Farmhouse 1301

Chapter 1301: Forming Ties to Break the Siege

Speaking of being unfamiliar with the Emperor of Zhuzhao Country, they were certainly well-acquainted with the Marquess of Lingnan, Yue Tingfang. The border troops even occasionally exchanged greetings, stirring up some friction along the way.

With Yue Tingfang around, the security along Zhuzhao's borders was guaranteed—this was something everyone knew. He only had one son, and if anything were to truly happen to his only child, Yue Tingfang might actually lose his mind.

"Send him back," a close aide suggested to the Nanzhao Emperor.

The Nanzhao Emperor glared at him, his expression a bit awkward.

Wouldn't that make him seem too cowardly? Though Nanzhao Country was a small nation, it could hardly be said to be scared to such a degree.

He fixed his gaze on Yue Rujing and asked, "What were a prince and a princely heir like you doing in my Nanzhao Country?"

Yue Rujing remained entirely calm and replied, "Of course, we came to trade for some special local products. We've already explained this to your soldiers, but you didn't believe us."

What a joke.

The Nanzhao Emperor snorted coldly, "Do you even believe your own explanation?"

Yue Rujing chuckled sheepishly, his face showing an unapologetic roguishness. "I believe it. I definitely believe it."

"You..." The Nanzhao Emperor snapped angrily, "This is sheer nonsense! It's clear to me that you are plotting something against my Nanzhao Country!"

"Hey, hey, everything requires evidence. Just because you are the Nanzhao Emperor doesn’t mean you can recklessly accuse people of wrongdoing."

"Report..." A drawn-out voice rang from outside the hall, causing everyone inside to lift their heads and look toward the source.

A guard knelt on the ground, holding a scroll aloft above his head.

This scroll was crafted from Zhuzhao Country’s signature golden silk—a handwritten letter from their Emperor.

"What is it?" the Nanzhao Emperor asked irritably.

He did not appreciate interruptions.

"Your Majesty, the envoy from Zhuzhao Country requests an audience," the guard reported.

The atmosphere inside the hall shifted slightly.

The envoy from Zhuzhao Country? They had only just detained Zhuzhao’s Crown Prince earlier today, yet this envoy had arrived so quickly?

"Bring it here," the Nanzhao Emperor commanded, frowning.

After reading the contents of the scroll, the Nanzhao Emperor’s face filled with surprise. Hastily, he said, "Quick, invite the envoy in!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the guard replied.

As the guard went to summon the envoy, the Emperor cast a glance at Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing, issuing another command, "Quick, offer seats to the Crown Prince and the Princely Heir."

Yue Rujing looked at Jin Zijin with confusion, unsure of what to make of it all.

Why had Zhuzhao Country dispatched an envoy so swiftly? And why had this caused the Nanzhao Emperor to change his attitude so quickly?

Jin Zijin showed no expression. Since seats had been offered, he calmly accepted his place.

Seeing Jin Zijin settle into his seat so naturally, Yue Rujing, not one to stand on ceremony, brazenly seated himself next to Jin Zijin.

Soon after, the so-called Zhuzhao envoy arrived—a man with only one arm, Jie Zhonglin?!

Of all people... why him? Could they not have sent someone more appropriate? This might make Nanzhao believe they were being slighted by sending a disabled person as envoy.

As expected, upon seeing that the envoy was missing an arm, the Nanzhao Emperor’s expression darkened, the joy of receiving such attention from a major power instantly evaporating.

The faces of Nanzhao officials also turned grim, feeling as though they were being insulted.

"Greetings to the Nanzhao Emperor," Jie Zhonglin said, bowing slightly as best he could with only one arm.

The Nanzhao Emperor coughed lightly and replied indifferently, "Rise, envoy."

In a gesture of diplomacy, the Nanzhao Emperor granted Jie Zhonglin a seat.

Once seated, Jie Zhonglin saluted the Nanzhao Emperor and said, "Our Emperor hopes to establish closer ties between the two nations by offering a princess to marry into Nanzhao Country. At the same time, he hopes your nation will send a suitable princess to marry into Zhuzhao Country. What is Your Majesty's opinion on this proposal?"

Chapter 1302: Reason

"You're sending a princess for an arranged marriage? To a backwater country like Nanzhao?"

Yue Rujing's mouth twitched. What exactly was the Emperor thinking? This generation of royal children wasn't numerous—most had been schemed against by the Empress and lost their lives. The surviving princes numbered only three, and there were just three princesses as well, and that was including Jin Fengzhao.

When all was said and done, the only one of the princesses nearing marriageable age was the Ninth Princess. That little girl?

Yue Rujing casually jabbed Jin Zijin with his elbow. Jin Zijin merely turned his head slightly, shot him an indifferent glance, and made no further reaction.

Up above, the Nanzhao Emperor naturally appeared to be overjoyed.

Nanzhao was the poorest among the surrounding countries. The reason they hadn't been invaded by other nations was twofold: first, they were so poor that others found no profit in conquering them and didn't bother to go to war. Second, Nanzhao's geography was a major obstacle, making warfare challenging.

Climbing all those mountains alone was enough to wear an army out.

For years, no nation had been willing to form an alliance through marriage with Nanzhao, as there simply weren't enough benefits to justify it. Zhuzhao Country was the first major power expressing willingness for such a union. Naturally, this delighted them.

"Is this true?" The Nanzhao Emperor was so thrilled he could scarcely believe his ears.

Jie Zhonglin replied, "We have a handwritten letter from our Emperor as proof. If Your Majesty finds this acceptable, you may dispatch a prince of marriageable age immediately to travel to Zhuzhao Country to escort the bride."

"Haha, excellent!" The Nanzhao Emperor was utterly overjoyed and said, "Then I shall send a royal prince to Zhuzhao Country to marry their princess and solidify the alliance between our two nations."

The court officials of Nanzhao all wore pleased expressions. Glancing again at Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing...

Jie Zhonglin hastily explained, "Our Ninth Princess is the youngest daughter of our Emperor, greatly cherished by her elder brothers, especially the eldest prince. When the eldest prince heard that the Emperor intended to send the Ninth Princess to Nanzhao for marriage, he was so anxious that he insisted on coming to Nanzhao himself for an in-person assessment."

Oh?

The crowd suddenly understood—the real reason for Zhuzhao's eldest prince's visit to Nanzhao had now come to light.

Jin Zijin had remained silent all this time. It was only now that he stood up to take his leave of the Nanzhao Emperor.

The usually slow-witted Yue Rujing also began to understand. The Emperor was making preparations for contingencies, and marrying off the princess was merely a convenient excuse to have them remain in Nanzhao and accomplish their task.

A pity it came at the cost of the Ninth Princess.

He could guess that his senior was likely not too fond of the Emperor's decision.

Having found a legitimate reason to stay, Jin Zijin and Yue Rujing no longer had to lodge in inns. They joined Jie Zhonglin in residing at the embassy quarters provided for them by Nanzhao.

Yue Rujing tugged at the empty sleeve of Jie Zhonglin and asked, "Why did the Emperor send you here, of all people?"

Jie Zhonglin smiled and replied, "I am merely doing what is expected of me in my position—performing my duties and fulfilling my responsibilities. I can't very well collect a salary and do nothing, can I?"

"Heh, so now you're in the Ministry of Rites as a diplomat?"

Jie Zhonglin lifted his empty sleeve and said, "What can a disabled man like me do? Other than relying on my mouth to carve out a livelihood, I truly don't know how else I could hold my ground in the court."

Yue Rujing teased, "I've heard your esteemed father is the fastest talker in court, so you're probably no worse."

The two exchanged some light banter before noticing that Jin Zijin, who had not said a word, had suddenly stopped walking.

Jie Zhonglin furrowed his brow slightly and asked, "I heard Doctor Gu is in the hands of the State Preceptor?"

"Mm." Jin Zijin let out a muffled grunt but quickly changed the subject. "How old is Liuying today?"

A terse silence hung among the three of them. Having been by Jin Zijin's side for years, Yue Rujing naturally understood what was on his mind.

Chapter 1303: Picking People

But this is also the Emperor's painstaking effort—only by fostering good relations between the two countries can they stay in Nanzhao. Otherwise, what other choice do they have?

Jie Zhonglin took a deep breath and sighed. "The Ninth Princess… just came of age last month."

"Came of age?" Jin Zijin's smile carried a hint of sarcasm.

“Yes, came of age.” Jie Zhonglin looked at Jin Zijin and said, “However, I heard some news that Noble Consort Sheng had people change the Ninth Princess’s age. She just turned fourteen last month instead.”

“Fourteen? So that means she’s still a year away from coming of age?” Jin Zijin’s smile grew wider, but it didn’t reach his eyes. That smile exuded a chilly undertone that made people feel uneasy.

Yue Rujing quickly tried to mediate, laughing awkwardly. “One year less is no big deal. Being a princess, she eats well and grows fast. At fourteen, she must look as mature as someone who’s seventeen or eighteen.”

Jin Zijin’s expression remained unchanged. Jie Zhonglin braced himself and added, “It’s not unheard of for princesses to marry at fourteen. Sometimes, for the sake of the family and the nation, both princesses and princes have to make sacrifices.”

“Hmph!” Jin Zijin let out a cold snort, saying, “He’s growing increasingly muddle-headed.”

Jie Zhonglin said helplessly, “Word is that Doctor Gu was captured and brought to Nanzhao. Even the Ninth Princess herself is willing to marry into Nanzhao. Crown Prince, it’s better not to intervene in this matter. Rescuing Doctor Gu is more important.”

Jin Zijin closed his eyes in resignation and said, “You all don’t understand Youyou’s character. We can be determined and unyielding to achieve our goals, but if she learns that Jin Liuying was sacrificed for her, she will never find peace in her lifetime.”

“Come now, Senior Brother, that remark is too harsh,” Yue Rujing retorted. “Who the Ninth Princess marries doesn’t make much of a difference. Sooner or later, the Emperor will assign her a marriage. Right now, it might seem like a loss for her to marry into this barren, backwater place, but does she lack riches and honor? She doesn’t! Perhaps this land of Nanzhao’s mountains and rivers might actually suit her taste.

Whether there’s a marriage alliance or not doesn’t matter—the key is whether she’s happy. If she has the chance to rescue her mentor but refuses, and someday regrets it, then that’s what would truly haunt her forever.”

“Exactly, precisely so,” Jie Zhonglin echoed to persuade. “Sacrifice isn’t the issue right now. We’ll stay here and negotiate with the State Preceptor, and it’s not as though we’re leaving immediately. When the time comes, we can help the Ninth Princess assess her situation. If she’s truly living poorly, we can think of another way.”

Although Jin Zijin was deeply unwilling to use this method, he was left with no other choice.

Among the many ways to remain openly in Nanzhao, entering a marriage alliance with Nanzhao through a royal match was undoubtedly the best option.

…

Nanzhao Country needed to select an eligible prince to go to Zhuzhao Country to marry the princess. The Nanzhao Emperor chose several candidates whom he deemed suitable and sent word to the embassy to inform Jin Zijin and the others, inviting them to participate in the selection.

Yue Rujing chuckled. “See? This Nanzhao Emperor is still somewhat sensible—not throwing just any useless candidate at you.”

Jin Zijin remained silent with a somber expression. Since it had come to this, and the princess had to be sent far away in marriage, he could only do his best to ensure she married a decent man.

The candidates were young men from the Nanzhao Imperial Family, ranging from fifteen to twenty-five years old. Among them, the Nanzhao Emperor introduced the Second Prince, who was twenty-five. His formal wife had died last year, and he hadn’t yet found a suitable match, making him eligible to marry Zhuzhao Country’s princess.

Yue Rujing whispered, “Too old. Your sister is only fourteen—his eldest son might already be as tall as her.”

Chapter 1304: Who to Send as a Bride

Jin Zijin: "..."

He shot Yue Rujing a cold glare, and only then did Yue Rujing shut his mouth.

The Sixth Prince of Nanzhao, twenty years old, was the Nanzhao Emperor’s favorite son. He expressed willingness to have the Sixth Prince demote his lesser-status legitimate wife, so that the Duchy of Zhuzhao could marry in as his rightful consort.

Among the Nanzhao Emperor’s sons, these were the two with slightly better credentials, and their ages were not too far from the Princess’s.

The remaining candidates were young men from the Imperial Family, but their status and rank were lower than the Emperor’s sons—whether Jin Zijin found them acceptable was up to him.

"First Prince, how do these young men of Nanzhao strike you?"

Jin Zijin’s sharp gaze swept over the young men seated across from him, one by one, finally landing on a young man who seemed indifferent, quietly sipping his tea.

The Nanzhao Emperor followed Jin Zijin’s gaze and chuckled, "He is not from the younger generation—he’s my fifteenth brother. Eighteen years old, still unmarried."

Jin Zijin narrowed his eyes at him. Eighteen years old—so when the Nanzhao Emperor ascended the throne fifteen years ago, the old Emperor had died when this boy was just three?

Every nation’s transition of imperial power inevitably sparked a tempest of bloodshed and treachery. Nanzhao Country was no exception; much like Zhuzhao Country, after the Nanzhao Emperor took the throne, his siblings met various fates—some died, some were suppressed; those still alive were few and in dire circumstances.

This Fifteenth Prince must be an exception, having earned the Emperor’s favor to be invited to participate in the selection process.

He was considered fortunate; at three years old, unaware of the stakes, he had escaped the raging fires of power struggles.

Jin Zijin cupped his hands toward the Nanzhao Emperor and said, "I, Zijin, wish to have words with the Fifteenth Prince."

"Alright, of course, I shall arrange that immediately."

The Nanzhao Emperor internally sighed in relief. To him, securing a marital alliance with a major power like Zhuzhao Country was undoubtedly advantageous. However, determining which Prince the Zhuzhao Princess would marry presented a dilemma. No matter who she wed, that Prince would gain prominence, which could potentially destabilize Zhuzhao's imperial authority. Therefore, his greatest hope was for Jin Zijin to favor a non-aligned, leisure-loving Prince.

The Fifteenth Brother suited this role perfectly.

Jin Zijin and the Fifteenth Prince were escorted to the Imperial Garden for a casual conversation, while elsewhere, the Nanzhao Emperor cheerfully engaged Yue Rujing and Jie Zhonglin in inquiries about the Princes of Zhuzhao.

Zhuzhao Country, however, no longer had any Princes. Thus, the responsibility for this marital alliance fell on the shoulders of its royal sons.

The Nanzhao Emperor remarked that he found the First Prince quite suitable—though already married, their smaller nation's princesses and commandery princesses wouldn't mind taking a lesser position. Just moments ago, Jin Zijin hadn't been able to say this directly, so the Emperor specifically sought Yue Rujing and Jie Zhonglin's opinions.

Yue Rujing shook his head like a rattling drum and said, "Your Majesty, you'd better give up that idea. My senior brother is the type to lead a clean and simple life. Just one marriage is enough for him to fret over—any more and he's guaranteed to lose his mind."

"Ah?" The Nanzhao Emperor exclaimed, "Are you saying the First Prince is disinterested in women?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Then..." He didn’t know what to say after that. To their kind of man—those who believed the more women, the merrier, and aimed for no repeats night after night—not being interested in women was incomprehensible. If he hadn’t heard that the First Prince had at least taken a wife and fathered a son, he might have suspected the man had physical issues.

"In Yue Shizi’s view, then, who would Zhuzhao Country send for the alliance?"

Yue Rujing jerked his chin toward Jie Zhonglin and said, "What’s the Emperor thinking? Did he tell you who’s been chosen for the alliance?"

Chapter 1305: Deep Sympathy

Jie Zhonglin looked at Yue Rujing with a face full of sympathy, which sent a chill down Yue Rujing’s spine.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Don’t tell me..."

"The Emperor’s intention is for you to marry for diplomacy. None of the three Princes of Zhuzhao Country are suitable. Apart from them, you are the highest-ranking Princely Heir. Moreover, the Emperor thinks that Nanzhao and Lingnan are culturally close; marrying a woman from Lingnan is not too different from marrying one from Nanzhao. Most importantly, your father is getting anxious. You’re already in your twenties and still single. He petitioned the Emperor to grant you a marriage."

Yue Rujing: "..."

"Bullshit! Why didn’t my father tell me about this?" Yue Rujing lowered his voice and snapped at Jie Zhonglin.

"That, I don’t know," Jie Zhonglin replied with a laugh.

Yue Rujing’s lips twitched furiously, while on the other side, the Nanzhao Emperor sitting high above was already laughing heartily.

"Haha, splendid! Princely Heir Yue is just the right choice. You can personally select a suitable Princess or Commandery Princess here in Nanzhao. When the wedding delegation from Zhuzhao Country sets out,

I’ll have the Empress call together all the eligible Princesses and Commandery Princesses for you to choose from. What do you think?"

What did he think? He didn’t think much of it.

Yue Rujing, seething with anger, said, "I’m a Taoist. Before my master returns, it’s impossible for me to marry."

Jie Zhonglin quickly interjected, "I’ve heard that Marquess Yue is worried you’ve been dawdling at Sanqing Temple for too long, delaying the major event of your life. That’s why he petitioned the Emperor to grant you a marriage."

"I..." Yue Rujing felt like he’d been utterly betrayed.

Meanwhile, the Nanzhao Emperor kept laughing and said, "No rush, no rush. We can just settle the arrangement first. It certainly won’t delay Princely Heir Yue’s grand affairs."

For these diplomatic marriages, once the arrangement was set, there’d be no fear of anyone backing out.

The Yue Family had guarded Lingnan for generations; if they could truly establish marital ties with the Yue Family, it would bring the Nanzhao Emperor more joy than sending his daughter to marry into Zhuzhao’s Imperial Family.

...

When Jin Zijin returned, he found Yue Rujing utterly defeated, a look of complete despair on his face. Jie Zhonglin hurried forward to ask him, "How did it go?"

Jin Zijin paused momentarily and said, "Go inquire about Prince Fifteen. I chatted with him for a bit, and he seems like a decent person."

These days, people who care so much about the marriage arrangements of sisters were rare to come by—especially when it came to Princesses and Commandery Princesses, who were often tools for exchanging power and maintaining control. As long as the Emperor deemed their marriage beneficial, it would happen, regardless of whether the person was good or bad.

Clearly, Jin Zijin was different from the rest of the Imperial Family.

Jie Zhonglin glanced at Yue Rujing, who was still lying there, and said, "Your Highness, please try to persuade Princely Heir Yue. I shall take my leave."

"Mm," Jin Zijin nodded lightly.

He sat down on the chair next to Yue Rujing and turned his head to ask, "What's wrong with you? Should I take a guess?"

"Mm, go ahead and guess," Yue Rujing replied weakly.

Jin Zijin snickered and said, "You're the one chosen for the diplomatic marriage, aren't you?"

Yue Rujing jumped from his chair and exclaimed, "You already knew?!?"

"I was guessing, but it seems I was right," Jin Zijin said indifferently.

Yue Rujing squinted at him and said, "Why do I feel like you're enjoying my misfortune?"

"That's just your imagination," Jin Zijin said casually. "You've spent years in Beijing and even more years in Lingnan, yet you haven't found a suitable woman. I think..." He paused and looked at Yue Rujing before continuing, "I personally think you could consider finding one here in Nanzhao. Our Zhuzhao Country might not have the kind of woman you fancy, but maybe here, you'll find someone. From what I can tell, you prefer women with open and carefree personalities."

Hmm, women from Nanzhao are indeed bolder compared to the delicate ladies of Zhuzhao Country.

But Yue Rujing refused to admit it, sulking as he said, “Senior brother, which eye of yours saw that I like women from Nanzhao?”

“How would you know if you didn’t make an effort to find one?”

“Ah, I…”

“Alright, stop worrying for now. Tomorrow, go and speak with the Emperor of Nanzhao, ask for some time. Once you’ve found someone you like, tell him then. We won’t pressure you to make a decision so quickly, how about that?”

Yue Rujing: “…”

“For now, we can only use delaying tactics.”

…

After finalizing the candidate with the Emperor of Nanzhao, a date was promptly set for the journey to Zhuzhao Country to fetch the bride.

And the chosen person was none other than the Fifteenth Prince, Zhao Yanzhong.

The day before departure, Fifteenth Prince Zhao Yanzhong personally picked a date to visit Jin Zijin and the others at the posthouse.

Now that the date was set, there was no time for Zhao Yanzhong to play riddles with Jin Zijin and the others, so he spoke bluntly.

“First Prince, Yanzhong has only one question: why did Zhuzhao Country suddenly propose a marriage alliance with Nanzhao?”

Faced with his straightforwardness, the three present found themselves at a loss for how to respond.

Jin Zijin suddenly smirked and said, “I happen to appreciate Fifteenth Prince’s directness. Since you’ve asked me, we have nothing to hide.”

Yue Rujing nervously looked toward Jin Zijin, and Jie Zhonglin furrowed his brows deeply.

Unperturbed, Jin Zijin replied to Zhao Yanzhong, “This involves your Great Shaman. Do you know who your Great Shaman really is?”

“The Great Shaman?” Zhao Yanzhong frowned and said, “I do not.”

Yue Rujing, standing off to the side, snorted and added, “He is our former State Preceptor from Zhuzhao Country, the Taoist Master of Xuanzong, Yu Jizi. He is also our martial uncle. We only learned recently that he has another identity—that of the Great Shaman of Nanzhao.”

Zhao Yanzhong’s face registered shock, though it was only mild surprise.

They all knew that the Great Shaman possessed extraordinary abilities and was elusive like a dragon—his head visible yet his tail unseen. People in Nanzhao greatly respected him, and his identity had always been extremely mysterious. As for who he truly was, it actually didn’t matter much to them.

He paused for a moment, then asked, “What does that have to do with your visit to Nanzhao?”

Yue Rujing beat Jin Zijin to speak first, his face filled with indignation as he said, “He stole my senior brother’s wife. We couldn’t defeat him, let alone do anything to him, so we came to Nanzhao to wait it out.” Yue Rujing cupped his hands toward Zhao Yanzhong and added, “We bear no ill will in coming to Nanzhao—our only goal is to save someone. Now that His Majesty is considering forging ties of friendship between the two countries, I ask that the Fifteenth Prince not misinterpret our intentions.”

Zhao Yanzhong was stunned for a moment, then cupped his hands in return and said, “I understand now. Thank you for your honesty. Farewell.”

As for why the Great Shaman would steal the bride meant for Zhuzhao Country’s First Prince, Zhao Yanzhong figured it was best not to dwell on it, lest it send chills down his spine.

Watching Zhao Yanzhong walk away, Yue Rujing finally asked Jin Zijin with some concern, “Senior brother, do you think Zhao Yanzhong can be trusted?”

Jin Zijin looked toward Jie Zhonglin.

Jie Zhonglin replied earnestly, “He’s a man of his word. Compared to the others, he is relatively trustworthy.”

Since they had already made comparisons, the matter of whether or not he was reliable was no longer debatable.

…

Late at night, Jin Zijin secretly snuck into Gu Youyou’s stilted building once more.

After the last time, when Yu Jizi had warned him, he hadn’t come back. This was his second time visiting her here.

Although they were already married, and their child could walk, it was astonishing how things had unexpectedly come full circle, returning to the days of the past.

Chapter 1307: Visit Her Again

During the day, it was impossible to see her; only at night could he sneak in for a visit.

Gu Youyou had ground the ink and was holding a brush, meticulously writing small regular script.

She wasn’t someone suited for a life of despair. Since her freedom was restricted, she used the spare time to write medical texts and even crafted fairy tales for Jin Xuyao.

Even if something unpredictable happened to her, she wished for the medical texts to be passed down and for her son to enjoy a childhood with her tales.

Fortunately, aside from her confinement, they treated her reasonably well. Whatever she requested—be it brush, ink, paper, or inkstone—they fulfilled promptly.

Feeling someone entering her room, her hand gripping the brush paused instantly.

She turned her head and saw, in a place beyond the candlelight’s reach, within the shadows, an even darker silhouette.

Her heart shuddered as she tentatively asked, "Zijin?"

The figure in the shadows moved its throat and replied in a raspy voice, "It’s me!"

A droplet of ebony ink fell onto the paper, spreading into a blurred stain.

Gu Youyou trembled slightly and hurriedly placed the brush onto the brush holder. She crossed the short distance to the shadow and flung herself against him.

"You came, why did you come again? Won’t it be dangerous for you?" She spoke, her tone disjointed. "I’m fine, see? I’m perfectly fine. I both long for your visits and dread them. Didn’t I tell you last time to leave early? Go back and take care of Jin Ziyuan—I will be fine. Why don’t you listen to me and come again? What if it angers that old lunatic..."

"Youyou!" His voice, choking back emotion, interrupted her rambling. He said, "Don’t speak. I just came to see you."

"I..."

"Don’t say anything!" He gently reached out and pressed his fingers against her lips.

"With you here, I’ll go nowhere. I won’t leave. You don’t need to worry about anything; just eat well, drink well, and take good care of yourself. Come, let me see if you’ve lost weight."

Gu Youyou smiled wryly and said, "I have nothing to do here; I spend all day eating and sleeping. You should be worried about whether I’d gain weight instead."

"A little weight would be good—looks healthier." Jin Zijin forced a faint smile, glancing at the flickering candlelight, and asked softly, "Why aren’t you asleep so late? What are you doing?"

Gu Youyou quickly tried to gather up the papers she had been writing, saying, "I slept too much during the day, so I couldn’t fall asleep at night. I was just jotting down some thoughts."

Jin Zijin effortlessly snatched the paper from her hand. Gu Youyou jumped up to grab it back, but he raised it high out of her reach.

"It’s nothing, really! I’m just writing for fun," Gu Youyou said hurriedly.

"Then let me take a look," Jin Zijin replied.

He glanced down briefly. His brows gradually knit together.

Looking at Gu Youyou, whose expression showed faint exhaustion, he said, "You’re writing medical texts."

Gu Youyou gave a big smile and said, "Yes, it’s my only hobby. When I have nothing to do, I write for a bit."

Jin Zijin turned around and noticed a box stacked with thick piles of paper. Stepping forward, he picked up the stack and held it high, asking, "You've written this much in such a short time? Writing this kind of thing consumes immense effort. Have you been working day and night?"

"No, no! That's not true!" Gu Youyou explained quickly, "These aren't medical texts; they're fairy tales I wrote for Xuyao. Kids love listening to them. Writing medical texts does take effort, but fairy tales don't—they're finished quickly."

Chapter 1308: Departure

Jin Zijin hesitantly opened the papers and scanned them one by one, finally realizing they were merely amusing little stories and breathed a sigh of relief.

He collected the stories and sighed softly, "I'll keep these things for you. Tomorrow, the Fifteenth Prince of Nanzhao Country will be traveling to Beijing in Zhuzhao Country to propose marriage. I'll ask him to take these items back to Xuyao for me."

"Hmm? Traveling to Zhuzhao Country to propose marriage?" Gu Youyou asked in surprise, "Who is he proposing to?"

"Among the daughters in our family who haven't married yet, there's only one—the Ninth Princess. Naturally, he's proposing to her."

Gu Youyou froze for an instant, somewhat unable to stand steadily, and said, "But the Ninth Princess is only fourteen. She's still so young..."

Jin Zijin was silent for a while and then said lightly, "She is fifteen. In Zhuzhao Country, fifteen-year-old girls are eligible for marriage."

Fifteen? Gu Youyou vaguely recalled that it seemed about right. She stopped thinking about it further.

"Is she willing to marry so far away in Zhuzhao Country?"

Jin Zijin replied coldly, "As an imperial princess, marrying for alliances isn't her choice to make. There's no such thing as willing or unwilling."

"...Then I have nothing more to say." Gu Youyou considered herself incapable of changing an era's institutions. Since her father and brothers saw nothing wrong with this practice, it would have to be accepted.

As time slipped by, Jin Zijin suddenly embraced her tightly with reluctance and whispered near her ear, "Remember my words. I must leave now."

Jin Zijin quickly disappeared into the night, leaving Gu Youyou to sigh softly and gather the brush and ink.

Blowing out the candle, she went to sleep.

Meanwhile, under the night sky, Jin Zijin held onto the fairy tale story Gu Youyou had written for Jin Xuyao, remaining silent for a long time.

How could he not understand her intentions? She had prepared for the worst, knowing that if one day she met with misfortune and couldn't return, these stories would be the last gifts she left for her son and the world.

...

Zhao Yanzhong led the Nanzhao wedding entourage out of Nanzhao Country. The Nanzhao Emperor personally bid farewell, and the procession carried unique and precious treasures from Dali Nanzhao as the betrothal gifts, forming an impressive caravan of more than a hundred people.

The Nanzhao Emperor, with a hint of pride, glanced at Yue Rujing and Jie Zhonglin and said, "Are you pleased, Princely Heir Yue and Minister Jie?"

Jie Zhonglin respectfully replied to the Nanzhao Emperor, "You've been most generous, Your Majesty. Our Emperor is sure to be greatly pleased."

The Nanzhao Emperor’s grin deepened, letting out a hearty laugh. Suddenly, he asked, "Why haven’t I seen your country’s eldest prince?"

Yue Rujing explained, "My senior brother left early this morning. We are not in a position to inquire about his whereabouts."

The Nanzhao Emperor looked slightly displeased but refrained from asking further. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Princely Heir Yue, you’ve been staying in Nanzhao’s Taihe City for quite some time now. Have you found any lady who catches your eye?"

"Ah? This..." Yue Rujing smiled stiffly and said, "Marriage is a major decision in life. There’s no rush. I’ll take my time to observe further."

"Haha! The daughters of Nanzhao are all outstanding, so I understand the difficulty in choosing. As the Princely Heir, it’s perfectly acceptable to have three or four wives. If you truly find it hard to decide, why not marry all the girls you fancy? I can make arrangements for you."

Yue Rujing stiffened at this suggestion and replied awkwardly, "Let’s discuss this later, perhaps after the princess is married."

Jin Zijin had left early that morning and was waiting along Bellis Road, ten miles outside Taihe City.

He stopped Zhao Yanzhong in his tracks and handed him a carefully wrapped box.

"What is the meaning of this, eldest prince?" Zhao Yanzhong accepted the box.

Chapter 1309: Where is Jin Ziyuan?

Jin Zijin pressed his lips together and said in a low voice, “I have a favor to ask of Prince Fifteen. Please deliver this box to my son—it’s a small token of my wife’s affection for him.”

“The Crown Princess?” Zhao Yanzhong raised an eyebrow, suddenly feeling a hint of sympathy for Jin Zijin.

Even someone as powerful and high-ranking as Jin Zijin still has so many things beyond his control.

It seems that this trip to Zhuzhao Country for the marriage alliance also requires investigating matters related to the State Preceptor.

“Alright, I will personally deliver it to the Crown Prince,” Zhao Yanzhong said as he accepted the box.

“Mm, I wish you a safe journey!” Jin Zijin stood at the crossroads, watching Zhao Yanzhong’s convoy fade out of view before turning back.

…

Jin Ziyuan’s side received news that Gu Youyou was in Yu Jizi’s hands, and he could no longer restrain himself from wanting to go to Nanzhao to rescue her.

You Jiang tried to dissuade him, saying, “Young Prince, this is clearly a trap—you can’t go!”

Jin Ziyuan’s face bore a murderous aura, his fists tightly clenched.

“A trap? Even knowing it’s a trap, I cannot abandon her. Do you know how cruel that old bastard is? You Jiang, you will never understand what those ten years were like for us. If we had to face it again, none of us would have the courage to survive.”

You Jiang gripped Jin Ziyuan firmly and said, “I may never understand, but no matter how painful it was, didn’t you all manage to survive? As long as you’re alive, what’s there to be afraid of? Only the living have a future to speak of!”

“No, for people like us, there is no future. But she’s different—her future can be bright. This matter must be handled by me. That old bastard’s target is me…”

“What can you do? Even the Heavenly Master and Jin Zijin cannot deal with him—what can you possibly do? You’re just throwing your life away!”

Jin Ziyuan closed his eyes in grief, slamming his fist into the wall. The wall bore unmistakable traces of blood.

He said, “Maybe only my death can put an end to Yu Jizi’s obsession!”

You Jiang let out a sorrowful sigh and said, “If you die, Yu Jizi will surely go mad. When that happens, it won’t just be Gu the doctor—who knows how many innocent people will lose their lives because of him!”

“Then what do you suggest I do?”

“The best course of action now is to protect yourself. As long as they can’t find you, everyone else will remain safe. Young Prince, you must never forget the hatred of the past. If it weren’t for Yu Jizi’s schemes, even if the Prince failed to attain the throne, he wouldn’t have met such a tragic end.”

“Of course, I remember…” But just thinking about Gu Youyou possibly being forced to swallow those vile black medicines made his heart ache unbearably.

No one else could understand—only someone like him, who had endured it firsthand, could comprehend the despair of those utterly dark and hopeless days.

Jin Ziyuan’s heart was fraught with turmoil. You Jiang sighed deeply and said, “If you show up, Gu the doctor will only be in greater danger. Her safety depends on your absence. Young Prince, head to Qiuci—the Princess has always been waiting for you there.”

Jin Ziyuan grabbed You Jiang’s collar, saying, “Go to Qiuci? Are you telling me to run away?”

“It’s not running—it’s temporary avoidance. Give Jin Zijin some time. As long as you remain hidden, Gu the doctor will be safe. Trust Jin Zijin—given his measures, he will surely be able to kill Yu Jizi and rescue Gu the doctor…”

…

Zhao Yanzhong arrived in the capital of Zhuzhao Country, where the Emperor personally left the palace to greet him, showing the great importance the Emperor attached to the marriage alliance between the two nations.

“Zhao Yanzhong of Nanzhao greets the Emperor!”

The Emperor helped him up and laughed heartily, saying, “Ha ha, Prince Fifteen is so young and impressive! Zijin had someone send word ahead—now that I’ve met you in person, you’re even more handsome and striking than described in the message.”

Chapter 1310: To the Zhuzhao Country Imperial Palace

"I also greatly admire the eldest prince of your esteemed country..."

After exchanging a series of compliments, Zhao Yanzhong was invited to the Imperial Palace.

Upon hearing that Zhao Yanzhong had already entered the palace, Cui Yingying hurried to Liuying Hall to inform the Ninth Princess, Jin Liuying.

"Ninth Princess, the Fifteenth Prince of Nanzhao, Zhao Yanzhong, has arrived. His Majesty and the ministers are currently receiving him at Taihe Hall."

Jin Liuying abruptly stood up, extremely nervous.

"Did you see him?"

"No, I haven’t. He is in Taihe Hall, how could I have gone there? However, the eunuchs said he’s quite handsome and His Majesty is very pleased."

Jin Liuying sighed lightly, "Father intends to marry me off to Nanzhao, no matter who comes, he would be satisfied, right? Good or bad, how can it depend solely on his satisfaction?"

This is the fate of princesses, Cui Yingying also sighed along with her.

They sat together on the threshold, resting their heads on their hands in a daze.

"Master said that at fifteen, if there's a chance, he would take us to see the outside world. We are almost fifteen, but Master... encountered great calamity."

Jin Liuying sniffed and said, "That's why I am willing to marry into Nanzhao Country; this is my decision, not my father's coercion. If being bestowed in marriage could also plead for my master, it's far better than being used as a tool for nothing."

Cui Yingying comfortingly smiled, "Don't be too pessimistic, I've heard that the Fifteenth Prince of Nanzhao was personally chosen by the eldest prince for the princess. He's a talented person with a good character, maybe the princess will like him."

Jin Liuying reluctantly smiled and said, "For now, that's the only way to think."

Cui Yingying nodded, and Jin Liuying suddenly stood up and said, "Let's go, we should go ask Eunuch Wan."

For many years, there have been no children in the palace, besides Jin Xuyao, who was brought in and raised, only Jin Liuying was still considered a child.

Wherever she went, she was a landscape of innocence.

Eunuch Wan, while ordering palace attendants to serve the dishes, ran into the arriving Jin Liuying and Cui Yingying, and said, "Oh my, Little Princess, why did you run here? This is not a place you young girls should be."

Jin Liuying said, "We'll leave in a moment, just stay for a little while, okay?"

Eunuch Wan, an old hand, naturally understood Jin Liuying's intention?

He pulled Jin Liuying and Cui Yingying aside and said, "This old slave knows the princess wants to see the Fifteenth Prince from Nanzhao Country. However, a place like Taihe Hall is indeed not suitable for young girls. But in a while, the emperor will host a banquet for the Fifteenth Prince in Hanyuan Hall, and the princess could sneak a look."

"Really?" Jin Liuying's innocent expression was heart-wrenching.

If she married into a common minister's family, at least she would be in Beijing, and even if aggrieved, the emperor would be there to support her.

Looking at the favor Jin Fengzhao had in those years, it was evident how good it was. But she happened to marry so far away, to Nanzhao, and even if the emperor wanted to intervene, he would be powerless.

Eunuch Wan dispelled those unpleasant thoughts, smiled at her, and said, "Really, this old slave will wait in the courtyard for the princess when the time comes, and the princess can sneak in with this old slave to watch."

"Good, thank you, Eunuch Wan."

"Oh, Princess, you've flattered this old slave too much."

Cui Yingying couldn't help but ask, "Eunuch Wan, in your opinion, how is the Fifteenth Prince of Nanzhao?"

Eunuch Wan stroked his beardless chin and thought for a moment, then said, "This old slave sees that the Fifteenth Prince is well-spoken and courteous, no worse than our young lords in Beijing. A man like him in the Southern Barbarian Lands would definitely be considered outstanding and pairing with the princess would be quite suitable."