paper mentioning some conditions the North Country might propose during the negotiations."

Upon hearing this, Wu Ming immediately put down his teacup and snatched the newspaper from the guard's hand, then started reading it.

As he read the content on the newspaper, Wu Ming involuntarily furrowed his brows. The newspaper only mentioned the main areas where the North Prince would propose negotiation terms, without specifying any explicit terms.

Ceding territory and paying indemnities were the very basics; even without the paper saying so, Wu Ming knew the North Country would raise demands for territory and indemnities. It was purely a waste of words.

However, at that moment, Wu Ming suddenly saw the last item.

A hostage?

Chapter 606: Princess Junwan's Fragile Health_1

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Seeing the words "hostage," Wu Ming's face grew even uglier.

In Wu Ming's view, if Great Wu were to send a hostage to North Country, it was very likely they would choose him.

To any dynasty, a hostage was no different from a disposable piece; thus, they certainly wouldn't choose the most important prince.

His father, the Emperor, valued Prince Lu Yi so much that he didn't even let Prince Lu Yi come on this mission to North Country, so his father would definitely not allow Prince Lu Yi to be a hostage in North Country.

The Emperor naturally had several other sons, but compared to Prince Lu Yi and himself, those princes were essentially of little use, with Prince Lu Yi and himself, the Second Prince, being the most distinguished.

If his father were to send another prince as a hostage to North Country, it was very likely that North Country would not agree. The North Prince wasn't a fool; how could he possibly allow Great Wu to send a prince of no significant importance to be a hostage in North Country.

Just as Wu Ming's heart was wracked with anxiety, he suddenly saw the newspaper stating that North Prince's choice for hostage was Great Wu's Princess Junwan.

A moment of stun washed over Wu Ming, followed by ecstasy.

The North Prince actually wanted that woman to be a hostage in North Country!

This was simply too good to be true!

Although Wu Junwan had fallen out of favor by now, no one could guarantee that she wouldn't make a comeback one day.

If Wu Junwan were to return to the court someday, she could still potentially regain great power, leaving the princes breathless under her weight.

However, if Wu Junwan were to become a hostage in North Country, things would be different. A hostage was a disposable piece, and once Wu Junwan arrived in North Country, it would be much harder for her to re-enter the circles of the Capital City, let alone return to the center of power.

As long as Wu Junwan was expelled from the place of power in Great Wu, it would be the same as her being completely eliminated from the game.

Thinking this, a sense of exhilaration filled Wu Ming's heart. The princes of Great Wu had been oppressed by their imperial sister for far too long. They would all be delighted to have her removed from the center of power.

However, Wu Ming quickly thought of a problem—would their father-king agree to let their imperial sister be a hostage in North Country?

As everybody knew, the reason their imperial sister had so much power, enough to be named Princess Junwan, was entirely due to their father-king. If he did not wish for Princess Junwan to participate in governance, she could not possibly have been named Princess Junwan.

If they could get their father-king to agree to North Prince's terms, that would be perfect.

But how could they get their father-king to agree?

Could they do it as they had done last time by having the court ministers collectively submit a petition?

Wu Ming believed that if his faction's ministers submitted a petition for Wu Junwan to become a hostage in North Country, then Prince Lu Yi's faction's ministers would definitely join in the petition as well.

Although they were not of the same faction, when it came to dealing with Wu Junwan, all the officials from the prince factions could unite.

Thinking this, Wu Ming immediately said to the guard beside him, "Prepare pen and paper."

The guard hurried to bring pen and paper before Wu Ming, who directly began drafting a memorial inside the pavilion, incorporating some things he had heard upon arriving in North Country into the text.

After finishing the memorial, he handed it to the nearby guard, "Send this memorial back to Great Wu immediately."

Negotiations are a long-term process; they couldn't possibly be concluded in just a few days. If he hurried to send the memorial back to Great Wu now, the Emperor's royal decree would probably still arrive before the negotiations concluded. Then, Wu Ming would have a sense of his father's attitude towards the terms offered by North Country.

Of course, the most important purpose of his memorial was to inform the ministers in court that North Prince intended to have Wu Junwan become a hostage. As long as those ministers were aware of this, surely many would follow suit in submitting petitions.

Just as the guard by Wu Ming's side was about to turn and leave the pavilion, Wu Ming suddenly reminded him, "Right, after the memorial is sent back to the imperial city, find someone to spread the news that the North Prince intends to make the Great Princess a hostage. Make sure all the court ministers know about this."

The guard immediately bowed and said, "Yes, Your Highness."

"Alright, go."

"Your subordinate takes his leave." With those words, the guard turned and left the courtyard.

Evening.

Dusk fell, and lanterns in the courtyard were lit one by one, with the entire Prince's Mansion blazing with lights. After dinner, Lu Chen spent some time in Wind Cloud Court, playing with the two children borne to him by Mu Zixuan, and then, feeling it was about time, he made his way to Zhou Youyou's room.

Just as Lu Chen was about to enter the northern courtyard, a female soldier's voice rose from behind him, "Prince, Wu Ming has seen this afternoon's edition of the Eastern Newspaper Agency and has written a memorial to be sent back to Great Wu. Should we intercept this memorial?"

Lu Chen replied indifferently, "No need, let them send the memorial back to Great Wu."

Even without intercepting Wu Ming's memorial, Lu Chen had a fair idea of what it likely contained. Evidently, Wu Ming intended to convey some of the information released by North Country back to the Emperor and Great Wu's ministers.

After hearing the response, the female soldier said, "Yes, Prince, your subordinate takes her leave."

The female soldier turned and departed from the inner courtyard, and at that moment, Lu Chen stepped into the northern courtyard and directly entered Zhou Youyou's room.

Upon entering Zhou Youyou's room, Lu Chen found that she was alone, and he asked with a smile, "Where are those two little rascals? Why aren't they here?"

Blushing, Zhou Youyou, sitting at the bedside, replied, "Prince, I have already sent the two of them to my sister's room."

Zhou Youyou had heard during the day that Lu Chen had asked Xiao Wenyao to come to her room, so she knew Lu Chen would undoubtedly come to favor her that night. Therefore, she had sent the children to the next room early on and sat on the bed alone, ready.

Hearing this, Lu Chen smiled slightly, and then sat down beside the bed, taking Zhou Youyou's delicate hand into his.

Seeing Zhou Youyou's face flushed red, Lu Chen lifted his hand, gently caressing her cheek, "Youyou, you're already the mother of two children, why are you still so shy?"

...

Zhou Youyou didn't know what to say, "This humble one... this humble one..."

Seeing Zhou Youyou too embarrassed to speak, Lu Chen began making his advances and soon had her laid out on the bed, sealing her cherry lips with a kiss.

Lu Chen had forgotten he had also called for Xiao Wen Yao; he began to cultivate affection with Zhou Youyou directly. Although Zhou Youyou still remembered someone else had not come, she did not dare to say much.

A quarter of an hour later.

After bathing, Xiao Wen Yao headed to the northern courtyard. Upon arrival, she quietly asked a maid there, "The Prince hasn't arrived yet, has he?"

The maid replied, "Replying to Lady Xiao, the Prince has already been here for a while."

Upon hearing this, Xiao Wen Yao's heart skipped a beat. Was she late?

Would the Prince be angry with her later?

With a heart filled with trepidation, Xiao Wen Yao still went towards Zhou Youyou's room, and only after entering did she hear faint sounds.

Xiao Wenyao's concern deepened; she really was late.

This was trouble! Being late meant facing punishment.

Since matters were being attended to inside, she didn't feel it was right to just barge in.

She couldn't knock either, could she? Wouldn't that disturb the Prince?

As Xiao Wenyao was pondering what to do, Lu Chen's voice came from inside, "Yaoyao, why are you standing at the door? Come in."

Hearing Lu Chen's voice, Xiao Wenyao still hesitated for a moment before softly pushing the door open.

Just as she was about to speak, a force pulled her in, dragged her onto the bed, and the door slammed shut behind her.

Xiao Wenyao lay on the bed, stunned. Lu Chen and Zhou Youyou were not on the couch; instead, Lu Chen was with Zhou Youyou near the table...

Seeing what was happening, Xiao Wenyao didn't dare to speak. She quietly took off her shoes and lay alone on the bedchamber.

She thought to herself that as long as she didn't speak, the Prince's attention wouldn't be on her later.

However, in the next moment, Lu Chen appeared before her. He said with a smile, "Yaoyao, you maligned me in the courtyard today. Let's see how I'll punish you tonight!"

Xiao Wen Yao's delicate body trembled as she weakly said, "My Prince, your servant knows her mistake..."

Before Xiao Wen Yao could finish, Lu Chen kissed her red lips, and Xiao Wen Yao was sternly reprimanded.

Seeing Xiao Wen Yao being taken care of, Zhou Youyou, who was resting nearby, didn't dare to breathe a word. She thought to herself that she must never anger the Prince in the future; the Prince's anger was truly frightening.

...

Half a month later.

The Great Wu court.

These past few days, there'd been rumors throughout the Capital city saying that the North Country had proposed for Great Wu to send a hostage to their lands.

Initially, the ministers of Great Wu, upon hearing this news, all presented memorials expressing opposition.

Even though they had been defeated, the Great Wu dynasty was still a dynasty. How could a dynasty send a hostage to a feudal state within another dynasty? Wouldn't Great Wu become a laughingstock among the major dynasties from then on?

Just as the ministers were filled with righteous indignation, more rumors spread that the North Country had chosen Princess Junwan as the hostage. This made the ministers in the court extremely pleased, and they resubmitted memorials to the Martial Emperor, stating that Great Wu should agree to this condition from the North Country.

Now, the Martial Emperor's desk was piled with two kinds of memorials from the same ministers; one set opposing the sending of hostages to the North Country, and another set supporting the idea of sending Princess Junwan to the North Country as a hostage. It made those ministers seem as if they had split personalities.

The Martial Emperor, sitting on the Dragon Throne, eyed the ministers below with a piercing gaze, as if he wished to kill them on the spot.

The assembled ministers kept their heads low, not daring to utter a word.

After a long pause, the Martial Emperor spoke, "Have all my beloved ministers recently been stricken with amnesia?"

"First you submit memorials insisting that I must not agree to send a hostage to the North Country. Now, these past few days you've been sending memorials urging me to send Princess Junwan to the North Country as a hostage!"

"Who can explain to me how your attitudes have changed so drastically in such a short time?"

As the Martial Emperor's voice fell, the ministers dared not speak. However, at that moment, Chai Jiliang stood up. Despite being demoted, he still had access to the court; he had not been expelled from the center of power.

Chai Jiliang was a man of action, and even though he had been demoted by the Martial Emperor, the latter could not directly banish Chai from the imperial city. If Chai, the man of action, were to be forced out, the ensuing troubles would likely be too much for anyone else to handle.

Seeing Chai Jiliang step forward, before he could say anything, the Martial Emperor directly asked, "What does the honorable Chai have to say?"

Chai Jiliang immediately knelt on the floor and said, "Your Majesty, Princess Junwan is delicately constituted. It would be utterly improper to send her to the bitterly cold lands of the North to be a hostage!"

Hearing Chai's words, the ministers from the Imperial Prince Faction were displeased. What did he mean by 'delicately constituted'?

Princess Junwan was the only one among the Martial Emperor's children to have broken through to the Master Realm. The other princes hadn't even reached the eighth level of the Realm, let alone the Master Realm. If anyone was 'delicately constituted', it was those princes. She, as a Grandmaster, was very robust.

The entire court knew why Chai Jiliang didn't want Junwan to go to the North Country as a hostage. He fancied the Princess, and since he was already part of the Junwan faction, naturally he did not wish for Junwan to become a hostage in the North Country.

Chapter 607: One Day, She Will Seize That Position Herself_1

Although the ministers from the Imperial Prince Faction very much wanted to refute Chai Jiliang's words, no minister on the court dared to stand up directly at this time.

They were all waiting.

Waiting for the Martial Emperor's attitude.

After all, they had already submitted their memorials, and it all depended on the Martial Emperor's stance regarding this matter.

If the Martial Emperor had completely given up on Princess Junwan, he would very likely choose to send Princess Junwan to North Country as a hostage, even if Chai Jiliang resorted to threats of death, it would be futile.

Upon hearing Chai Jiliang's words, the Martial Emperor asked, "Since Chai doesn't want Princess Junwan to go to North Country as a hostage, who, in Chai's opinion, would be the best candidate for hostage?"

Faced with this question, Chai Jiliang did not answer immediately. Although he was quite anxious in his heart, fearing that the Martial Emperor would agree to send Wu Junwan to North Country as a hostage, he did not dare to answer this question rashly.

If he suggested sending a certain prince to North Country as a hostage, he would inevitably offend the faction of that prince. Under the current circumstances, continuing to antagonize those ministers would bring more trouble.

After pondering for a moment, Chai Jiliang finally spoke, "Your Majesty, I believe that whether it is Princess Junwan or the various princes, they are all Your Majesty's own flesh and blood. So, if Your Majesty must choose a hostage to send to North Country, the decision should be made by Your Majesty."

Upon hearing this, the Martial Emperor let out a laugh, Chai Jiliang really was watertight.

Then the Martial Emperor continued, "Since Aiqing also knows they are all my own flesh and blood, does Aiqing not think it is too cruel for me to personally choose one of my own children to suffer in the harsh lands of the north?"

Chai Jiliang did not reply but merely knelt on the ground.

Just then, the Martial Emperor continued, "As the eldest daughter, Princess Junwan naturally should bear the responsibilities of being the eldest. If North Country insists on choosing a hostage, I can only send Princess Junwan to North Country as a hostage with a heavy heart."

At this statement, ministers within the grand hall were taken aback, including Chai Jiliang.

Once everyone regained their senses, they unanimously exclaimed, "Your Majesty is wise!"

And just as the ministers' voices fell, Chai Jiliang immediately cried out loudly, "Your Majesty, think again, please!"

The Martial Emperor paid no heed to Chai Jiliang's words and went on, "After court adjourns, I will personally talk to Princess Junwan regarding this matter. I believe she will understand my difficulties."

Chai Jiliang wanted to say more but was interrupted by the Martial Emperor, "Enough, the matter of the hostage is settled. We will discuss it no further."

This...

For the rest of the morning court, Chai Jiliang was dispirited, paying no mind to the other matters the ministers discussed in court. He had not expected the Martial Emperor to truly be willing to send his eldest daughter to North Country as a hostage.

Wu Junwan was a Grandmaster, after all, while those princes were good-for-nothings. Instead of sending the good-for-nothings as hostages, he had chosen one of the most formidable ones.

Could it be that the Martial Emperor had truly completely abandoned Princess Junwan?

After the morning court ended, the Martial Emperor sent someone to Green Cloud Palace to summon Wu Junwan to his study. He wanted to speak personally with his daughter about the matter.

At that moment, inside Green Cloud Palace, Wu Junwan lay despondently on a lounge, her eyes devoid of the brilliance they once held.

A person of great power, once deprived of that power, ages particularly quickly.

It was then that a female guard entered Green Cloud Palace. "Princess Junwan, the Emperor wishes for you to come to the Imperial Study Room right now."

Upon hearing this, Wu Junwan was initially stunned, then quickly rose from her lounge and asked, "What does my father the Emperor want with me in the Imperial Study Room?"

The female guard hesitated briefly before responding, "I have heard that the Emperor intends to send Your Highness to North Country as a hostage, and he wishes for Your Highness to come to the Imperial Study Room, presumably regarding this matter."

Hearing this, Wu Junwan was completely stunned.

To go to North Country as a hostage?

What kind of joke was this?

If she left the Imperial City for North Country, she would completely lose any chance of a comeback.

Was her father so heartless?

As she thought this, Wu Junwan's fists clenched slightly, and in that moment, the image of a certain young man flashed in her mind, and the words he said to her during her last visit to North Country echoed in her ears, especially one sentence that she still remembered very clearly.

"There may be no need to conquer all of Great Wu. Once North Country's strength grows to a certain extent, someone from the Great Wu Dynasty will naturally deliver Miss Qian to North Country."

Though the North Prince referred to Miss Qian at the time, he was speaking of her.

She never expected that the North Prince's words would become prophetic, turning into reality.

Although reluctant, Wu Junwan decided to go to the Imperial Study Room to see what her father the Emperor still had to say to her.

Soon after, she told her handmaidens, "Help me change my clothes!"

Shortly thereafter, Wu Junwan changed into a new outfit, combed her hair, and seemed much more spirited, although traces of dejection lingered on her face.

Then Wu Junwan proceeded to the Imperial Study Room.

When Wu Junwan entered the Imperial Study Room, the Martial Emperor was reviewing petitions. Sensing Wu Junwan's entrance, he put down his pen and looked at her.

Wu Junwan immediately performed a courtesy and said, "Daughter pays respect to Father Emperor!"

The Martial Emperor nodded and said, "Rise."

Wu Junwan directly asked, "May I know why Father Emperor has summoned me?"

The Martial Emperor said indifferently, "Junwan, your father knows that you hold a deep resentment towards him for stripping you of your title, but you must understand, I had no choice but to do so.

Great Wu's defeat in the war is inseparable from you, as if it weren't for the lack of intelligence, not knowing that the North Country possessed so many powerful weapons, Great Wu would not have suffered such a crushing defeat. Therefore, I must punish you."

Wu Junwan said expressionlessly, "Daughter understands, and since it has already happened, I am willing to accept the punishment."

The Martial Emperor said, "It's good that you understand my difficulties."

"Now, North Country is prospering, and the mysterious weapons they possess are so powerful that they have become the greatest threat to the Great Wu dynasty."

"Even if the peace talks succeed this time, in not too many years, the North Prince might well launch an offensive, intending to engulf the entire Great Wu."

At this point, the Martial Emperor rose from his chair, walked to the center of the study, came before Wu Junwan, looked into her eyes and said, "You are the daughter I value the most. Therefore, I want to entrust you with a mission. Would you be willing to accept it?"

Hearing this, Wu Junwan immediately guessed what her father emperor was about to say next. She was no fool, and it was impossible for her not to know that her father emperor was dangling a carrot in front of her.

"Please speak, Father Emperor!"

The Martial Emperor then said, "I hope you can go to North Country as a Hostage, and then find a way to obtain their secrets, especially the methods of manufacturing those North Country weapons."

"If you can acquire the blueprints for the manufacture of those North Country weapons, once the term of your being a Hostage is complete and you return to Great Wu, I will reinstate you as Princess Junwan, and perhaps even as the Crown Princess."

Hearing this, Wu Junwan's heart skipped a beat again.

Although she was aware her father emperor would surely dangle a carrot, she hadn't expected it to be such a large one.

What status was that of the Crown Princess?

The Crown Princess, like the Crown Prince, was the heir to the Emperor.

To reinstate her as the Crown Princess meant that her father emperor planned for her to take over his throne, in other words, he wanted her to be the next Martial Emperor.

In the past, no matter how hard she tried or how well she performed, her father emperor would never have uttered such words, considering this a rather traditional country, where few people from top to bottom would want a woman to be the emperor.

It took Wu Junwan some time to snap back to reality. Once she did, she said, "Father Emperor, your daughter understands. I will certainly find a way to complete your mission,"

Hearing this, the Martial Emperor showed a hint of a smile, then continued, "I entrust everything to you."

"That's all for now; you may go back. Once the delegation comes up with the peace negotiation terms with North Country, you must head there immediately."

Wu Junwan then performed another courtesy and said, "Yes, Father Emperor, your daughter will take her leave."

As Wu Junwan turned to leave the Imperial Study Room and her figure was leaving, the smile on the Martial Emperor's face vanished in an instant.

Crown Princess?

How could he possibly entrust his throne to a woman?

If it hadn't been to win over those on the Empress's side, he would not have appointed Wu Junwan as Princess Junwan. Now that those people around her had flocked to support other Princes, or directly to himself, the Emperor, he was even less likely to allow Wu Junwan to hold power.

Though his daughter was outstanding, her excellence did not bestow her with the right to the throne.

His earlier words had been spoken only out of concern that Wu Junwan, once sent to North Country, might give up on herself and would no longer support Great Wu.

If he gave her a glimmer of hope, then Wu Junwan would surely think she could become the Empress of Great Wu in the future, thus continuing to work for Great Wu, and even with more motivation than before.

The Martial Emperor murmured to himself, "Junwan, you better not disappoint your father."

On her way back to the Green Cloud Palace, Wu Junwan's heart was not stirred.

Although her father emperor's words had momentarily stunned her, she soon came to her senses. She did not believe her father emperor would truly make her the Crown Princess.

If her father emperor had truly entertained that idea, he would have made her the Crown Princess a long time ago, not just now.

Now that those who had followed her deceased mother had dispersed, even Pei Hong, who was a Grandmaster, had switched his allegiance directly to the Martial Emperor. She no longer had anyone she could rely on. To her father emperor, her only value now was probably as a Hostage to steal North Country's secrets for Great Wu.

Clearly, her father emperor was trying to ensure her compliance, to prevent her from giving up or betraying Great Wu, and also to make use of her as a pawn in North Country.

At that moment, a subtle smile appeared on Wu Junwan's face.

Though she was aware that her father emperor was only leading her on with false promises, it also made her realize, she wasn't without hope. Someday, she would seize that position for herself.

The image of that little man surfaced again in her mind.

This debauchee wanted her to go to North Country, so she was going, and by being a dangerous woman in North Country for an extended period, this little man would one day regret it!

Chapter 608: Negotiations Begin_1

After the delegation from Great Wu arrived in the North Country, Lu Chen didn't grant them an audience for over half a month, leaving the delegation from Great Wu just hanging there as if they did not exist at all.

Wu Ming wasn't in a hurry, though; he was waiting for news from the court of Great Wu and the decree from his Father Emperor. If he could arrange for Princess Junwan to come to the North Country as a hostage this time, it would be worth spending a longer time in the North Country.

Meanwhile.

At the North Prince Mansion.

Lu Chen sat at his desk, processing official documents while listening to Wang Qingci's reports at his side.

Wang Qingci had now taken over the work for the Rain-listening Pavilion again. Although the Rain-listening Pavilion had been exposed and the major dynasties already knew it was under the influence of the North Prince Mansion, because the North Country had easily defeated Great Wu this time, the major dynasties did not dare to take action against the Rain-listening Pavilion.

The Rain-listening Pavilion was now openly gathering information from the major dynasties, even in Great Wu. Even though the Rain-listening Pavilion had established branches in the imperial city of Great Wu, the Da Yue Dynasty currently dared not do anything to the Rain-listening Pavilion.

For Lu Chen, the intelligence gathered by the Rain-listening Pavilion supplemented the information collected by the Brocade Guard. Of course, the Rain-listening Pavilion also had spies from the Brocade Guard, but they were part of two separate systems.

The intelligence gathered by the Brocade Guard was reported up through the Brocade Guard's ranks, while the intelligence gathered by the Rain-listening Pavilion was reported up through its own channels.

With a smile, Wang Qingci said, "Prince, it seems that before long, that great beauty from Great Wu will become your pet."

Upon hearing this, Lu Chen stopped writing, then glanced at Wang Qingci and said indifferently, "Qingci, it looks like you haven't been disciplined by me in a while and are itching for it again."

At these words, Wang Qingci sighed softly and said, "Alas, the Prince has changed. Ever since Murong Xue'er came, the Prince has lost interest in this one."

As she spoke, Wang Qingci raised her delicate hand, feigning to wipe away non-existent tears from the corners of her eyes, portraying the image of a fragile woman.

Lu Chen chuckled. This bitch.

In the next moment, Lu Chen raised his hand and directly used his spiritual power to pull Wang Qingci's soft frame into his embrace.

Just as Lu Chen was about to take advantage of Wang Qingci, an attendant's voice suddenly came from outside, "Prince, Commander Liang requests an audience."

Only then did Lu Chen let go of Wang Qingci. Seeing that Lu Chen had released her, Wang Qingci felt a slight sense of loss in her heart; she was just about to be dealt with by Lu Chen, and someone had interrupted them.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to have intimate moments with Lu Chen in the study. Just as she had anticipated, with the North Country growing stronger, and its power increasing, Lu Chen would become busier with more affairs. The time he could spend with his women would become ever scarcer.

Now, Lu Chen was only short of some rest time in his study. In the future, when his governmental affairs became numerous, even Lu Chen's sleeping time would be occupied, and with so many women around him, the time they could spend with Lu Chen would be even less.

Wang Qingci knew this was inevitable, and she had no solution to it. After all, she had chosen to follow this man.

Wang Qingci then stood aside and did not continue to seduce Lu Chen.

In the next moment, Liang Zong entered the room and reported all the affairs of the major dynasties collected by the Brocade Guard.

Many of the pieces of intelligence reported by Liang Zong overlapped with those collected by the Rain-listening Pavilion, but there were also some details that the Rain-listening Pavilion had not uncovered. Lu Chen did not consider this a waste of resources.

Having two intelligence agencies was a good thing for Lu Chen because they could counterbalance and monitor each other. Although Lu Chen had not yet mastered the art of using people like an emperor, he was gradually forming his own method of using personnel.

After listening to Liang Zong's report, Lu Chen thought that since the channels through the Great Wu court had already been cleared, it was time to start negotiations. However, there was something that needed to be done before the negotiations could begin.

Lu Chen then ordered, "Send a military order to Mu Changtian to lead two hundred thousand soldiers southward, to be stationed at the border between Youping County and Lingtu County. When there's nothing to do, fire off some cannons and make some movements."

Liang Zong immediately understood Lu Chen's intention; Lu Chen was planning to create pressure on Great Wu to force them to make more concessions.

Continuing, Liang Zong said, "Yes, Your Highness."

...

At this very moment.

In the Da Yue Dynasty.

The Yue Emperor, wearing the Phoenix Robe, was meditating on the Phoenix Throne when a breeze passed through, causing the red curtains to flutter incessantly.

At that moment, a female soldier appeared outside the red curtains, holding an envelope. She knelt down and said, "Your Majesty, Princess Wu has agreed to go to the North Country as a hostage."

Upon hearing this, the Yue Emperor, who had her eyes closed, immediately opened them. With a wave of her hand, the intelligence report in the female soldier's hand flew straight into the Yue Emperor's hands.

The Yue Emperor tore open the envelope, her beautiful eyes scanning the information on the letter, and she muttered with some disbelief, "Strange, why would Junwan agree to her Father Emperor's request?"

Princess Junwan was a woman with pride. Having spent many years with her, the Yue Emperor knew her personality well. With Princess Junwan's character, she definitely wouldn't tolerate the role of a hostage.

The Yue Emperor had even intended to have Princess Junwan brought directly to Da Yue, but unexpectedly, Junwan had agreed to go to the North Country as a hostage.

Chapter 609: Negotiations Begin_2

After a moment, the Yue Emperor's reaction came swiftly, her lips curling into a slight smile before she spoke, "It seems Junwan has not given up yet."

The Yue Emperor had pretty much guessed what Wu Junwan intended to do by volunteering to go to North Country as a hostage, most likely eyeing those mysterious weapons of North Country, along with its secrets.

If Wu Junwan could uncover the secrets of North Country and obtain the blueprints for manufacturing its weapons, perhaps she would still have a chance to turn her fortunes around.

It was just that...

At this moment, a look of concern appeared on the Yue Emperor's face.

The North Prince was a lascivious man, and her dear friend was as beautiful as a celestial; sending her to North Country to be a hostage, she feared the North Prince might take an interest in her.

The Yue Emperor had no desire to see her dear friend defiled by that despicable man.

With this in mind, the Yue Emperor said to the female soldier kneeling outside the curtains, "What has Xue'er been doing lately?"

The soldier immediately replied, "Your Majesty, lately, Lord Murong has been frequently visiting the North Prince Mansion, but she returns here every evening."

Upon hearing this, a trace of displeasure appeared on the Yue Emperor's face, "She returns in the evening?"

In the Yue Emperor's eyes, if one wanted to control the North Prince, Lord Murong Xue'er needed to engage in relations with him, yet if Murong Xue'er was returning in the evenings, it meant she hadn't shared the North Prince's bed, and thus, had not yet secured control over him.

The Yue Emperor had always assumed relations between men and women took place at night, so she believed that Murong Xue'er and Lu Chen had not been intimate, but for her plan to succeed, it was imperative Murong Xue'er sacrificed herself.

At that time, the Yue Emperor said, "Send a Pigeon Letter to Xue'er, instructing her to find a way into the North Prince's bed."

Her dear friend was about to head to North Country, and she had to control the North Prince before Wu Junwan's departure in order to prevent any designs he might have on her.

Just one night's sleep with Lu Chen, and he would fall deeply in love with Murong Xue'er, thereafter losing interest in all other women. That way, by securing Murong Xue'er's position, the North Prince could be manipulated for her use,

Upon hearing the Yue Emperor's command, the soldier kneeling in the sleeping chamber immediately said, "Yes, Your Majesty! This servant shall send a Pigeon Letter to Lord Murong at once!"

The Yue Emperor said icily, "Dismissed."

"This servant shall take her leave!"

The female soldier then rose and left the sleeping chamber.

At this time, the Yue Emperor muttered to herself, "I hope my Curse Pattern will work as intended. So long as there are no Celestials in North Country, it should remain undetected..."

Several days later.

North Country.

In the Hall of Political Affairs.

The Great Wu delegation, after almost a month's wait in North Country, finally got an audience with the North Prince.

Unlike the last visit by Great Wu's envoys to North Country, this time there were no seats for them; they could only stand in the middle of the great hall, even Prince Wu Ming, as they were representatives of the defeated nation.

Wu Ming stood in the center of the great hall, looking up at Lu Chen on the throne, his heart heavy with discomfort, his fists involuntarily clenching.

After all, he too was a prince of an empire, even a contender for the Crown Prince, yet now he had to stand before a prince of a vassal state, a humiliation he had never before experienced.

But as much as he felt aggrieved, Wu Ming neither acted impulsively nor spoke recklessly.

Lu Chen also noticed Wu Ming's discomfort and said with a smile, "Prince Wu Ming, I did not expect to meet you so soon again; your departure from North Country seems just like yesterday, and I have been looking forward to another conversation with you."

At these words, Wu Ming let out a cold laugh, struggling to control his emotions as he spoke, "It seems the North Prince is unaware that the Great Wu delegation has been in North Country for some time. Had you known, I presume you would have met with us earlier."

Lu Chen responded indifferently, "Alas, there has been so much to attend to lately; there's no helping it. Your emperor sent troops to attack North Country, causing significant destruction, and we have been busy with rebuilding everywhere."

Wu Ming immediately caught the implication in Lu Chen's words, sensing that negotiations were about to start.

Without delay, Wu Ming said, "North Prince, let's cut to the chase. What does North Country require to end this war and forgo a counter-attack against Great Wu?"

Before Lu Chen could reply, Li Rui from within the hall spoke up, "Prince Wu Ming certainly is impatient."

Negotiations of this sort did not necessitate the personal intervention of Prince Lu Chen; the officials from North Country present in the hall could handle the bargaining.

If Lu Chen personally engaged in the bargaining, it would diminish his stature; it was sufficient for him to simply affirm or deny the results of the talks.

Li Rui continued, "Great Wu attacked North Country, causing a tremendous number of soldier deaths, destroyed many of our cities, resulting in significant losses for North Country, and forcing civilians into exile. If Great Wu sincerely wishes for peace, they must show genuine goodwill."

Without hesitation, Wu Ming said, "Great Wu is willing to offer ten million taels of silver as compensation."

As soon as Wu Ming finished speaking, the Minister of Revenue from the small court stood up and said, "Prince Wu Ming, you're not jesting with us, right? Ten million taels of silver is hardly enough to provide pensions for our fallen soldiers!"

At that moment, an envoy from the Great Wu delegation stood up and said, "North Country hasn't lost many men; there's no need for so much pension money."

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As the discussion ended, an official from the North Country's Ministry of War stood up and said, "We have not disclosed how many soldiers the North Country has lost, so how could Great Wu possibly know the extent of our casualties?"

As the official finished, an envoy from Great Wu countered, "With such terrifying weapons at the North Country's disposal, our soldiers were defeated before they even got close to the North Country's army. How could the North Country have sustained significant losses?"

Although it was a humiliating admission, in order to minimize compensation, the members of the Great Wu delegation had no choice but to bring up these points.

After the Great Wu envoy finished speaking, the officials from the North Country began to retort, and the whole hall turned into a bargaining scene between the North Country delegation and Great Wu's ministers, as noisy as a marketplace.

Lu Chen sat on the throne, watching as if the whole affair had nothing to do with him.

After what seemed like an eternity, Wu Ming finally took the initiative to say, "25 million taels of silver, that's Great Wu's final bottom line!"

Upon hearing this, the entire hall fell silent. Both the members of Great Wu's delegation and the officials from the North Country turned their heads to look at Lu Chen on the throne.

With a slight upturn of his mouth, Lu Chen responded, "25 million taels of silver? It seems that Great Wu does not want to take back those 200,000 surrendering Great Wu soldiers."

Hearing this, Wu Ming and the members of the delegation felt a jolt in their hearts.

They definitely needed to get those 200,000 Great Wu soldiers back. They were the elite of Great Wu, and even though they were defeated by the North Country, it was simply because the North Country's weapons were too advanced. It had nothing to do with the soldiers themselves.

If those 200,000 soldiers were not taken back, the power of the Great Wu dynasty would be greatly weakened.

Wu Ming asked directly, "North Prince, just name your price in silver."

Lu Chen immediately said, "30 million taels of silver, without beating around the bush."

Hearing this, Wu Ming and the members of the Great Wu delegation breathed a sigh of relief. It was an increase of just 5 million taels, and although 30 million taels was a lot, paying an extra 5 million taels of silver to bring back 200,000 soldiers was a very worthwhile deal.

Just as Wu Ming was about to say something, Lu Chen continued, "Plus 5 million taels of gold!"

Upon hearing this, the delegation from Great Wu exploded in uproar.

5 million taels of gold?

What a joke!

In that era, 5 million taels of gold was worth 50 million taels of silver. Adding to the previous 30 million taels of silver, the total cost would now be 80 million taels of silver.

And gold was a scarce currency. If the Great Wu dynasty compensated the North Country with 5 million taels of gold, there wouldn't be much gold left in the Great Wu national treasury.

The annual tax revenue of the Great Wu dynasty was how much? If they compensated nearly 80 million taels of silver at once, Great Wu would have some tough years ahead.

With a dark expression, Wu Ming said, "North Prince, don't you think the North Country is being a bit too greedy?"

As Lu Chen was about to say something, a Jinyiwei Guard suddenly entered from the main entrance of the hall, circled around to his side, and bent down to whisper something in Lu Chen's ear.

Lu Chen smiled slightly.

Seeing this, Wu Ming and the members of the Great Wu delegation grew even more somber, anticipating that something must have happened.

At that moment, an outside soldier announced, "Prince, members from the Great Wu delegation request to enter the hall."

Many people had accompanied the Great Wu delegation, but not everyone had entered the hall to negotiate with the officials from the North Country. Some stayed outside, awaiting any news that might come from Great Wu at any moment.

When Wu Ming heard that it was his delegation requesting entry, he knew that something must have happened in Great Wu; otherwise, the members of his delegation would not be asking to enter at this time.

Lu Chen said with a smile, "Let them in!"

The next moment, a member of the Great Wu delegation entered the hall, first bowing to Lu Chen on the throne, then quickly walked over to Wu Ming and handed him an envelope.

Wu Ming hastily took the envelope and looked it over. Upon reading it, his face turned ashen.

A few days earlier, the North Country had dispatched 200,000 troops to camp on the border between Lingtu County and Youping County, occasionally creating thunderous noises.

Opposite the North Country's camp was the North Country's Heavy Cavalry camp. Although the North Country had no intentions of attacking, a certain general from Great Wu lost his senses, thinking the North Country had let down its guard—and with a flatland ahead, he led his Heavy Cavalry to launch a night raid on the North Country camp.

However, not only did the raid fail, but the 20,000 Great Wu Heavy Cavalry were defeated instead. The North Country's army seized the opportunity to move south, capturing several cities in Lingtu County.

After reading the contents of the letter, Wu Ming couldn't help but crush the entire envelope into a ball.

He cursed inwardly, fools, such fools!

20,000 heavy cavalry against 200,000, what gave them the courage!

Didn't they know about the North Country's terrifying weapons?

This turn of events once again put their negotiations at a disadvantage.

Lu Chen then said with a smile, "Your Highness Wu Ming, you seem to be looking a bit pale?"

Wu Ming quickly replied, "North Prince, I am feeling somewhat unwell today. May we discuss the peace terms further tomorrow?"

Without hesitation, Lu Chen agreed, "Since Your Highness Wu Ming is not feeling well, let's end it here for today. You must get some good rest."

With an act of thanks, Wu Ming said, "I thank the North Prince!"

Afterward, Wu Ming and the members of the Great Wu delegation turned and left the hall.

Watching their receding figures, Lu Chen stood up with a chuckle, "The people of Great Wu are indeed 'rich in martial virtue'."

I guess they think it's still the olden days.

If it were the previous era of cold weapons, 20,000 Heavy Cavalry launching a night raid on a 200,000-strong infantry camp indeed had a chance of success, given the advantage of their armor.

But sadly, times have changed.

Moreover, there was another reason for the failure of the Great Wu Heavy Cavalry's night raid: the caution of Main General Mu Changtian. If the North Country soldiers had truly become complacent, the night raid of Great Wu's 20,000 Heavy Cavalry might have had a chance to throw the North Country soldiers into disarray.

But Mu Changtian, considering the crucial moment of peace talks, anticipated that Great Wu would attempt something to increase their bargaining power, so he remained vigilant. As a result, when Great Wu did indeed send troops to raid the camp, they were thwarted.