

## **Great Ming 1001**

### Chapter 1001: Steam Engine Malfunction

With the northern and western fronts in chaos, the main rebel army was finally able to refocus its attention on the Gao Family Village Militia.

However, before the rebel cannons could even be repositioned, war drums thundered once more from the south.

Shi Kefa had arrived.

He commanded only five hundred men. Worse still, his force was a chaotic mix of militia and useless, poorly trained rabble. Under normal circumstances, such a unit would have been nothing more than a rounding error on the battlefield.

But Shi Kefa's men carried new style flintlock rifles.

Their firing speed was terrifying.

Four rounds within ten breaths.

Such a rate of fire was so outrageous that even Emperor Zhu Youjian himself would have doubted it if he had not seen it with his own eyes.

The rebel troops guarding the southern flank barely had time to react before dense gunfire erupted. The moment the rifles spoke, the southern perimeter collapsed. Rebel soldiers scattered in all directions, fleeing in panic.

The Dashing General froze for a brief moment, stunned by the sudden turn of events. Then he roared furiously, "Who will intercept Shi Kefa?"

Earlier, no one had dared to face He Renlong.

Now, finding someone willing to confront Shi Kefa was even harder.

The Dashing General scanned the surrounding commanders, but not a single person stepped forward.

As a result, Shi Kefa led his mere five hundred men straight through the rebel army's southern flank, moving freely as if marching through an empty field.

This sight infuriated the Dashing General.

Inside his heart, he cursed violently.

"A rabble. Completely useless. Just a disorganized mob."

At that moment, someone suddenly burst out laughing.

"Hahahaha. A rabble indeed. Nothing but a rabble."

The speaker had voiced the Dashing General's inner thoughts aloud, completely unconcerned about offending anyone present.

Everyone turned their heads.

It was the Eight Great Kings, Zhang Xianzhong.

The Eight Great Kings of the South Camp had already been wiped out earlier. Among the roaming bandit forces, only the West Camp Eight Great Kings remained. Over time, people stopped bothering with the "West Camp" title and simply called him the Eight Great Kings, partly to avoid accusations of inflating their numbers.

One rebel chief immediately scowled. "Eight Great Kings, watch your mouth. Who are you calling a rabble?"

The Eight Great Kings rolled his eyes lazily. "You. Me. Everyone here." He laughed loudly. "A rabble, every last one of us."

He clapped his hands together, laughing as he spoke. "This entire rabble wants to earn those hundred catties of gold, yet no one cares whether we win or lose. Fine. You all chase your gold. I'll be the one to stop Shi Kefa."

He turned and waved at the two men beside him. "Sweeping King. Peaceful King. Let's move."

The three forces under the Eight Great Kings, along with the Sweeping King and Peaceful King, immediately broke away from the main camp and advanced south.

These two kings were the same rebel forces who had recently colluded with the Huangmei water bandits to attack Anqing Prefecture. They had plenty of old grudges and fresh hatred toward Shi Kefa.

Their combined army surged southward in massive numbers, tens of thousands strong.

Shi Kefa's five hundred riflemen could not possibly withstand such overwhelming force head on. He was forced to retreat southward, engaging the enemy only through constant skirmishes and harassment.

Seeing that the southern front was finally contained, the Dashing General let out a long breath of relief.

Good.

Now he could finally focus entirely on Gao Jie.

But before he could issue another order, war drums suddenly boomed again, this time from the southwest.

Governor Lu Xiangheng had arrived.

Lu Xiangheng led the Tianxiong Army, along with General Zu Kuan, Guerrilla Commander Luo Dai, and the Henan Relief General Zuo Liangyu.

It was a formidable force.

The moment the Dashing General saw them, his heart sank.

There was no one left on his side willing to peel off and block them.

At this point, the rebel army truly was nothing more than a disorganized mob. How could they possibly stop Lu Xiangheng?

The rage that had been burning moments earlier, fueled by thoughts of his stolen wife and Gao Jie's name, finally began to cool.

From the southwest, deafening battle cries shook the land. Lu Xiangheng's Tianxiong Army cut into the roaming bandits like a blade through rotten wood. Wherever they went, rebel soldiers collapsed and fled, clutching their heads and refusing to resist.

The Dashing General sighed heavily.

"Looks like I won't be taking Gao Jie's head today."

He waved his hand. "Retreat."

Once the order was given, the roaming bandits immediately demonstrated their one true advantage.

Their lack of organization.

Seventy two bands of roaming bandits scattered in seventy two different directions. Even immortals would struggle to capture them all in one sweep.

The Dashing General and Li Zicheng led their forces into the Dabie Mountains.

Geli Yan and others vanished into the Yingshan region.

The Eight Great Kings disappeared into the Huoshan area.

The once arrogant rebel army of hundreds of thousands dissolved in an instant, leaving behind only tens of thousands of captured labor reform prisoners, all destined for the Gao Family Village labor reform camps.

Xi'an.

Chang'an Automobile Factory.

A filthy, battered light armored vehicle was hauled into the workshop.

Workers swarmed it immediately. Wrenches, pliers, and tools flew in every direction. In mere moments, the armored vehicle was stripped down into a pile of scattered parts.

Then, its "soul" was extracted.

The steam engine.

It was rushed at top speed to the Steam Engine Assembly Workshop and placed before the workshop director, Bin Sheng.

An armored battalion soldier who had escorted the vehicle snapped to attention and saluted.

"Director Bin," he reported. "This armored vehicle participated in the bandit suppression operation and performed exceptionally near Lu Prefecture. However, during the final decisive battle, the steam engine suffered a severe malfunction and completely shut down. We expended great effort transporting it back. We hope the assembly workshop can identify the issue and prevent similar incidents in future battles."

Bin Sheng returned the salute immediately.

"On behalf of the Steam Engine Assembly Workshop, I apologize to the armored battalion," he said solemnly. "We will identify the problem as quickly as possible and ensure such failures are minimized in future production."

The soldier froze.

He had not expected the director to apologize to him personally.

No excuses.

No blame shifting.

He did not know that Bin Sheng also came from a military background. In his heart, responsibility always lay with the factory when soldiers were put at risk.

The soldier left, still somewhat dazed.

The moment he was gone, Bin Sheng's expression darkened.

"Damn it," he thought grimly. "This steam engine actually has defects. If I steal flawed technology back to the Later Jin Dynasty and it breaks down, the Emperor would skin me alive."

"No. Absolutely not."

"I must make sure it is perfected before bringing it home."

He immediately convened a review meeting, summoning every worker from the steam engine assembly workshop.

Standing on the platform, Bin Sheng's face was terrifyingly grim.

"Do you know this," he roared. "This steam engine was assembled right here. In this workshop. And it broke down on the battlefield."

His voice rose sharply.

"It shut down completely."

"Do you understand what that means for our frontline soldiers?"

"If it fails in the middle of battle, the soldiers inside become nothing more than fish on a chopping board."

"If it breaks down during long distance transport, the vehicle must be abandoned. If the enemy captures it, our military secrets are exposed."

"If it breaks during logistics transport, our allies at the front will starve."

His furious voice echoed even into the neighboring workshops.

"I will not blame any individual," Bin Sheng continued. "This is the responsibility of all of us. Every worker here. Including me."

"I want this steam engine dismantled immediately. Find the problem."

"And for the next ten thousand, no, one million, no, one hundred million steam engines we produce, this flaw must never appear again."

He slammed his hand down.

"Do it now. This is the most important task of this workshop."

The workers were filled with shame and determination.

They surged toward the engine.

"I found it," someone shouted. "I found the problem. This component has a slight deviation."

Bin Sheng's eyes lit up.

"Excellent," he said sharply. "Fix it immediately."

Chapter 1002 Labor Model

It was mid February of the ninth year of Chongzhen's reign.

At the main square of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, tens of thousands of workers stood in orderly formations. An award ceremony was being held.

Gao Yiyi, one of the original forty two villagers of Gao Family Village and now the director of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, personally presented a silk banner to Bin Sheng.

Behind Bin Sheng stood a large group of team leaders, quality inspectors, and worker representatives from the steam engine assembly workshop. Each of them wore a small red flower pinned proudly to their chest.

Cannons thundered from both sides of the viewing platform. Colorful paper scraps were blasted into the air and rained down, covering Bin Sheng and the others from head to toe.

With visible excitement, Gao Yiyi announced loudly, "Through hard work, perseverance, and meticulous research, the steam engine assembly workshop has raised the precision of steam engine production to a new level. After strict organizational testing, the malfunction rate of our new steam engines has dropped by fifty percent. A full fifty percent."

Thunderous cheers erupted from below the stage.

"The steam engine workshop is outstanding."

Gao Yiyi raised his voice again. "I hereby announce that the steam engine assembly workshop is awarded the title of Advanced Workshop. In addition, all workshop employees will receive a ten percent salary increase."

The representatives on the platform beamed with pride. Below them, the workers erupted into cheers, flinging their safety helmets high into the air.

In an instant, hundreds of yellow helmets soared skyward.

Gao Yiyi continued, "That was a collective honor. Next, Vice Director Qi Cheng will present Director Bin Sheng with his personal award."

Qi Cheng stepped onto the stage, smiling and waving, and handed Bin Sheng a certificate. "Congratulations on being awarded the title of Labor Model."

Bin Sheng accepted the certificate, completely bewildered. He could not help asking, "What exactly does a Labor Model do?"

Laughter rippled across the crowd.

Qi Cheng explained, "As a Labor Model, you will receive a special monthly labor allowance, along with higher medical subsidies. Also, the factory is currently building new housing next to the plant. When homes are allocated, Labor Models will receive priority."

At the mention of housing, Bin Sheng's thoughts raced.

Housing?

What use did housing have for a spy like him?

A dormitory was more than enough. Housing meant nothing. He could not take it with him when he returned to the Jin Kingdom.

With that in mind, Bin Sheng spoke earnestly, "There's no need to allocate housing to me. Please give it to another worker who truly needs it. Living in the dormitory keeps me closer to the workshop and makes work more convenient."

The moment those words fell, the entire factory went silent.

Utter silence.

Every face was filled with awe.

Such selflessness.

To give up allocated housing so casually. The weight behind those words was immense. Many people asked themselves whether they could do the same, and every answer was no.

The silence lasted a full ten seconds.

Then an even louder roar exploded from the crowd.

"Bin Sheng. Bin Sheng. Bin Sheng."

Someone shouted, "Bin Sheng, aren't you preparing a marital home for Yanzi?"

Another laughed, "Yanzi is going to be furious."

Amid the laughter, Yanzi suddenly rushed onto the stage. She snatched the metal loudspeaker from Qi Cheng's hand and shouted at the crowd, "Quiet. What nonsense are you all saying. I'm not angry at all. I already have allocated housing. Our marital home can be at my place. I support Brother Bin Sheng."

The crowd burst into laughter.

Bin Sheng gasped. "Huh?"

He froze for a moment, then joy flooded his heart. "Yanzi, will you marry me?"

Yanzi glared at him. "Idiot."

She jumped off the stage and vanished into the crowd.

Cheers continued endlessly.

Bin Sheng stared in the direction she had disappeared, his body stiffening.

Damn it. I'm a spy.

When I finish stealing the technology and return to the Jin Kingdom, will Yanzi follow me?

She definitely won't.

Then what should I do?

His mind fell into chaos. The cheers around him faded into meaningless noise. Like a walking corpse, he drifted off the stage, wandered through the crowd, and returned to his small dormitory room. He collapsed onto the bed.

His mind spun. The future in front of him had become completely blurred.

At that moment, a soft knock sounded at the door.

Bin Sheng opened it and saw one of his support team members standing outside.

He quickly pulled the man inside, poked his head out to check both sides of the corridor, then shut the door tightly.

"What is it?" Bin Sheng whispered. "We could have met in the cafeteria. Coming to my dorm alone is too obvious. It puts both of us at risk."

The man lowered his voice. "Boss, I came to report."

He took out a blueprint. It was a detailed drawing of the transmission shaft connecting the steam engine to the wheels.

Bin Sheng's eyes lit up instantly. "You copied this? How did you manage it?"

The man whispered, "I also received an internal commendation and was promoted to quality inspector in the bearing workshop. During inspections, I needed reference blueprints. I copied a bit each day until it was complete."

Bin Sheng was overjoyed. "Excellent. Outstanding work. This is a great contribution. When we return to the Jin Kingdom, I will report your merits to our superiors."

The man hesitated, then asked quietly, "Boss... when this is done, what kind of reward do you think we'll receive back home?"

Bin Sheng froze. After several seconds, he replied uncertainly, "At least... a hundred taels of silver."

"A hundred taels?"

A strange expression flickered across the man's face.

He turned and left.

Bin Sheng lay back on the bed, thoughts swirling.

When I return, what will I get?

Will they commend me before tens of thousands of people?

Will they pin a little red flower on my chest?

Will they give me a Labor Model certificate?

Allowances? Medical subsidies? Housing?

Will there be a girl like Yanzi?

"Enough. What nonsense am I thinking."

Just then, another knock sounded.

Bin Sheng opened the door.

No one was there.

Only a strange symbol etched onto the doorframe.

Bin Sheng's heart tightened instantly.

The contact from the Jin Kingdom had arrived.

Chapter 1003: It Should Have Been This Way All Along

Bin Sheng's heartbeat quickened, yet there was no room left for hesitation, because once the mark had appeared on his door, the matter was already beyond the point where fear or indecision could change anything.

He carefully memorized the strange sequence of numbers written beneath the symbol, making sure not to miss a single detail, before lifting his sleeve and methodically wiping the mark away until no trace remained.

Only after returning to his room did he finally let out a slow breath, pulling out his worn copy of Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Sitting at the table, he began the tedious process of cross referencing the numbers against the text, searching line by line and character by character, his brows tightly knit as time slipped by almost unnoticed.

Eventually, the hidden message revealed itself.

He was to meet tonight, at the third watch, in the small grove behind the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

Bin Sheng clenched his fists, the tension traveling all the way up his arms, because the meaning of "third watch" was clear to anyone familiar with the old system of timekeeping.

In modern terms, it was midnight.

In this age, who went to bed before midnight anyway?

At the same moment, Li Daoxuan was indeed still awake, sitting casually in front of his computer while scrolling through the backend performance data of his latest short drama series. The newly released Battle of Liaoluo Bay had failed to meet expectations, with revenue barely reaching six or seven million, a result that made him sigh even before he finished reading the report.

The reason was obvious enough that he did not need to think too hard about it. Naval warfare sounded impressive on paper, but when translated into short dramas, it lacked the visceral appeal audiences craved. Ship to ship combat left little room for close quarters fighting, and aside from a few scattered action scenes, most of the runtime was dominated by long range artillery exchanges.

Such scenes relied heavily on special effects, and modern viewers had long since grown numb to that sort of spectacle.

Li Daoxuan opened QQ and sent a message to Queen Qianyan M.

"Didn't earn much this time. That's on me. The script wasn't strong enough."

Her reply came quickly.

"This amount is already very good for me. Thanks for bringing me along, brother. Call me again next time."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly and typed back that he would.

Just as he closed the chat window, his phone emitted a sharp notification sound.

His eyebrows rose at once.

The alert came from the diorama box's surveillance system, which he had configured to notify him only when abnormal movement was detected. Earlier that evening, he had deliberately shifted the field of view to the Chang'an Automobile Factory, meaning that whatever triggered the alert had happened there.

Something was moving.

Li Daoxuan focused his attention on the diorama, and the image quickly sharpened before him, revealing a black clad figure climbing over the factory wall under cover of darkness.

At first glance, his instinctive conclusion was simple enough: a thief.

After all, similar incidents had occurred in Puzhou before, and Li Daoxuan himself had once caught such a scene and personally handed the culprit over for labor reform.

He was just about to intervene when a detail made him pause.

This man was not climbing into the factory.

He was climbing out.

That alone was enough to make the situation far more interesting.

Suppressing his impulse to act, Li Daoxuan chose instead to observe quietly, leaning back as he activated the Focus function. His viewpoint slipped past the crude mask covering the man's face, and the moment his features became clear, recognition flashed through Li Daoxuan's mind.

It was Bin Sheng.

Only a few days earlier, this man had appeared on Gaojia News as a model worker from the Chang'an Automobile Factory, a representative of the new era whom Li Daoxuan himself had taken note of.

Seeing such a person sneaking out over a wall in the dead of night felt deeply unsettling.

On screen, Bin Sheng landed lightly on the ground, glanced around with practiced caution, and then slipped into the small grove behind the factory, moving deeper among the trees. There, another black clad figure was already waiting for him, as if he had arrived long ago.

"I'm here," Bin Sheng said.

To Li Daoxuan's surprise, the words were spoken in Manchu, a language he could not understand at all, causing his brow to furrow in mild irritation. Fortunately, this was not a serious obstacle, as the diorama box had long since unlocked its Mystical Translation function.

With a single press, the spoken words flowed into his mind as clear modern Mandarin.

"You came?" the other figure sneered. "I thought you might not dare."

Bin Sheng answered calmly, his tone respectful. "How could I not come, sir?"

"The Emperor has been waiting for your schematics," the man said coldly. "Months have passed without results. Are you planning to betray His Majesty?"

Bin Sheng explained patiently that the schematics for the great iron vehicles were extraordinarily complex, with even a single component capable of filling an entire page, and that when all parts were combined, the stack of drawings became massive, far beyond what could be acquired casually or quickly.

"How much have you obtained?" the man demanded.

Bin Sheng produced the bearing blueprint his subordinate had risked everything to copy, along with several folded diagrams of steam engine components taken from his inner garments.

The man frowned deeply as he looked them over. "These things look nothing like great iron vehicles."

"They are only components," Bin Sheng replied. "Only when assembled together do they form a complete vehicle. This is merely a tiny fraction of the whole, and recreating it requires countless complex processes."

The man snorted dismissively, insisting that a box on four wheels could not possibly be so complicated, yet despite his disbelief, he lacked the knowledge to truly argue the point.

In the end, he could only issue a curt order for Bin Sheng to obtain the remaining schematics as quickly as possible.

At those words, something hardened inside Bin Sheng.

On the Ming side, his work was praised and rewarded, his contributions recognized by thousands, his future filled with honor and warmth. Yet here, he was met with suspicion, impatience, and scorn.

Lowering his voice, he said slowly, "There is one more thing I wish to give you."

The man leaned closer, curiosity overcoming caution.

Bin Sheng reached into his clothes, fumbling deliberately, before finally withdrawing his clenched fist. When he opened his palm, it was empty, and the man barely had time to react before a dagger slid from Bin Sheng's sleeve and plunged straight into his chest.

From the man's throat came a strangled gasp as he staggered backward.

"From today onward," Bin Sheng said quietly, "I want to be a good man."

The body soon lay motionless beneath the trees.

After ensuring no one was nearby, Bin Sheng dragged it deeper into the grove, dug a hurried pit, and buried both the corpse and the schematics he had brought with him. He no longer wanted them, because they had lost all meaning.

When the last handful of soil was packed down, the oppressive weight that had been pressing on his chest finally lifted, leaving him breathing freely for the first time in what felt like years.

It should have been this way all along.

Straightening his posture, Bin Sheng walked back toward the Chang'an Automobile Factory, while above it all, Li Daoxuan watched in silence, a faint and knowing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Chapter 1004: Dao Xuan Tianzun Already Knows

The following day, around noon, the Chang'an Automobile Factory cafeteria was filled with its usual bustle, as workers streamed in with their lunchboxes and the air carried a mix of food aromas and casual chatter.

Bin Sheng collected his meal, wandered around the cafeteria as if looking for a place to sit, and finally dropped down beside one of his subordinates from the support team, his movements appearing casual and unremarkable.

The subordinate was startled by the sudden proximity and immediately lowered his voice. "Boss, do you have instructions?"

Bin Sheng kept his head lowered as he ate and replied softly, "Gather in the garden next to the training ground."

After that, he stood up, took a few steps, and paused behind another subordinate, leaning in just long enough to whisper the same words before moving on as if nothing had happened.

One by one, he made his rounds, repeating the same quiet instruction until all ten of his subordinates had received the message, none of them drawing any unnecessary attention.

About ten minutes later, Bin Sheng and his ten men gathered in the small garden beside the training ground, each holding a lunchbox in hand. They ate while pretending to watch the female workers training nearby, their gazes drifting lazily even as their voices remained low and cautious.

After confirming that no one was close enough to overhear, Bin Sheng finally spoke. "Brothers, I have something important to tell you."

The ten men instinctively leaned closer, murmuring, "Boss, say it."

Bin Sheng took a slow breath and said quietly but firmly, "I am not going back to the Jin Kingdom."

The effect was immediate.

All ten of them stiffened at once, their movements freezing as if struck by the same invisible force, their expressions turning strange as fear, confusion, and suspicion intertwined. Some wondered whether this was a test, while others feared that a single wrong response might cost them their lives.

Seeing their reactions, Bin Sheng understood their thoughts clearly and continued in a low voice, "Last night, an envoy from the Jin Kingdom came to see me. He offered no praise, no encouragement, only complaints and accusations. I lost my temper and killed him."

A sharp intake of breath spread through the group as several men instinctively covered their mouths, their eyes widening in shock.

Bin Sheng did not linger on the matter. "I will not say anything else. I only want to ask you one thing," he said, his gaze sweeping across their faces. "Are you happy living here, or not?"

The ten men hesitated, exchanging glances, their inner struggles plainly visible. After a long moment, one by one, they lowered their voices and answered honestly, "Extremely happy."

"That's right," Bin Sheng said, his voice growing more intense as emotion surged. "We live like immortals here. We work hard, yes, and it is tiring, but our labor has meaning. Every effort is rewarded, every

contribution is seen and acknowledged. But what about in the Jin Kingdom? There, we are nothing but insignificant spies, despised and disposable. Even if we accomplish great feats, do we receive anything? No. All the glory goes to our superiors. Do we even get a sip of the soup? Do we?"

Silence fell over the group.

Bin Sheng clenched his teeth. "I am not going back. If any of you want to return, I will not stop you. Just do not betray your brothers. If someone slips away alone, I will remember our past camaraderie and will not lift a hand against him."

His words were carefully chosen, leaving space without issuing threats.

The ten men looked at one another again, and this time their hesitation faded. Almost in unison, they spoke. "We are not going back either."

"I'm already a Labor Model," one of them muttered. "Why would I go back?"

"I've been promoted to team leader," another said quietly. "My wages are about to rise again."

"The director promised to help me fight for a promotion to assistant director," a third added.

These men had all risen rapidly within the Chang'an Automobile Factory. In their efforts to gather intelligence, they had worked harder than anyone else, striving to please their superiors, and as a result, their promotions had come one after another. None of them were low level laborers anymore.

Compared to the shameful life of a spy, their current achievements were something they could hold their heads high about.

Seeing their unanimous resolve, Bin Sheng felt a surge of joy. "Good," he said firmly. "From today onward, we are no longer people of the Jin Kingdom. We have returned to the Great Ming."

"But, Boss," one of the men whispered anxiously, "our presence here has already been reported. The Jin Kingdom will keep sending people. Sooner or later, someone will uncover our identities, and when that happens, we will all be doomed."

Bin Sheng's eyes hardened. "I have a plan."

All eyes immediately turned toward him.

"We turn ourselves in," Bin Sheng said.

The words stunned them.

"Turn ourselves in?"

"Isn't that just walking straight into death?"

Bin Sheng shook his head. "No, it isn't," he said seriously. "Haven't you noticed how open minded this place is? People here treat others with goodwill. Deputy Director Qi Cheng was once a bandit and even a labor reform prisoner, yet now he is a deputy director. A prodigal son who returns is worth more than gold. If we openly confess our identities, we will receive the same understanding. At the very least, the deputy director will understand us."

The others began whispering among themselves.

"It's too dangerous."

"We could die."

"It's like licking blood off a blade."

Bin Sheng lowered his voice. "Brothers, if we do not turn ourselves in, that is when we are truly licking blood off a blade. Sooner or later, a new spy will expose us, and then there will be no way out. If we confess now, our chances are far greater. This is the biggest gamble of our lives. If we win, we can live openly for the rest of our days. If we lose, consider it dying on a mission. We were all prepared for that fate long ago."

When he put it that way, the logic was undeniable.

The ten men nodded slowly, one after another. "Boss, we're with you."

"Good," Bin Sheng said. "Let's go to the deputy director's office right now."

The eleven of them stood together, quickly finishing their meals before striding toward the office with confident steps.

These eleven men were rising stars of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, known among the female workers as the "Eleven Outstanding Youths." As they walked together, their confident posture immediately drew countless curious looks from passersby.

Under many astonished gazes, they arrived at the deputy director's office and knocked lightly on the door.

Before they could even enter, Qi Cheng's gentle voice came from inside. "There's no need to come in. Dao Xuan Tianzun has already issued a divine decree to me, saying that all eleven of you have turned over a new leaf and decided to become upright people."

Bin Sheng and the others froze in place.

The shock was overwhelming.

In that instant, their souls nearly left their bodies.

They had heard Dao Xuan Tianzun's name countless times since arriving here, but they had never witnessed a true miracle and had secretly believed it to be little more than a convenient myth.

At this moment, they finally understood the boundless power of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Qi Cheng continued calmly, "Dao Xuan Tianzun says this matter should not be made public. You know it yourselves, and there is no need to tell anyone else. Go back to your workshops, work hard, and act as if nothing happened."

Bin Sheng was overcome with joy and immediately prostrated himself toward the sky, his voice trembling as he cried, "Dao Xuan Tianzun is benevolent!"

"Oh, and one more thing," Qi Cheng added. "If any more spies from the Jin Kingdom come to contact you, do not risk killing them yourselves. Report it to the factory militia and let them handle it. Also, that body should not be buried in the woods. What if wild dogs dig it up someday? Move it tonight and give it a proper burial."

The eleven men were filled with gratitude. Bin Sheng bowed deeply and said, "For people like us to receive such magnanimity, we are eternally grateful to Dao Xuan Tianzun. If we ever harbor ill intent in this life, may we be struck by five bolts of thunder."

Chapter 1005: A Concubine? Impossible!

That very same night, while Bin Sheng and his group were busy in the small woods, digging up the bodies of the Jin spies and relocating them to a more proper burial site, an entirely different kind of event was unfolding far away at the Puzhou Grand Theater, where a new film titled *The Legend of Li Shishi* officially premiered.

The movie itself was, frankly speaking, rather crude in its execution, with many scenes feeling stiff and awkward. Lao Nanfeng's portrayal of Emperor Huizong of Song failed to convey the bearing and dignity of an emperor, while Cai Lin's performance as the grown Li Shishi lacked the intoxicating charm and allure that the legendary courtesan was known for.

However, the audience's disappointment did not last long.

Because the young Li Shishi stole the entire spotlight.

Played by Chen Yuanyuan, the version of Li Shishi from the ages of eight to fourteen left the audience utterly stunned. At only twelve years old, Chen Yuanyuan demonstrated mastery in zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting, while also excelling in singing and dancing, her movements graceful and her voice clear.

More importantly, despite her tender age, she already possessed a natural charm that seemed to seep into every glance and gesture, making viewers unconsciously hold their breath as they watched her. For many, the thought inevitably arose that perhaps this was not merely an actress portraying Li Shishi, but someone even more Li Shishi than Li Shishi herself.

Thanks entirely to Chen Yuanyuan, the film exploded in popularity.

Countless people flocked to theaters, not for the story, nor for the emperor, but simply to catch a glimpse of that young girl who had embodied the legend so completely.

Sensing the opportunity, Lao Nanfeng immediately dispatched the memory cards containing the film to cinemas in Gao Family Village, Xi'an, and Luoyang, arranging for intensive screenings without delay.

And just like that, Chen Yuanyuan became a phenomenal star across all territories under the influence of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

That evening, as dusk settled quietly over the city, Chen Yuanyuan sat in the backstage dressing room of the Flower World Star Agency, standing in front of a mirror and diligently practicing her camera presence.

After watching her own performance in *The Legend of Li Shishi*, she felt dissatisfied with several aspects, believing that some of her expressions were still slightly stiff and that certain movements could be refined further, so she continued practicing with full concentration.

Cai Lin, seated beside her, could not help laughing softly as she watched. "You little thing, you are already so beautiful and yet you work this hard. What, do you want to become famous across the entire world?"

Chen Yuanyuan scratched her head, smiling a little sheepishly. "Isn't it good to work hard? Back in the Pear Garden, if you didn't practice properly, the madame would scold you. Now that I'm here, you act like a madame yourself, but instead you laugh at me."

Cai Lin shook her head helplessly, amusement in her eyes. "Don't call me madame. That word sounds far too much like a brothel, and Dao Xuan Tianzun would not like that. You should call me manager instead."

Chen Yuanyuan blinked in confusion. "Manager? Shouldn't I call you Boss? What does manager mean?"

Cai Lin chuckled. "Brother Nanfeng is the Boss. I just help him manage this place, so people call me the manager."

Understanding dawned on Chen Yuanyuan's face. "Oh, so a manager is like a shopkeeper," she said, then suddenly burst into giggles. "Then you're definitely going to marry Brother Nanfeng, right? If you do, you'll be a boss too."

Cai Lin's cheeks flushed faintly as she sighed and shook her head. "I came from a brothel. Even if I only sold my artistry and not my body, my background is still humble. Even if Brother Nanfeng were willing to marry me, I could never be his main wife. At best, I would only be a concubine. A man of his status will surely marry a respectable young lady from a good family one day."

Chen Yuanyuan opened her mouth, unsure how to respond, when a knock sounded at the door.

Cai Lin went to open it, and there stood Lao Nanfeng, holding a box of chocolates, his expression bright with a broad grin. "Miss Cai, this is a reward I received from Dao Xuan Tianzun for my contribution in the Battle of Liaolu Bay. I know you like sweet things, so I brought it for you."

Cai Lin's eyes lit up as she accepted the box with both hands. "Thank you, Brother Nanfeng."

Lao Nanfeng laughed contentedly.

Men were strange creatures. They could spend money on a gift for a woman and somehow feel happier themselves in the process, as if the joy they received in return was a kind of emotional reward.

Cai Lin took a piece of chocolate and placed it in her mouth, her smile instantly sweetening.

Seeing that smile, Lao Nanfeng felt even more pleased, rubbing his hands together unconsciously.

At that moment, Chen Yuanyuan suddenly spoke up with an innocent tone. "Brother Nanfeng, when are you going to take Sister Cai as a concubine? She's been looking forward to it."

Cai Lin was so startled that she nearly lunged forward to cover Chen Yuanyuan's mouth.

Lao Nanfeng, however, froze for a moment before blurting out, "What? Take her as a concubine? Impossible."

Cai Lin's heart sank instantly, as if it had fallen into an icy lake.

So that's how it is. He doesn't care for me at all. He won't even take me as a concubine. Of course, he's a great general, and I'm a woman from a brothel. I'm not even worthy of that.

Just as despair took hold, she heard Lao Nanfeng laugh again. "If I marry her, it will be as my wife. I just don't know whether Miss Cai would be willing to marry a rough man like me."

Cai Lin froze for a heartbeat, then burst out in excitement. "Willing. Of course I'm willing!"

The happiness came so suddenly that her answer was far too quick.

A moment later, embarrassment washed over her. "No, no, this isn't right. Such an important matter shouldn't be decided so casually, in such a strange place. There should be a matchmaker, a formal proposal, exchanging birth dates, so many proper rituals. You're being too sudden, and I agreed too suddenly. This is all wrong."

Lao Nanfeng grinned. "I'm a man who could die on the battlefield at any moment. Why bother with so many rituals? What if the ceremonies aren't even finished, and I'm sent off to war and then..."

"Shh!" Cai Lin jumped up and covered his mouth.

The two of them stood there, gazing at each other, completely lost in their own world.

Chen Yuanyuan stuck out her tongue mischievously. See, I fixed it with just one sentence.

She was about to tiptoe away quietly when a young man suddenly poked his head into the dressing room. He had meant to knock, but seeing the door already open, he spoke up politely. "Excuse me, is Miss Chen Yuanyuan here?"

Chen Yuanyuan turned toward him. "That's me. Who are you?"

The young man smiled broadly. "Hello, my name is Liu Maopao. I'm the head factory manager of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. The one beside me is the second factory manager, Zhebu, and the other is the third factory manager, E'zhe."

Behind Liu Maopao stood two slightly older children, dressed in Han clothing but wearing Mongolian hairstyles and distinctive ornaments, creating a somewhat unusual sight.

Chen Yuanyuan looked at them, completely baffled.

Lao Nanfeng and Cai Lin were also drawn over, curiosity written on their faces.

Liu Maopao then turned to Lao Nanfeng with a respectful smile. "Uncle Nanfeng, hello. I'm the son of Liu You from the 'Handsome Enough to Bubble' noodle shop. You've even eaten at our place before."

At the mention of the shop, Lao Nanfeng recalled it immediately. "Shuixian Heluo noodles."

Liu Maopao laughed. "Uncle Nanfeng has a great memory."

Lao Nanfeng thought to himself that he was not actually that close to Liu You, but since the boy was young, he did not bother to argue. His gaze shifted to the two Mongolian children behind Liu Maopao, and a knowing smile appeared. "So, what do you want with Chen Yuanyuan?"

Liu Maopao straightened slightly. "It's good that Uncle Nanfeng is here, because this matter needs your input. Miss Chen has become extremely popular recently, whether in Gao Family Village, Xi'an, or Puzhou. Everyone is talking about her. I've been thinking that I'd like to invite Miss Chen to help promote our wool sweaters. Naturally, this won't be for free. We will definitely pay for her work."

Chapter 1006: The Birth of Commercials

Lao Nanfeng had genuinely never encountered such an idea in his life, and after listening for a while, he could not help frowning slightly as he asked in confusion, "Help you promote it? What exactly do you mean by that, and how are you planning to do it?"

Liu Maopao did not seem nervous at all. Instead, he explained patiently, "My idea is simple. I want to invite Miss Chen to wear one of the wool sweaters produced by our factory, and then record a short video where she looks comfortable, warm, and genuinely happy, while saying a single sentence."

Lao Nanfeng raised an eyebrow. "What sentence?"

Liu Maopao replied without hesitation, "She will look at the camera and say, 'Wearing this wool sweater makes me feel so warm that I could just fall asleep.'"

Lao Nanfeng stared at him for a long moment, his expression blank with disbelief. "That's all?"

"Yes," Liu Maopao answered, nodding seriously. "That's all."

Lao Nanfeng felt his mind stall for a moment, and after a brief pause, he pressed on, "So what you are saying is that you want to film her speaking that one line, record it as a short video, and then hand it over to you, just like that?"

"Yes," Liu Maopao said again, his tone firm and confident. "And for this short video, I am willing to pay one hundred taels of silver."

"A hundred taels?" Chen Yuanyuan cried out involuntarily, her eyes widening in shock.

That amount of silver was more than what Zhu Piaoling had paid to redeem her from the Pear Garden. To think that someone was willing to pay such an enormous sum simply for her to say a single sentence in front of a camera left her utterly stunned. For a brief moment, she even wondered if she had heard him wrong.

She could hardly believe that she herself was worth that much.

Lao Nanfeng, however, was more curious than shocked. He looked at Liu Maopao carefully and asked, "Boy, you are spending so much money on such a small thing. Isn't that a loss? How many wool sweaters would you have to sell just to earn it back?"

Liu Maopao merely smiled, as if this concern had never crossed his mind. "Uncle Nanfeng, there is no need to worry about my costs. In fact, I also plan to spend another one hundred taels of silver, specifically to buy a short period of time from you."

Lao Nanfeng froze, completely at a loss. "Another hundred taels? Buy time?"

"Yes," Liu Maopao said calmly, then continued explaining, "Before each of your films begins, there is a short interval, is there not? The moment when the audience has entered the theater, but the movie itself has not yet officially started."

After thinking for a moment, Lao Nanfeng nodded slowly. "That interval does exist."

"Then sell that time to me," Liu Maopao said. "For one hundred taels of silver, I want that brief pre movie slot to play the short video Miss Chen and I just filmed."

Lao Nanfeng could not help laughing in disbelief. "Young man, what use is that bit of empty time to you? It lasts only a moment. You play a clip of Chen Yuanyuan saying one sentence, and you think people will go out and buy wool sweaters for that? And you are willing to pay a hundred taels for it?"

Liu Maopao chuckled softly and replied, "A truly capable businessman understands the real value of time."

Lao Nanfeng shook his head, half amused and half exasperated. "A capable businessman, you say? This sounds more like a child playing at business." Then he added bluntly, "This is sheer madness. Does your father, who is so wealthy, know that you are spending money like this?"

"My father does not need to know," Liu Maopao answered calmly. "Every share of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory belongs to me. He does not own even a tenth of it."

Lao Nanfeng was stunned into silence.

This revelation left him in an awkward position. After a moment, he said with some discomfort, "In that case, I really would not dare take a hundred taels from you. People would accuse me of being greedy. How about this? I will play your clip for free."

"Free will not do," Liu Maopao said immediately, his expression turning serious.

Lao Nanfeng blinked in surprise.

Liu Maopao explained in a measured tone, "Uncle Nanfeng, things that are given for free are never stable. Once my advertisement becomes popular, other merchants will surely follow my example. They will come looking for you, hoping to buy that same short slot before the movie starts. If you give it to me for free, but others are willing to pay, you will naturally sell it to them instead."

Lao Nanfeng laughed. "You really think that brief moment will become something people fight over?"

"I am absolutely certain," Liu Maopao said earnestly. "That is why I am paying a hundred taels upfront, to secure it. In the future, if demand increases, I am even willing to raise the price. If anyone offers more

than me, please contact me first, Uncle Nanfeng. As long as the price is reasonable, I will increase my offer so that the slot remains mine."

At this point, Lao Nanfeng felt that his thoughts were completely failing to keep up with this younger generation.

These youngsters, like Liu Maopao, had grown up studying the Heavenly Books bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Even if they had only grasped a portion of that knowledge, it already felt to Lao Nanfeng like they were reading divine scripture from another world.

After a long sigh, he finally said, "Fine. But if you lose money, do not come crying to me. I cannot stand a crying child. It is even more troublesome than fighting on the battlefield."

Liu Maopao smiled confidently. "Do not worry, Uncle Nanfeng."

And just like that, the agreement was settled.

Zhebu removed a small bundle from his back and opened it, revealing several finely knitted wool sweaters inside. Chen Yuanyuan carefully selected two that looked especially pleasing, then returned to the dressing room to change.

Not long after, she emerged, her figure wrapped snugly in a soft and warm wool sweater.

The Stars Performing Arts Agency already had a camera prepared. Chen Yuanyuan stepped in front of it, turned toward the lens, and offered a gentle, sweet smile as she spoke clearly, "Wearing this wool sweater makes me feel so warm that I could just fall asleep."

With that, the filming was complete.

It was a perfect take.

Chen Yuanyuan stepped aside gracefully, and Zhebu and E'zhe moved into frame. They had changed into traditional Mongolian clothing and each held a large bundle of wool in their arms. Facing the camera, they smiled honestly and said, "We are descendants of Genghis Khan, and we have always raised sheep on the grasslands. Our wool is truly the finest."

Only then did Liu Maopao step into the frame, placing his hands on the shoulders of the two Mongolian youths as he smiled at the camera and said, "Warm and Sleepy brand wool sweaters, made from the finest wool of the Mongolian grasslands, will keep you warm through the entire winter."

"Cut."

The filming ended.

Lao Nanfeng's staff quickly performed some simple post production, adjusting the image quality, refining the colors, and making a backup copy. The finished video was then transferred onto a memory card and handed to Liu Maopao.

"This memory card was bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun," the staff member reminded him seriously. "It is a divine artifact from the heavens. You must transport it carefully, keep it safe, and return it immediately after use."

Liu Maopao nodded solemnly. "Understood. I will take this card with me. As for the pre movie slot, I will leave it in your hands, Uncle Nanfeng."

Lao Nanfeng waved dismissively. "Do not worry. I will arrange it immediately."

After paying two hundred taels of silver, Liu Maopao instructed the two Mongolian youths to carry the oversized memory card, and the three of them quickly boarded the train back to Gao Family Village.

Watching them leave, Lao Nanfeng shook his head with a mixture of confusion and amusement. "Young people these days are truly something else. I will never understand what goes on in their heads."

Cai Lin smiled softly. "You do not need to understand it, Brother Nanfeng. You conquered an empire with your sword. Just let these youngsters take the reins and watch what they do."

Lao Nanfeng laughed heartily. "You are right."

An hour later, at the Puzhou Grand Theater, moviegoers poured into the hall, scanning seat numbers as they searched for their places. Before the screening had even officially begun, the massive screen suddenly lit up.

The audience exchanged startled looks. "What is going on? We have not even sat down yet."

Soon, they realized that it was not the movie.

It was an advertisement.

Chen Yuanyuan appeared on the screen, smiling gently as she spoke, "Wearing this wool sweater makes me feel so warm that I could just fall asleep."

With just that single line, the audience was completely captivated.

When the film ended, those same captivated viewers streamed directly toward the Warm and Sleepy wool sweater shop in Puzhou.

Chapter 1007: You Little Rascal

At Gao Family Village, within the main settlement, Gao Yiye had just finished recording that day's edition of Gaojia News.

She was dressed neatly and with dignity, seated upright before the camera, her posture composed and her expression gentle. As she calmly read through the prepared script, her voice remained steady and clear from beginning to end, and once the final line was delivered, the recording came to a smooth conclusion.

The work that followed no longer required her involvement. The disciples from the Gao Family Village News Department, all followers of Dao Xuan Tianzun, immediately took over the editing process. They climbed up and down the scaffolding erected in front of the massive tablet computers, carefully adjusting footage, trimming segments, and arranging the sequence of the broadcast.

This was not easy work.

The tablet computers were enormous, and even the smallest adjustment often required them to climb several meters up the scaffolding, drag a clip slightly to the left or right, then climb back down to check the result, repeating the process again and again.

Yet not a single person complained.

These tablets were Immortal Treasure Mirrors bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself, and for ordinary mortals to personally operate such divine artifacts was an honor beyond measure. No matter how exhausting the task became, everyone felt it was more than worth it, since countless others would never even have the chance.

Gao Yiye took a sip of tea to moisten her throat, then set the cup down lightly.

At that moment, Liu Maopao slipped quietly into the room and bowed respectfully toward her. "Sister Saintess."

Gao Yiye smiled when she saw him. "Oh? If it isn't Handsome Enough to Bubble. What brings you here today?"

Liu Maopao scratched his head and laughed. "Sister Saintess, I came to ask for a small favor. I was hoping to insert a tiny advertisement at either the beginning or the end of Gaojia News. Of course, I am not asking for special treatment, and I am certainly not trying to exploit connections. I will pay the village treasury properly."

"What?" Gao Yiye burst out laughing. "You little scoundrel. Now you have set your sights on Gaojia News itself? If Dao Xuan Tianzun finds out, he will spank your backside."

Liu Maopao grinned without the slightest fear. "Dao Xuan Tianzun would never spank me. He would definitely praise me for being clever."

"I don't believe that," Gao Yiye replied, snorting lightly.

She turned her head and glanced at the Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun sitting quietly on her desk. "Too bad Dao Xuan Tianzun isn't here right now."

To her surprise, the puppet suddenly moved.

It stood up on its soft fabric feet, wobbled slightly, then raised its round little hand and waved, laughing cheerfully. "I just arrived."

Gao Yiye jumped in surprise. "Dao Xuan Tianzun! This Liu Maopao is getting bolder by the day. He actually came to ask about placing advertisements in Gaojia News."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "That is actually a very good thing."

"Huh?" Gao Yiye froze. "Dao Xuan Tianzun thinks this is good?"

Liu Maopao's eyes immediately lit up. "I knew Dao Xuan Tianzun would approve."

Li Daoxuan explained patiently, "Yiye, this is a completely normal commercial activity. Advertising can increase the income of the village treasury. Merchants earn money, that money flows back into the treasury, the treasury then uses it to benefit the people, and the people use that money to purchase goods again. It forms a healthy cycle."

Gao Yiye hesitated. "But won't viewers find the advertisements annoying?"

"They definitely will," Li Daoxuan replied without hesitation. "People who do not need the product will certainly feel annoyed. However, if someone happens to need a warm coat for winter, then this

advertisement will appear at exactly the right moment. It is impossible to satisfy everyone. As long as it is useful to some people, that is already enough."

Gao Yiye's eyes widened as realization dawned on her. "So that's how it works."

Liu Maopao quickly followed up, "Then shall we discuss the price?"

Gao Yiye hesitated again. "How should we charge for something like this?"

Liu Maopao thought for a moment, then said, "Sister Saintess, how about two hundred taels of silver for one full year of advertisements across all Gaojia News broadcasts?"

Gao Yiye gasped. "What? That much?"

The Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun laughed. "Liu Maopao, you little rascal. Trying to buy a whole year of Gaojia News advertising for such a small amount?"

Liu Maopao immediately cried out, "Wow, Dao Xuan Tianzun saw through me at once. Only Dao Xuan Tianzun truly understands!"

Li Daoxuan waved his hand. "Be honest and give a reasonable price. Do not take advantage of Yiye's unfamiliarity with business matters."

Liu Maopao straightened up and quickly said, "Then two hundred taels per month."

"What?" Gao Yiye stared at him. "How much did you just say?"

"Per month," Liu Maopao repeated.

Gao Yiye turned to the puppet in disbelief. "He raised the price ten times in an instant."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "Strictly speaking, it is twelve times."

Gao Yiye was completely stunned. "That much money? How many wool sweaters would he have to sell just to earn it back? Is it really reasonable to pay so much for only one month?"

Li Daoxuan replied calmly, "Actually, I think it is still too cheap. Gaojia News is broadcast to all major cities under Gao Family Village, and it is the program with the highest viewership. The price should be higher. However, since he was the first to come up with this idea, the money we are not charging him will count as his reward. Let us call it the Major Commercial Innovation Award."

With that, the matter was settled.

The students of the News Department immediately began working. They inserted the memory card Liu Maopao had brought into the tablet computers, extracted the advertisement footage, trimmed it to an appropriate length, and placed it before and after the Gaojia News broadcast.

That evening, in Xi'an, at Caisikou Market.

Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir, once again came out to watch Gaojia News.

After enjoying a leisurely trip through Nanjing, Zhu Cunji had returned feeling thoroughly transformed. He first ordered his body double to hide in the basement and avoid public appearances for several days, then personally drove his luxurious Kulinan carriage through the streets with his consort beside him, bold and unrestrained.

His horizons had broadened, his taste refined, and he had even seen the finest courtesans along the Qinhuai River.

He was no longer a country bumpkin.

He was once again the most eye catching figure on the street, strutting with confidence and satisfaction in every step.

At the street corner, he once again ran into Lian Guoshi, the Governor of Shaanxi.

Lian Guoshi cupped his hands politely. "Your Highness seems to be in excellent spirits today."

"Hmph," Zhu Cunji snorted. "I don't like you. Don't bother me."

After saying that, he felt extremely pleased with himself. At last, he could speak freely and indulge in his old arrogant habits again.

He strode to his exclusive viewing platform and sat down directly in front of the large screen, feeling utterly satisfied, except for one annoyance.

Lian Guoshi shamelessly brought his wife along and squeezed in beside him.

"This is my private viewing platform," Zhu Cunji said coldly. "How dare you freeload here every day?"

"There are empty seats," Lian Guoshi replied calmly. "An empty seat is still an empty seat. Besides, my wife and your consort can sit together and chat."

Zhu Cunji glanced over and saw that the two women were already deeply engrossed in conversation, discussing rouge and powder brands, jewelry shops, and which textile merchants sold the best fabrics.

The men were completely ignored.

"Hmph."

Zhu Cunji could only swallow his displeasure.

At that moment, Gaojia News began.

A staff member from Gao Family Village stepped forward and used an Iron Mountain Back technique to bump the tablet computer's power switch.

The screen lit up, and Chen Yuanyuan appeared.

"This wool sweater..."

Zhu Cunji was about to boast that he had bought her from Jiangnan when he suddenly remembered Lian Guoshi sitting beside him and hastily shut his mouth.

To his shock, both Lian Guoshi's wife and his own consort jumped up almost at the same time.

"This wool sweater!" they exclaimed together. "I want it!"

They immediately turned to their husbands. "Buy it for me."

Chapter 1008: High-End Private Customization

What kind of person was Zhu Cunji, really? He was the sort of man who had never learned the meaning of restraint when it came to money, especially where his wife was concerned. The moment she showed even the slightest interest, he did not hesitate in the least and waved his hand grandly, declaring with complete confidence, "Buy them. Buy all of them. One of every color."

His wife's eyes immediately lit up, her joy written plainly on her face.

Standing beside them, Madam Lian Guoshi quietly turned her gaze toward her husband. She did not say a single word, yet the meaning behind that glance was so clear that it left no room for misunderstanding. Whatever other women possessed, she absolutely could not be without.

Lian Guoshi felt a wave of helpless embarrassment rise in his chest, and after a brief inner struggle, he could only surrender. "Fine," he said with a sigh. "Buy them. We'll take one of every color as well."

Madam Lian Guoshi was instantly delighted.

With both women now in high spirits, the moment the news broadcast ended, the two households set off briskly toward the Xi'an branch of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory.

However, as soon as they reached the street corner where the shop was located, they sensed that something was very wrong. The entire road ahead was packed so tightly that it was impossible to see the ground, nothing but a dense sea of heads stretching forward.

The entrance to the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory was already completely surrounded by people. Those closest to the door were all stretching their arms forward, silver ingots clutched tightly in their hands as they shouted at the top of their lungs, "I want a yellow one!"

"I want a red one!"

"I want two!"

Inside the shop, a salesclerk with sweat pouring down his face raised his voice desperately. "Please don't rush. Line up properly. Everyone, line up!"

Both women sucked in a sharp breath of cold air at the sight. "It's this popular? We're too late. This is bad. We're really too late."

Given their noble status, there was no possibility that either of them could force their way through such a crowd. In the end, they had no choice but to send their maids and servants to join the line on their behalf.

Within the domain of Dao Xuan Tianzun, no one dared to rely on their background to bully others. Even servants from princely residences and governor's mansions behaved with extreme caution, terrified that the slightest misconduct might provoke the wrath of Dao Xuan Tianzun. As a result, they could only obediently queue up alongside common citizens like everyone else.

Thus, the already astonishingly long line continued to grow, snaking out from the shop entrance, around the street corner, turning into another road, and stretching on so far that its end could not be seen at all.

After an unknown amount of time had passed, just as the maids from both households were finally about to reach the storefront, a large banner was suddenly unfurled inside the shop.

"Out of Stock. Store Closed for Several Days. Please Await Restocking."

The maids from both families cried out in despair, "Aaaah!"

Behind them, the crowd that was still queuing let out a unified howl of anguish. "Aaaah!"

Those who had waited for half the day only to end up empty-handed instantly erupted in fury. The crowd surged forward, pounding violently on the shop doors until the entire street echoed with noise and chaos.

That very evening, several households belonging to high-ranking officials and nobles experienced sudden outbreaks of so-called domestic disputes. Wives who were usually gentle, virtuous, and obedient completely lost their composure, smashing flowerpots as they vented their anger.

"Even concubines in other households have those wool sweaters, yet I, the principal wife, have none. Am I really not even as good as a concubine now? How am I supposed to show my face in Xi'an? Wuwuwu, I can't go on living. I might as well hang myself."

What followed was the exhausted and panicked voice of the husband. "Stop making such a scene. What will the neighbors think? Give me a few days. I promise I will get them for you."

While wool sweaters were being snatched up like wildfire in Xi'an, a very different scene was unfolding in Luoyang, inside the Luoyang branch of the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory.

Prince Fu, Zhu Changxun, a man weighing a full three hundred catties, stood in the middle of the shop, staring blankly at the completely empty shelves with an expression of profound sorrow.

The shopkeeper approached him with a courteous smile. "Is there anything I can assist you with, Your Royal Highness Prince Fu?"

"Out of stock?" Zhu Changxun muttered resentfully. "My Princess Consort complained all night long and didn't let me sleep for a moment. My head feels like it's about to split open."

The shopkeeper spread his hands helplessly. "We truly are out of stock. All our goods are transported directly from Gao Family Village by large steam trains, and restocking only happens every few days. We really did not expect them to sell out this quickly, so the inventory was insufficient. Please be patient, Your Royal Highness, and wait a few more days."

Prince Fu looked utterly aggrieved. "Wait a few more days? One night was enough to nearly drive me insane. What am I supposed to do now?"

The shopkeeper laughed inwardly. Who told you to be so fat? Women stay with you for your wealth, not for your looks. If you were handsome, you could smooth things over with a few sweet words and a confident smile, even without a wool sweater.

Prince Fu continued, "And it's not just for my Princess Consort. I need one for myself as well. But with my build..."

At three hundred catties, Prince Fu was far beyond the standard sizes. Ordinary wool sweaters simply could not accommodate his frame.

The shopkeeper chuckled knowingly. "Your Royal Highness, your physique is no problem at all. I can arrange for the original factory to custom-make several wool sweaters specifically for you."

Prince Fu's eyes immediately lit up. "Excellent. Truly excellent."

In truth, Prince Fu had no shortage of servants capable of making wool sweaters. However, anything produced by his own household lacked one crucial detail. It did not carry the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory brand.

And without that brand, no matter how well-made the garment was, it was meaningless. Prestige was everything.

Prince Fu let out a sly laugh. "Shopkeeper, these custom-made sweaters should be unique, correct? No one else wearing the same pattern?"

"Of course," the shopkeeper replied smoothly. "All custom orders feature exclusive designs. How about this: I'll commission a skilled scholar to design a special pattern for you, incorporating the character 'Fu' to represent blessing and fortune. The meaning will be auspicious, and everyone will immediately recognize it as a Prince Fu exclusive. I guarantee you will be the only person in the entire world wearing such a design."

Prince Fu was overjoyed. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

The shopkeeper then lowered his voice slightly. "However, Your Royal Highness, such a bespoke design naturally comes with a price."

"I understand," Prince Fu said without hesitation. "Just tell me how much."

The shopkeeper raised five fingers.

"Fifty taels?" Prince Fu guessed.

"Five hundred taels for one," the shopkeeper corrected calmly.

Prince Fu froze on the spot.

Just as anger was about to erupt, the shopkeeper leaned closer and whispered, "When you wear this out, people will certainly ask about the price. If you name a low figure, would that truly reflect your status?"

Prince Fu paused, considering the words. He's right. If I say it only cost a few dozen taels, how would that distinguish me from ordinary people?

"Still, five hundred taels is too expensive," Prince Fu said reluctantly.

The shopkeeper smiled. "We are only quoting five hundred taels. We will give you a fifty percent discount, so you will actually pay two hundred and fifty taels per piece. However, when others ask, you can confidently say it cost five hundred taels. Our store will also publicly announce that Prince Fu commissioned high-end custom products priced at five hundred taels each. No one will know the real price."

Prince Fu's face broke into a broad grin. "Shopkeeper, you are truly brilliant."

"Our goal is to serve every customer well," the shopkeeper replied with a smile.

Prince Fu wasted no more words. He turned to Zheng Gonggong and ordered, "Pay. One of every color."

Zheng Gonggong produced a small box filled with gold and handed it over solemnly. "This is the payment for the custom wool sweaters. Please ensure everything is handled with the utmost care."

The shopkeeper accepted the box, his smile blooming like a flower.

Chapter 1009: The Great Wool Scramble

Guhuacheng, also known as Hohhot.

The leader of the Wushen Tribe sat upright at the head of the long table, his posture steady and imposing. Below him, arranged in two rows, were the leaders of various tribes from different regions, all gathered for this meeting. As they ate, they tore into roasted mutton legs with their bare hands, grease shining on their fingers as laughter and chatter filled the tent.

This gathering had originally been convened so that the tribal leaders could report on their recent affairs.

If every report were to be written out in full detail, it would easily fill a hundred million words, and so this book will mercifully omit that part.

Now that the reporting was over, the formalities were finished, and everyone was preparing to eat, drink, and then disperse.

As the meal went on, the atmosphere grew increasingly lively, with boasts, jokes, and mutual flattery being exchanged without restraint.

The leader of the Otok Tribe grinned broadly and spoke first. "Thanks to the guidance of the Wushen Tribe, all the wool and hides from my tribe were bought up by the Han people. The caravan sent by Young Leader Zhebu brought us vast amounts of tea, salt, and grain in exchange. This winter, my tribe truly lived in comfort."

The leader of the Hangjin Tribe nodded vigorously and followed up. "It was the same for us. Through Young Leader Zhebu's connections, our tribe also passed the winter smoothly. No one froze to death, and no one starved. His caravans even brought us iron woks, which have made cooking far more convenient than before."

The leader of the Urad Tribe stroked his beard and said thoughtfully, "In the past, the Han people strictly forbade us from acquiring weapons and were only willing to sell us a very limited number of iron woks. But now they are so generous. It seems they are no longer afraid that we might melt down the woks to forge swords and blades."

Before he could continue, the Otok Tribe leader burst out laughing and interrupted him. "That's nonsense. Haven't you seen how powerful the Han people are now? They no longer rely on swords and blades at all. They use flintlock rifles and those massive armored vehicles. Why would they fear us forging a few swords? Of course they no longer care about selling us iron woks."

Several of the tribal leaders nodded in agreement.

This was the truth.

In the past, iron woks had been a rare and precious form of hard currency on the steppes. Now, however, the Han people simply did not care anymore. As long as one could pay in wool, they could buy as many iron woks as they wanted, along with whatever else they desired.

Young Leader Zhebu acted as the intermediary, connecting the Han people and the Mongol tribes and turning trade between the two sides into a thriving, continuous exchange.

The tribal leaders could not help but sigh in admiration. "We owe a great deal to Young Leader Zhebu."

"To be so young and yet so capable, integrating with the Han people, opening factories among them, and earning their wealth. It is truly impressive."

Hearing this, the Wushen Tribe leader laughed heartily. "Zhebu is my most promising child. Once he has learned enough from the Han people, he will return and inherit my position. Speaking of which, my son mentioned that the wool sweaters produced by his factory have recently been selling far too well and are now in short supply. He urgently needs more wool."

At these words, the tribal leaders exchanged uneasy glances.

One of them spoke up cautiously. "The wool in our hands has already been collected and sent off. The next shearing season will not come until summer, which is still several months away."

The Wushen Tribe leader's expression darkened slightly. "How could it all be gone already? You must have been lazy and failed to raise enough sheep. From now on, you must raise more."

The tribal leaders immediately responded in unison. "Yes, Great Khan. Once we return, we will organize our herdsmen and instruct them to raise even more sheep."

The Wushen Tribe leader let out a long sigh. "Even so, far water cannot quench a nearby thirst. How long will it take for newly raised lambs to grow? My son needs a large quantity of wool right now."

The tribal leaders could only spread their hands helplessly.

It was only spring in the ninth year of Chongzhen, and summer was still far away. No one dared to shear sheep at this time, since doing so would certainly freeze them to death.

Just then, the leader of the Chahar Tribe suddenly raised his hand. "I may have a solution."

The tribal leaders immediately perked up. "Tell us."

The Chahar Tribe leader said calmly, "We may have no wool left, but the Mongol tribes conquered by the Jin still do. We can go and beat them, then seize their wool."

As soon as these words were spoken, excitement spread through the tent.

"That's right. The Khorchin Tribe is now allied with the Jin and has long been at odds with us. We can attack them."

"And the Hasum Tribe."

"The Unegud Tribe as well."

The tribal leaders silently calculated in their hearts and were surprised by what they realized. There were still many Mongol tribes under the influence of the Jin.

If they could thoroughly defeat these tribes and seize their wool, they could send it all to Zhebu and exchange it for useful Han goods.

The Wushen Tribe leader suddenly stood up. "Prepare for battle. We will go and give those eastern Mongol tribes a severe lesson."

"Great Khan," the Chahar Tribe leader quickly added, "we cannot openly declare that we are attacking them just to seize their wool. I suggest we ask Heavenly Khan E'zhe to issue a proclamation, stating that those tribes disrespect the descendants of Genghis Khan and disobey the directives of our Great Yuan court. That way, we will have a legitimate reason for war."

Naturally, this proposal was approved without the slightest hesitation.

A messenger was immediately dispatched to Gao Family Village, where he sought out Heavenly Khan E'zhe. However, E'zhe was still just a child and understood nothing about such matters. As a result, his sworn brother Liu Maopao guided him in composing a punitive proclamation, after which Gao Yiye was invited to bring out the Imperial Seal of the Great Yuan Dynasty and stamp it down firmly with a heavy thump.

The messenger clutched this so-called authorization for war and happily rode back to Guhuacheng.

And so, a so-called righteous war began.

On the surface, it was launched to uphold the dignity of the Yuan Dynasty's Heavenly Khan. In reality, it was nothing more than a scramble for wool.

Meanwhile, back in Gao Family Village.

Liu Maopao was delivering an impassioned speech at a shareholders' meeting.

He pointed directly at Zhebu and said, "Second Brother, you can't obtain any more wool from your side right now, can you?"

Zhebu shook his head. "We absolutely cannot shear sheep this year. We must wait until the weather becomes warmer."

Liu Maopao then turned his gaze to E'zhe. "Third Brother, what about you?"

E'zhe also shook his head. "The Chahar Tribe has no more wool either."

Liu Maopao sighed heavily. "As expected, relying solely on wool from the Mongol steppes is no longer enough. Our advertising has been far too effective. All branch stores are sold out, and the village's wool reserves are shrinking rapidly. If this continues, we will have no choice but to halt production."

"Halt production? That absolutely won't do," An Jile exclaimed anxiously. "If production stops, my female workers will lose their wages, and their lives will become difficult. Dao Xuan Tianzun would be angry with us for failing to care for our laborers."

An Jile had not known Chinese before, but by now her speech had grown increasingly fluent.

Liu Maopao said seriously, "Then we must find more wool suppliers."

E'zhe replied, "The major tribes have already formed a joint army and are preparing to attack the eastern tribes. They will bring back wool."

Liu Maopao immediately countered, "And if they fail? Do we shut down our factories and wait for them?"

For a moment, no one could answer.

Everyone felt a dull headache coming on.

Just then, Zhebu suddenly raised his hand. "I know a place that also has a large number of high-quality sheep."

Liu Maopao leaned forward. "Oh? Where?"

"Yinchuan," Zhebu replied.

Liu Maopao stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Yinchuan... that is Ming territory, if I remember correctly. Ah, yes. Uncle Shi Jian is currently serving as the Regional Commander of Yansui. If I seek his help, we should be able to establish contact with the people of Yinchuan and urgently acquire a batch of wool from there."

Liu Maopao was a man who acted the moment he had an idea. Without delay, he arranged for his subordinates to travel to the Yansui border garrison to seek out Shi Jian.

## Chapter 1010: The Arrears Begin Anew

Yinchuan had, since ancient times, been one of the Ming Dynasty's most critical frontier garrison towns.

On paper, the Ming court stationed more than thirty thousand border troops in this region. At a glance, that number sounded impressive, even reassuring, but in reality those soldiers were scattered across ten cities and over a hundred fortresses. Once divided up, each stronghold was left with only a few hundred men, barely enough to hold the walls, let alone project strength.

The Salt Lake region was the most famous part of Yinchuan, renowned for its vast pastures and for raising horses and sheep.

Within this region alone stood ten military fortresses, scattered like stars across the land, guarding an immense and desolate expanse.

The trade caravan dispatched by Liu Maopao finally arrived at Yinchuan's Salt Lake area, its carts coated in dust, its horses weary from the long journey.

Accompanying the caravan was a sightseeing Mass-Produced Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Everyone knew that Salt Lake tan sheep were a famous delicacy. The moment Li Daoxuan heard that Liu Maopao was sending a caravan to Yinchuan, he promptly invited himself along.

For the sake of tasting tan sheep, he did not use an embroidery avatar, nor a cloth doll, nor even a Puppet Dao Xuan Tianzun. Instead, he brought out a Mass-Produced Dao Xuan Tianzun, because only this form could actually eat.

Originally, the caravan was meant to be led by a steward Liu Maopao had hired at great expense, a man seasoned in trade and negotiation. However, once Li Daoxuan joined the group, command of the caravan naturally shifted entirely into his hands. The steward was reduced to little more than an errand runner and assistant. Far from feeling slighted, the man was secretly overjoyed. To be able to remain so close to Dao Xuan Tianzun for such a long journey, who could say whether he might one day be remembered in the divine heart?

"Dao Xuan Tianzun," the steward reported respectfully, "the military fortress ahead is Dingbian Fortress, the southeasternmost stronghold of Yinchuan."

After a brief pause, he added, "I just asked a local. There are four hundred border troops stationed there, and they are said to be... quite fierce."

Li Daoxuan nodded slightly. "Show them the written order Shi Jian obtained for us, and speak politely," he instructed. "Do not rely on our connection to Shi Jian to act arrogantly or disrespect the soldiers."

The steward nodded vigorously. "Understood. Your subordinate has also watched the film A Small Soldier of the Dalinghe Border Army and deeply understands that every frontier soldier deserves respect."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly. "It is good that you understand that."

The steward hurried off to make arrangements and returned not long after, grinning. "Everything has been settled."

The caravan continued forward and soon arrived beneath the walls of Dingbian Fortress.

The border troops had already verified the written order. Upon learning that the caravan was connected to Shi Jian, the Regional Commander of Yansui, they treated the group with noticeable respect.

In recent years, Shi Jian had vigorously pacified northern Shaanxi, suppressing bandits and engaging in repeated clashes with Mongol forces. His achievements had earned him the genuine respect of most frontier soldiers.

Thanks to him, Yinchuan had not suffered Mongol harassment for a long time, and the soldiers were deeply grateful. Naturally, they extended that goodwill to anyone associated with him.

The soldiers waved and smiled as the caravan passed through the gates.

Yet Li Daoxuan did not see joy in their expressions.

What he saw instead was exhaustion.

These border troops were thin and malnourished, their cheeks sunken, their bodies bony beneath their armor. Their equipment was worn and patched, their appearance wretched to the extreme.

Li Daoxuan frowned and turned to the commanding bazong. "Commander, it seems your supplies here are... rather insufficient."

The bazong looked embarrassed and let out a long sigh. "Alas. Our military pay has once again been in arrears for over a year."

In the early years of Chongzhen's reign, Lao Nanfeng and his branch of the border army had rebelled precisely because their military pay had been withheld for three years. Later, when Hong Chengchou assumed the post of Supreme Commander of the Three Borders, he had gone to great lengths to scrape together the back pay and pacify the troops.

Yet now, after several years of apparent calm, by the ninth year of Chongzhen's reign, military pay was once again being delayed.

Li Daoxuan frowned more deeply. "Lord Hong has no money to pay you?"

The bazong shook his head helplessly. "Lord Hong is doing everything he can, but even the cleverest man cannot conjure something from nothing. If the court does not allocate funds, where can he find the money to pay us?"

Li Daoxuan turned to the steward beside him. "Take some grain from our provisions. At the very least, make sure the soldiers in this fortress can eat one full meal."

The steward hesitated and whispered, "The grain we brought is meant for trading for wool. If we give it to the soldiers, we will have nothing left to trade."

Li Daoxuan furrowed his brow. In the next instant, his consciousness shifted back to Gao Family Village, appearing upon the embroidery on the chest of Second Steward Tan Liwen. Without wasting time, he gave his instructions. "Immediately organize a transport team and deliver a large batch of supplies, especially grain and cloth, to the Yinchuan border garrison. Allocate part of it to replenish the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory caravan using village treasury funds."

"As you command," Tan Liwen replied without hesitation.

Li Daoxuan shifted back again and said calmly to the steward, "Distribute the grain without concern. The missing supplies will soon arrive from the village treasury."

"As you command," the steward responded.

The caravan members moved at once, unloading sack after sack of grain from the carts and handing them over to the soldiers of Dingbian Fortress.

These border troops, whose pay had been withheld for over a year, had lived in misery, often going hungry and in extreme cases even selling their children to survive. Now, a caravan had suddenly arrived and delivered grain directly into their hands.

It was enough to move men to tears.

The news spread rapidly throughout the fortress.

Not only the soldiers on duty, but also those resting off duty rushed over as soon as they heard. Soon after, the soldiers' wives, children, and elderly parents followed, the crowd swelling as it surged toward Dingbian Fortress.

"A caravan has come!"

"They gave us grain!"

"Heaven above, what kind-hearted people!"

"I've never seen such good people in my life."

"I heard they're neighbors of General Shi Jian."

"So they're General Shi's people. No wonder they're so generous."

Below the fortress walls, cooking pots were set up everywhere, and the sound of boiling food soon filled the air.

Smiles finally appeared on the weary faces of the border troops.

Li Daoxuan, however, felt a deep unease settle in his heart.

The Ming court was truly incompetent. If funds were scarce, they could have delayed the salaries of high-ranking officials, but withholding the pay of frontier soldiers was tantamount to inviting catastrophe.

Alas.

He knew that such thinking was futile.

From ancient times onward, whenever the economy faltered, the imperial court never reduced the income of high officials. Instead, it squeezed even harder from the lower classes.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, a sudden commotion arose. From the northwest official road, a fast horse galloped into view. The rider was clearly carrying urgent news and knew he would be questioned at the fortress gate. To save time, he began shouting from afar.

"Urgent military intelligence! Dingbian Fortress, do not obstruct me! Urgent military intelligence! Seven border fortresses in Yinchuan have mutinied! The rebellious soldiers are attacking Ningxia Prefecture! Urgent military intelligence! Dingbian Fortress, do not obstruct me!"

With a shout like that, who would dare stop him?

The soldiers hurriedly pulled open the wooden gates, clearing a path.

The messenger spurred his horse and thundered through the fortress, vanishing into the distance in the blink of an eye.

The soldiers of Dingbian Fortress stood frozen, exchanging bewildered looks before turning toward their bazong.

The bazong himself stood stiffly for several breaths before finally letting out a heavy sigh. "A few days ago, Bazong Zhao from Dashapu Fortress secretly came to drink with me. As we drank, he cursed the court, complaining that his military pay had been withheld and that he could no longer endure it. I did not take it seriously at the time."

He paused, his expression bitter. "Now I understand. He was testing me. If I had joined him in cursing the court that day, he would have invited me to join the mutiny."