

Great Ming 1141

Chapter 1141 The New Order Here

Jiang Daliang stood atop the walls of Jiangbei City, his fingers wrapped tightly around the crude long spear that foreman Wang Wen had shoved into his hands days ago.

The wood was rough. Poorly balanced. The iron tip slightly crooked.

It suited the militia well.

He stared northward.

Chongqing was called Mountain City for a reason. Hills rose and fell endlessly in every direction. Looking north, there was not a single stretch of true flatland. One ridge blocked the next, slopes overlapping like waves turned to stone.

But Jiang Daliang did not need to see Longtou Mountain.

He knew it was there.

Only a few miles away.

And on that mountain, Er Zhi Hu and his rebel forces were stationed, waiting.

Waiting for the right moment.

Waiting for him.

He had already agreed to it. When the rebels attacked, he would find an opportunity to open the gates. That would be his task. Nothing more. Nothing less.

After that, his role would end.

He understood perfectly well how dangerous this was. Once the rebels poured in, they might decide an insider was no longer useful. A quick slash across the throat would silence loose ends. A corpse thrown into the river. Another nameless body drifting downstream.

But Jiang Daliang did not care.

If he died, he died.

As long as Wang Wen went down with him, that would be enough.

If he could drag that bloodsucking foreman into hell, then even death would count as a kind of victory.

Just as this grim determination settled in his chest, shouting erupted near the docks.

A familiar coworker rushed past him along the wall, breathing hard.

"A fleet has arrived! A large one. Looks like militia reinforcements from somewhere else. There must be a thousand of them!"

Jiang Daliang snorted quietly.

Reinforcements?

A thousand men?

What difference would that make?

Ten thousand rebels were waiting in the mountains. If he opened the gates, those rebels would flood in like a black tide and chop these newcomers into minced meat before sunset.

The worker elbowed him.

"Daliang, why are you just standing there? Come help unload goods at the South Gate. We can earn some money."

Jiang Daliang did not even turn his head.

"Help Wang Wen earn money? I am not going."

The worker lowered his voice conspiratorially.

"It is different this time. I heard the wages will be paid directly to us. No foreman taking it first."

That finally made Jiang Daliang blink.

"Directly? Wang Wen is not fighting over it?"

"Oh, he is fighting," the worker grinned. "They are arguing right now. Come see the excitement."

Interest replaced indifference.

Jiang Daliang tightened his grip on the spear, then headed down from the wall toward the South Gate docks.

When he arrived, the scene before him was tense enough to snap like a pulled bowstring.

Two groups faced each other across the dock.

On one side stood Wang Wen and his people.

Wang Wen's name sounded refined, scholarly even, as if he had been born to hold a brush rather than a cudgel. Reality disagreed. He stood at the front like a street tyrant, surrounded by house guards, bodyguards, and hired thugs. They formed a tight, intimidating cluster, clearly accustomed to backing their master with force.

On the other side stood the newly arrived militia.

At their head was Cheng Xu.

He wore a faint smile that did not quite reach his eyes.

The confrontation had already begun.

As soon as Cheng Xu's fleet docked, he had begun unloading supplies intended to aid the local commoners, just as he always did in newly arrived territories. Naturally, moving those goods required labor. Naturally, he intended to hire local dockworkers and pay them wages.

When he announced the pay rate, cheers erupted from the workers.

That was when Wang Wen arrived.

"All workers on this dock belong to my Wang family," he declared loudly. "All wages must be collected by my Wang family and then distributed by us."

The moment those words were spoken, Cheng Xu understood.

Unified collection. Unified distribution.

It sounded orderly.

In truth, it meant taking a cut.

At first, Cheng Xu had not been overly concerned. Taking a small percentage was common practice in many places. He had even considered letting it pass.

But as he reached for the silver to hand over, he noticed something.

One worker nearby looked troubled. Not merely cautious, but bitter.

Cheng Xu paused.

"What percentage do you take?" he asked calmly.

Wang Wen smiled thinly.

"Eighty percent."

The number hung in the air like a slap.

Cheng Xu physically recoiled. The silver he had begun to extend froze midair before he slowly drew it back.

"Eighty percent?" he repeated.

He had seen greedy men before.

But this was not greed.

This was stripping flesh from bone.

Without another word, he withdrew the silver completely.

"I will distribute the wages directly."

Wang Wen's expression darkened instantly.

An outsider.

Daring to challenge him.

On his own dock.

With a shout, Wang Wen's men surged forward, filling the space behind him in a display of strength.

Cheng Xu did not retreat.

With a sharp barked order, his own militia closed ranks behind him, boots thudding against wood and stone.

The dock fell silent except for the creak of ropes and distant river water.

Jiang Daliang watched, heart tightening.

It was not as if no one had challenged Wang Wen before. Outsiders occasionally arrived full of confidence.

Without exception, they disappeared within days.

Wang Wen had protection.

Official backing.

And more importantly, local bandits.

Two to three thousand men, entrenched at Tieshan Ping not far from Jiangbei. A formidable stronghold. Brutal men who killed without hesitation.

Those who offended Wang Wen often ended up floating in the river.

That was why Jiang Daliang had agreed to help Er Zhi Hu. The authorities could not eliminate Wang Wen's backing.

Perhaps the rebels could.

Wang Wen sneered.

"All hiring here must go through me. Break that rule, and do not blame me for being ruthless."

Cheng Xu's voice remained steady.

"These rules of yours. Did the government issue them? Or did you invent them yourself?"

Wang Wen lifted his chin.

"My fists issued them."

Cheng Xu's smile widened slightly.

"Interesting. If the largest fist makes the rules, then I suppose I am making the rules now."

He suddenly turned and projected his voice toward every dockworker present.

"From today onward, the rules here change. Anyone hiring dockworkers will pay them directly. Wang Wen will not interfere. This is the new order. If anyone objects, they may come find me."

Wang Wen exploded.

"You bastard!"

Cheng Xu did not miss a beat.

"You think only you can curse? I will curse your entire lineage, eighteen generations deep, without sparing a single infant."

Wang Wen roared.

"Men! Attack!"

Two house guards lunged forward first, fists swinging toward Cheng Xu's face.

Cheng Xu moved lightly, almost lazily. Both fists cut through empty air. In the same motion, he hooked a leg behind them. The two guards lost balance and crashed onto the dock with heavy thuds.

Before they could recover, Cheng Xu stomped down hard on each of their backs, leaving clear boot prints pressed into cloth and flesh.

"Rebellion!" Wang Wen shouted. "You dare strike my men on my own ground?"

Cheng Xu laughed.

"Rebellion? Are you the emperor here?"

"Kill him!" Wang Wen screamed. "Kill this bastard!"

House guards, bodyguards, hired thugs surged forward together.

Cheng Xu's militia did not hesitate. They met the charge head on with a unified roar.

The clash was immediate.

Fists, sticks, boots. Shouting. Splintering wood.

Within five minutes, the difference in quality was painfully obvious.

Cheng Xu's militia had been drilled for years. They trained in formation, in coordination, in controlled aggression. Wang Wen's men were a mob used to bullying unarmed workers, not disciplined fighters.

They were driven back step by step.

Blow by blow.

In the chaos, Cheng Xu advanced with surprising speed.

In a blink, he stood before Wang Wen.

His fist came forward like a battering ram.

The impact landed squarely on Wang Wen's face with a sickening crack.

Wang Wen's refined name did not protect his nose.

His features burst open in a spray of blood, his face collapsing into a swollen, blossoming mess as he toppled backward onto the dock.

And in that instant, something shifted on the docks of Jiangbei.

Not just a man falling.

But an order breaking.

Chapter 1142 The Local Ruffians

Jiang Daliang stood off to one side, watching as the Gao Family Village Militia methodically and thoroughly thrashed Wang Wen and his men.

He did not cheer.

He did not laugh aloud.

But inside, something that had been suppressed for years burst into bright, reckless joy.

For so long, Wang Wen had strutted across the docks like a petty king. His eighty percent cut had crushed countless families. His men swaggered, shoved, cursed, beat people over small disputes.

And now he was the one being beaten.

Soon Wang Wen's sharp, panicked voice tore through the dock.

"Where is the militia? Come help! Get rid of these bastards!"

At that shout, Jiang Daliang instinctively turned his face away.

On the city wall, the hired militiamen who had been conscripted by Wang Wen all pretended not to hear.

Those who were less skilled at pretending simply fled in the opposite direction, shouting loudly as they ran, "The rebels might attack at any moment. We must guard the North Gate!"

Wang Wen's face twisted in rage.

"Fine. Fine. You want to play it like this? Just you wait. All of you. Just you wait!"

Clutching his bleeding nose, he staggered away, then broke into a run, disappearing down the street like a dog kicked out of its own yard.

Cheng Xu watched him go.

He lifted a hand and extended a single finger toward Wang Wen's retreating back, then turned cheerfully to the dockworkers.

"Everyone, come move the cargo. You will receive your wages directly from me. That Wang fellow is finished here."

The dockworkers erupted into delighted cries.

"Coming!"

"Right away!"

Even Jiang Daliang dropped his spear. The other workers followed suit, abandoning their pikes and rushing toward the ships.

This time, when they worked, their movements felt different.

There was no heaviness in their shoulders.

There was no bitterness tightening their jaws.

They carried sacks of grain, crates of goods, baskets of supplies.

And when they finished each load, they were paid in full.

No eighty percent cut.

No deductions.

No excuses.

When Jiang Daliang received his silver, he stared at it for a long moment.

This was the first time in his life, from childhood until now, that he had ever received his full wage.

For some reason, the river seemed brighter.

The wind felt cleaner.

Even Jiangbei City behind him no longer looked like a cage.

After hesitating for a while, he quietly approached Cheng Xu.

"Instructor... I have something to tell you."

Cheng Xu raised an eyebrow.

Jiang Daliang lowered his voice.

"This Wang fellow has connections. With officials. He has people backing him."

Cheng Xu smiled calmly.

"What a coincidence. We also have people backing us. And ours are stronger. Even the Prefect of Chongqing speaks to us politely. We are not concerned about Wang Wen."

Relief flashed across Jiang Daliang's face, but it did not last.

"There is more," he whispered. "Wang Wen also has the local ruffians at Tieshan Ping supporting him."

"Local ruffians?" Cheng Xu frowned. "What are those?"

Jiang Daliang explained quickly.

"They are local bandits. Ruthless. Cruel. Anyone who offends Wang Wen ends up dead. Their bodies are thrown into the river. You must be careful."

Cheng Xu's expression grew serious.

"So that is how it is."

Seeing that look, Jiang Daliang assumed he had finally frightened him.

"Perhaps you should withdraw for now," he suggested softly.

Cheng Xu blinked at him.

"You misunderstand. I am not afraid."

Jiang Daliang stared.

Cheng Xu sighed lightly.

"I am only regretting that I did not kill him just now. I merely punched him. That was too merciful."

Jiang Daliang inhaled sharply.

Cheng Xu gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Thank you for the warning. Stay out of trouble for now. Once I deal with Wang Wen and these local ruffians, I will ensure the dockworkers receive proper justice."

Jiang Daliang walked away in a daze.

Where did this man's confidence come from?

Outsiders always underestimated local power.

Always.

They thought discipline alone was enough.

They did not understand how deeply rooted local tyrants could be.

He could only sigh and return to the city wall, picking up his spear once more.

But as he stood there, he could not help observing the newcomers carefully.

The Gao Family Village Militia set up tents neatly in an open area within the city. They did not seize houses. They did not displace residents.

They brought their own provisions. They did not extort food from the gentry. They did not pressure wealthy households for "donations."

When they purchased goods in the market, they paid properly. Every coin accounted for.

They did not swagger.

They did not shout at commoners.

Even some of Jiang Daliang's own militia comrades occasionally took food without paying, believing their status entitled them.

But these outsiders did not.

The masked instructor at their head was clearly a figure of importance. He had dared strike Wang Wen openly.

Yet he did not strut about as if he owned the city.

He smiled.

He spoke politely.

He moved among the people and asked about their lives.

When he saw impoverished families without food, he arranged for congee to be distributed on the streets.

Suddenly, the poorest residents of Jiangbei had something warm in their bowls.

Jiang Daliang's mind wavered.

Could there truly be good men among the powerful?

After all this...

Should he still open the gates for the rebels?

If the rebels came, they would not distinguish between tyrants and decent men.

They would slaughter.

And that masked instructor would likely be among the dead.

Jiang Daliang felt something unfamiliar twisting in his chest.

Hesitation.

Tieshan Ping was once the site of Shu's military barracks during the Three Kingdoms era.

Tieshan Ping guarded the river approach to Chongqing. Any warship coming from downstream had to pass this stretch before reaching Chaotianmen.

It was a place of immense strategic value.

During the Three Kingdoms era, the Shu Kingdom had constructed a large barracks here. In another lifetime, Li Daoxuan had visited this site as a tourist, where a towering statue of Zhao Yun stood proudly against the sky.

Now, however, the barracks housed something far less heroic.

Two thousand five hundred local ruffians.

These men had once survived by robbing passing merchants. But as chaos spread and trade dwindled, they turned inward.

If merchants no longer came, they would rob their own people.

They plundered villages.

They extorted travelers.

They killed without hesitation.

Their cruelty rivaled that of roving bandits.

Such men, so vicious toward their own region, were rare even in troubled times.

Inside the main hall of the barracks, Wang Wen stood clutching his swollen face, weeping theatrically.

"Brother Ma, I was beaten."

The leader of the local ruffians was Ma Qiang.

He was not tall, barely reaching one meter sixty five. But his presence was heavy. His eyes were sharp. His expression permanently fierce.

"Who dared hit you?" Ma Qiang growled. "Do they not know you are under my protection?"

Wang Wen sniffed loudly.

"A group of outsiders. They claim to be a militia from Shaanxi. About a thousand men. They say they came to suppress bandits in Sichuan."

Ma Qiang let out a cold laugh.

"A Shaanxi militia? Coming to Chongqing to throw their weight around? Who gave them such courage?"

Wang Wen pressed further.

"He not only beat me. He changed the rules at the dock. Silver no longer passes through my hands. And you have a share in that silver, Brother Ma. You must intervene."

Ma Qiang's eyes narrowed.

"Hmph. Even if you had not mentioned it, I would intervene. Acting like a boss on my territory? He does not know his place."

He barked an order.

"Send men to scout Jiangbei City. Learn everything about these Shaanxi people."

But before his command could fully settle in the air, a subordinate rushed in from outside, face pale.

Ma Qiang smirked.

"You returned quickly."

The subordinate swallowed.

"Big Brother... it is bad."

Ma Qiang's smile faded.

"What is it?"

"The militia has already attacked the foot of Tieshan Ping."

"They say they are here to wipe us out."

Chapter 1143 Firepower Saturation

Ma Qiang almost dropped his teacup.

"What did you just say? The militia is attacking Tieshan Ping? They made the first move?"

His subordinate nodded quickly. "Yes, Boss. Strong Shaanxi accent. It has to be those newcomers."

Wang Wen sucked in a breath. "Ah. Them. The new arrivals."

Ma Qiang did not flare up. He did not rage.

Instead, he laughed.

"I was just about to go find them. And they've delivered themselves to my doorstep? Excellent. That saves me the trouble."

He slapped his thigh and stood. "Come on. Let's greet our guests."

The bandits swaggered toward the edge of the fortress.

This was no ordinary stronghold. It had once been a military encampment during the era of the Three Kingdoms, when the land was carved into rival states and generals thought three steps ahead of destiny. The men of Shu had chosen this place carefully. Their kingdom was long gone, but their strategic foresight still clung to the soil like old blood in stone.

Tieshan Ping crowned the highest ridge of the cliffs, overlooking the vast flow of the Yangtze River as it rushed southward, slicing through Tongluo Gorge on its long journey toward the eastern sea. To the northeast and west, steep slopes dropped sharply, treacherous and difficult to climb. Easy to defend. Miserable to assault.

The Shu strategists had understood terrain the way poets understood rhythm.

Now that wisdom belonged to bandits.

Ma Qiang stepped to the cliff's edge and narrowed his eyes. Below, a militia force had indeed gathered at the foot of the mountain. Not many. Roughly a thousand men.

Two thousand five hundred bandits on the summit.

One thousand attackers below.

It was not a battle. It was arithmetic.

Ma Qiang burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! What exactly are they relying on? Courage? Luck?"

He raised his arm. "Prepare for counterattack. If they climb, we smash them back down. If they don't, we charge downhill and butcher them to the last man."

The bandits roared with approval.

Wang Wen laughed the loudest of all.

They felt like tigers on a cliff edge.

Unfortunately for them, tigers from ancient times had never seen modern artillery.

At the base of the mountain, Cheng Xu stood with a topographical map spread before him. Reconnaissance hot air balloons had already completed a thorough survey of the area and delivered precise charts into his hands.

He studied the map from multiple angles, turning it slowly, then shook his head.

"This mountain is dangerous," he muttered. "The old Shu encampment already occupies the highest point. Those bandits don't even need brains. Sitting inside the former Shu barracks automatically grants them optimal defensive positioning."

He sighed softly.

"The brilliance of Shu strategists is now being exploited by thugs. What a waste."

He looked up toward the summit.

"A direct assault would carry at least a fifty percent chance of meeting our great-grandmothers."

Cheng Xu did not believe in heroics built on probability.

Fifty percent was unacceptable.

Even one percent was too high.

He only displayed bravery when victory was already certain.

After a long moment of contemplation, fingers stroking his chin, he issued his order.

"No direct assault."

The company commander beside him blinked. "Then what?"

Cheng Xu turned and looked at him with faint amusement. "'Then what'? Have you forgotten which regiment we are?"

The commander straightened and saluted sharply. "Gao Family Village First Regiment!"

Cheng Xu nodded. "Number One. And what does that mean?"

"We enlisted first. We trained hardest. We have the finest equipment."

A slow grin spread across Cheng Xu's face. "Exactly. Equipment."

He gestured forward. "Bring out everything."

The commander saluted again. "Understood."

He spun around and barked orders. "Gao Family Village First Regiment, First Artillery Battalion, attention!"

The elite gunners stepped forward, eyes already shining with anticipation.

Along the base of Tieshan Ping, they deployed rows upon rows of small short-barreled cannons. Each barrel was no thicker than a man's arm, light enough to be carried by a single soldier, yet capable of extraordinary range.

Yes. Precisely what you are imagining.

Cheng Xu raised his hand and roared, "Blast them."

The artillery battalion commander hesitated only long enough to grin. "Instructor He, we are thrilled. But if we unleash everything like this, the shells will disappear quickly. Won't our First Regiment look extravagant?"

Cheng Xu snorted. "Have you forgotten Dao Xuan Tianzun's temperament? If spending ammunition reduces casualties among our own people, no price is too high. But if you try to save money and even one of our soldiers gets scratched, Dao Xuan Tianzun will be displeased for quite some time."

That settled it.

Everyone from Gao Family Village understood one principle clearly: Dao Xuan Tianzun valued human life far above material expense.

In that case, there was nothing left to debate.

"Open fire!"

"Open fire!"

In the next instant, the mountain shook.

A synchronized roar erupted as dozens upon dozens of short barrels spat flame. From below, a torrent of shells screamed upward toward the summit.

On the mountaintop, Ma Qiang and his men were still peering downward in mild curiosity. They noticed the enemy fiddling with iron tubes, but no one seemed to be climbing.

Then the thunder began.

A collective confusion appeared on every face.

A heartbeat later, the shells arrived.

Boom.

Several bandits screamed and collapsed before anyone understood what had happened.

Boom. Boom boom boom.

White smoke blossomed across the Shu encampment as shells rained down in relentless succession, as if ammunition were free and the heavens themselves were angry.

An ancient earthen watchtower, a relic of the Han dynasty, shattered and collapsed in a cloud of dust.

A long stretch of fortress wall from the same era crumbled like dried bread.

The crude wooden shacks and thatched huts the bandits had built for themselves fared far worse. Splinters exploded outward. Straw scattered into the air. Within moments, the entire mountaintop resembled an apocalypse.

Men were struck by shrapnel and thrown to the ground, some never rising again.

Ma Qiang and Wang Wen flattened themselves against the dirt, clutching their heads, trembling.

Unlucky.

And yet, strangely fortunate.

For they had become among the first people in this world to personally experience what would later be known as firepower saturation.

A historical honor, if one insisted on calling it that.

In future years, had they survived with sufficient shamelessness, they might even boast, "Brother, do you know what firepower saturation feels like? I do. I was there."

The bombardment continued for what felt like an eternity.

When at last the thunder faded, Ma Qiang realized he was buried beneath a thick layer of sand and dust. He rolled over and forced himself upright.

The fortress he had managed for years was gone.

Not damaged.

Gone.

Flattened.

Reduced to debris.

He nudged Wang Wen beside him. Wang Wen coughed, spat dirt, and sat up as well, earth cascading from his shoulders.

"Is it... over?" Wang Wen's voice shook. "What kind of demonic cannons are those? How can they fire from the foot of the mountain and still explode up here?"

Ma Qiang's lips trembled. "It's finished. All of it."

He raised his voice hoarsely. "How many brothers are still alive?"

"Boss... I'm... alive..."

A figure crawled out from beneath broken beams.

Then another.

And another.

One by one, men emerged from rubble, shattered walls, collapsed pits. Fewer had died than he feared. Perhaps two thousand remained.

But survival did not mean courage.

The bombardment had crushed something far more important than buildings.

It had shattered their will.

A subordinate with hollow eyes pointed downhill. "Boss... they're starting to climb. What do we do? Counterattack?"

And for the first time since seizing Tieshan Ping, Ma Qiang hesitated.

Chapter 1144 The Ascent

After several full rounds of shelling, Cheng Xu slowly tilted his head back and looked toward the summit of Tieshan Ping.

White smoke rolled and twisted around the peak. Sand and ash swirled in the air, turning the entire mountaintop into a blurred silhouette. Visibility had dropped to almost nothing.

He narrowed his eyes and nodded with satisfaction.

Good.

His great-grandmother's shadow was nowhere to be seen.

Only when the danger could no longer be imagined did Cheng Xu raise his hand and give the order.

"Ascend the mountain."

With no spectral ancestor waiting at the top, Cheng Xu became extraordinarily brave. He was the first to charge up the slope, boots digging into the loose earth.

Behind him, the First Regiment surged forward. Flintlock rifles fitted with bayonets glinted under the smoky light as the soldiers rushed uphill in tight formation.

As they climbed, whispers spread among the ranks.

"General He is truly General He."

"Worthy of being one of the Three Heroes of Liaodong."

"Always the first to charge."

"Exactly."

"If even the general dares to go first, how can we, mere foot soldiers, hesitate?"

"Brothers, charge!"

"We cannot let General He risk his life alone!"

"I'll take a bullet for General He!"

"You fool. Where would these savages get flintlocks? Say you'll take arrows for him."

The correction spread instantly.

"I'll take an arrow for General He!"

Voices merged into a unified roar. The soldiers accelerated, scrambling up the mountain like a breaking flood. Many of them even overtook Cheng Xu, climbing with both hands and feet, racing ahead in raw enthusiasm.

Cheng Xu blinked as men streamed past him.

"What's gotten into them?" he muttered. "Gao Family Village does not reward reckless scrambling. Running faster won't earn you extra spoils."

But the men ignored him. Morale had ignited. Discipline and fervor fused into something frighteningly efficient.

Up on the shattered summit, the bandits were in no state to resist. After the relentless bombardment, very few retained a clear mind. With a chaotic shout, they abandoned their positions and fled down whichever slope lay closest.

Some ran north.

Some ran west.

A few, in blind panic, chose the southern path.

That direction led to a sheer cliff overlooking the roaring waters of the Yangtze River.

One unfortunate soul slipped.

His scream cut sharply through the smoky air as he tumbled over the precipice, disappearing into the gorge below.

This stretch of river was infamous for violent currents and jagged reefs. A fall here was not the sort of legendary plunge where heroes miraculously survive.

The man struck a rock mid-descent.

The sound was brief and final.

Blood sprayed across stone.

The river swallowed the rest.

Ma Qiang and Wang Wen, swallowed by the fleeing mass, ran toward the northern slope. Behind them came the crisp, relentless crack of gunfire.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

From time to time, a body collapsed mid-stride.

Some bandits lost even the will to flee. They crouched by the roadside, clutching their heads and shouting surrender.

They had fully expected to be cut down anyway.

Instead, something stranger happened.

The pursuers did not execute those who surrendered.

Anyone who dropped their weapon and stopped running was ignored.

That realization spread quickly.

In clusters, men squatted and covered their heads, choosing life over pride.

Behind Ma Qiang and Wang Wen, their numbers shrank steadily.

Some had fallen.

Some had leapt to their deaths.

Some had simply chosen to live.

The two men scrambled down Tieshan Ping and crossed a narrow mountain gully. On the opposite side rose another peak.

Yufeng Mountain.

In desperation, they began climbing again.

The first descent had already drained them. They had slid, rolled, clawed, stumbled. Muscles burned. Lungs felt like torn bellows.

And now they were attempting another ascent.

Halfway up, their strength gave out.

Wang Wen's foot slipped.

He tumbled downward, striking rock after rock, scraping skin and cloth alike. By the time he rolled to a stop at the foot of the slope, his body was a mass of bruises and torn flesh.

Before he could rise, a heavy boot pressed onto his chest.

He looked up.

It was Jiang Daliang, the dockworker.

For a moment, Wang Wen felt overwhelming relief.

"Daliang. Help me. Carry me away. I'll pay you. Ten taels of silver. Twenty. Whatever you want."

Jiang Daliang spat to the side.

"Did you ever wonder how those Shaanxi newcomers found Tieshan Ping? Or why I happen to be here?"

Wang Wen's eyes widened.

"You... you led them."

Jiang Daliang's smile was dark.

"Correct."

He lifted his thick carrying pole.

"And this is your reward."

The pole came down with a cracking impact.

Once.

That was enough.

Elsewhere on Yufeng Mountain, Ma Qiang staggered higher until he could climb no more. His legs trembled. His breath rasped in his throat.

He turned his head.

And froze.

The First Regiment was still coming.

Not slowing.

Not stumbling.

Closing in.

Ma Qiang cursed hoarsely. "What do these Shaanxi people eat? Why is their stamina endless? I grew up in Sichuan. I should be better at climbing mountains than them."

He did not know who he was facing.

This was the elite First Regiment of Gao Family Village.

Since the seventh year of Tianqi, they had lived under the protection of Dao Xuan Tianzun. They had eaten well for ten straight years. Slept well. Trained relentlessly every single day.

Two connected peaks like Tieshan Ping and Yufeng Mountain were an ordeal for ordinary militias.

For the First Regiment, it was little more than uneven ground.

One vanguard soldier leapt up the slope with shocking speed. He reached a cliff face twice his height, sprang upward, toes striking rock twice in rapid succession, and pulled himself cleanly over the top.

He moved like a mountain ape.

A gap nearly ten feet wide lay before him.

He cleared it in a single bound.

Thorns and brush snagged at his clothes. He vaulted through them without slowing.

Ma Qiang watched in horror as the man drew nearer.

"This... this isn't human," he gasped. "What kind of monsters are you?"

The vanguard soldier grinned.

"Run, savage chief. Keep running. Do you think you can escape? My first-class merit will not vanish because of you."

Driven by desperation, Ma Qiang drew his great saber and roared.

"Then I'll fight you to the death!"

He slashed forward with all his remaining strength.

The soldier's expression did not change.

"That's it?"

With a slight shift of his torso, he avoided the blade entirely. In the same breath, he stepped inside Ma Qiang's guard and executed the Ghost-God Fist technique taught within Gao Family Village, a brutal close-combat method refined from older cliff-carved martial diagrams.

There was a sharp crack.

Ma Qiang's wrist snapped.

He screamed.

The scream ended abruptly as the soldier seized his throat and twisted.

Silence followed.

The battle ended not with a clash of armies, but with a twist of bone.

That evening, the heads of Ma Qiang and Wang Wen hung from the south gate of Jiangbei City, facing the restless waters of the Yangtze River.

Every dockworker who passed spat in contempt.

Every laborer who had once trembled under bandit extortion paused to look.

Crowds gathered around Cheng Xu, bowing repeatedly.

"Instructor He, thank you."

"These savages ran rampant for years. The officials did nothing."

"It is all thanks to you."

Cheng Xu waved modestly.

Behind him stood soldiers who had climbed two mountains without complaint.

A dockworker approached quietly.

Jiang Daliang lowered his voice.

"Instructor He, I have more intelligence. Not far northwest from here lies a place called Dragon Head Temple. Ten thousand bandits are stationed there. Their leader is Er Zhi Hu."

He paused.

"They are planning to attack Chongqing City."

The smoke of one battlefield had barely cleared.

Another was already rising.

Chapter 1145 The New Coastal Commander

Jiang Daliang recounted everything in painstaking detail.

How the rebels had secretly contacted him.

How they promised silver.

How they asked him to open the city gates from the inside when the time came.

Cheng Xu listened without interruption, fingers loosely clasped behind his back.

When Jiang Daliang finished, Cheng Xu let out a faint chuckle.

"So, you. A local dockworker. You actually considered becoming an inside agent for the rebels."

Jiang Daliang lowered his head, ears red. "I only wanted to lure them in so I could kill Wang Wen."

Cheng Xu sighed softly.

"I understand why you thought that way. When the weak want revenge against the strong, gambling everything feels like the only option."

He looked toward the city walls of Chongqing.

"But you must also think about the ordinary people inside these walls. Luring rebels into the city might kill Wang Wen. It would also kill countless innocents. Sacrificing an entire city just to eliminate one man is fundamentally wrong."

Jiang Daliang's voice turned hoarse. "I know. I've been tormented by it. But when I saw you, Instructor He... I realized I couldn't go through with it."

Cheng Xu nodded.

"It is never too late to step back from the edge. The fact that you came to confess means you are already forgiven."

He waved a hand.

"Go. Return to your work."

Jiang Daliang blinked in surprise. "Instructor He, you are not going to have me continue contacting the rebels? Pretend to open the gates? Lure them into an ambush?"

Cheng Xu laughed lightly.

"We do not stoop to such dishonorable methods, especially when they would place you in grave danger."

"I am not afraid to die," Jiang Daliang said firmly.

Cheng Xu shook his head.

"Whether you fear death or not is irrelevant. You are a civilian. We are soldiers. Dao Xuan Tianzun has said that soldiers exist so civilians may live in peace and stability. How could we push civilians to the front line to perform dangerous work for us?"

The words struck Jiang Daliang like a hammer.

For a moment he could not speak.

Then he suddenly dropped to his knees.

"Then let me join the army. I want to be a soldier. If I am a soldier, then I can take on dangerous tasks."

Cheng Xu smiled faintly.

"Even as a soldier, you would not be assigned that job."

He glanced toward Tieshan Ping.

"With the scale of bombardment we just conducted, do you think rebel scouts are blind? They have likely fled long ago. If you go to Dragon Head Temple now, you will probably find nothing."

Jiang Daliang stared at him, then abruptly rushed out of the city.

He ran northwest toward Longtou Temple.

When he arrived, the temple grounds were eerily silent. The so-called ten thousand rebel troops had vanished without a trace.

Only three corpses remained.

An old monk.

Two young novices.

The rebels had fled.

When Jiang Daliang returned to Jiangbei City, he knelt before Cheng Xu again, guilt written plainly on his face.

"It is my fault. If I had informed you earlier about the rebels here, you would not have attacked the local strongmen first. You would not have alarmed the rebels and allowed them to escape."

Cheng Xu shook his head.

"You are not to blame. Those local tyrants had to be dealt with regardless. Eliminating them established our foothold in Chongqing. With cooperation from Chengdu, the rebels will eventually have nowhere to run."

He was not boasting.

Chongqing's strategic value could not be overstated.

All goods traveling upstream along the Yangtze River converged at Chaotianmen Pier. From there, smaller vessels could distribute supplies deep into Sichuan through both the Yangtze and the Jialing River network.

With Chongqing secured, Gao Family Village's logistical reach extended across nearly half of Sichuan.

The board had been set.

Now the capital would make its own move.

In the imperial capital, morning court convened.

Seated upon the dragon throne was Chongzhen Emperor, personal name Zhu Youjian.

Today, an unfamiliar expression brightened his face.

Joy.

His back was straight, his eyes sharp. A sense of renewed vitality emanated from him.

Moments earlier, news had arrived of a major victory at Pi Island.

The entire court, civil and military alike, buzzed with excitement.

Nearly ten thousand Manchu troops slain.

Their naval maneuver thwarted.

A firm foothold secured behind enemy lines.

Strategically significant.

Psychologically uplifting.

Zhu Youjian struck the armrest of his throne and laughed.

"I am told that the greatest merit in this victory belongs to Cao Wenzhao. He predicted the Manchus' flanking maneuver and spent a fortune to hire pirates, ambushing their fleet at sea. That is how this triumph was achieved. Minister Cao truly lives up to his reputation as one of our dynasty's foremost generals."

With the emperor praising him, the officials eagerly followed.

"General Cao's command is brilliant."

"Only he could have devised such strategy."

"To hire pirates and turn them against the enemy, truly ingenious."

"Our eyes have been opened."

Zhu Youjian raised his hand.

"What should be our next course regarding Pi Island?"

Several officials who had quietly aligned themselves with Gao Family Village's influence stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, since General Cao has proven so capable, why not have him remain to garrison Pi Island?"

The emperor frowned slightly.

"The situation on Pi Island has always been complex. Internal conflicts are many. The current commander, Shen Shikui, is not easily displaced. If we order Cao Wenzhao to seize his authority, would that not risk internal strife?"

The official bowed.

"Shen Shikui is flawed, yet loyal and courageous. There is no need to remove him. Let him remain Commander-in-Chief of the Dongjiang Garrison."

He lifted his head.

"As for Cao Wenzhao, grant him a different official post so he may legitimately remain."

Zhu Youjian narrowed his eyes.

"What post?"

"The position of Coastal Commander is vacant. Chen Hongfan deserted during the relief mission to Pi Island and was intercepted and killed by Qing forces during his escape. The office stands empty."

At once, several others chimed in.

"Precisely."

"General Cao is perfect for Coastal Commander."

Zhu Youjian considered.

"The Coastal Commander requires ships. Does Cao Wenzhao possess any?"

An official smiled slightly.

"Does he not command a pirate fleet? Since these pirates were hired to fight the Manchus, they may also be recruited into official service. Consider the great pirate Zheng Zhilong in the southeast. He now serves as a naval commander for the Great Ming."

"If Your Majesty grants Cao Wenzhao authority, he may incorporate these pirates into the imperial structure. We gain a fleet at no cost."

The phrase lingered in the air.

No cost.

Zhu Youjian's eyes lit up.

Free.

Free was good.

A naval fleet, acquired without draining the treasury.

He struck the throne decisively.

"Very well. Shen Shikui shall remain Commander-in-Chief of the Dongjiang Garrison."

"We appoint Cao Wenzhao as Coastal Commander, responsible for maritime security and support of Dongjiang."

He paused briefly, calculating.

"Cao Wenzhao is authorized to pacify and recruit pirates into imperial service. He may grant any official rank below that of Guerrilla General at his discretion."

The court bowed in unison.

And thus, with a few words spoken beneath a gilded ceiling, the sea itself began to change hands.

Chapter 1146 The Exploitation of the Works of Nature Officially Published

May, the tenth year of Chongzhen.

Gao Family Village. The main village. The Gao Family Village Bookstore.

Song Yingxing stood in front of a tall bookshelf, both hands clasped behind his back, trying very hard to look calm and dignified. In reality, his fingers were trembling.

On the shelf before him sat a neat row of newly printed books.

The Exploitation of the Works of Nature.

The cover was thick, sturdy, beautifully printed. The ink was rich and dark. And right there on the front, bold and unmistakable:

Written by Song Yingxing.

He stared at his own name for a long time.

For a scholar, for an author, for a man who had poured years of sweat, ink, and sleepless nights into paper, there was no sweeter sight than seeing his own work bound and printed properly. Not copied by hand. Not passed around in scraps. Printed. Distributed. Real.

His chest swelled.

This book was not something dashed off in idle hours. It was the result of years of observation, of travel, of questioning craftsmen, of studying tools, furnaces, looms, mills, presses, engines. Every ingenious device he had ever seen, every practical innovation that had improved people's lives, he had recorded it all carefully.

He had revised it again and again. Polished descriptions. Corrected diagrams. Argued with himself over terminology.

It had not been easy.

Not easy at all.

But now that it was here, a new fear crept in.

Would anyone buy it?

Song Yingxing slowly retreated to a corner of the bookstore, ordered a cup of tea, and picked up a random book to half cover his face. Through a narrow gap between the pages, he began observing the entrance like a spy on a battlefield.

Every customer who walked in made his heart jump.

Soon, two men entered.

Their clothes were simple, rough fabric, patched at the elbows. Laborers, without question.

Song Yingxing's eyes sharpened. He followed their movements as they approached the shelves. One of them stopped right in front of his book.

He picked up *The Exploitation of the Works of Nature*.

Song Yingxing nearly stopped breathing.

The man flipped through a few pages.

Buy it. Buy it. Buy it.

The worker frowned slightly, scratched his head, then slowly placed the book back.

Song Yingxing felt something inside him crack.

The man turned to another shelf and pulled out a different book.

Continent of War Gods, written by Gao Sanwa.

He grinned. "This looks fun."

They went to the counter. Paid. Left.

Song Yingxing clutched his chest.

"Ah," he groaned softly. "I have been defeated by Gao Sanwa."

He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe.

It is fine. It is fine. They are laborers. Perhaps they do not enjoy technical writing. Comic books are lighter reading. That is understandable. Completely understandable.

He repeated this several times until he almost believed it.

Then two more men entered.

These two wore scholar's robes. Clean. Proper. Ink stains on the sleeves. They carried themselves like minor administrators from the Gao Family Village Council.

Song Yingxing straightened.

"These two," he whispered to himself, "will understand quality."

The scholars walked directly to the same shelf.

They picked up *The Exploitation of the Works of Nature*.

They flipped through it carefully.

One of them chuckled. "This is quite interesting."

Interesting?

Song Yingxing's heart pounded so loudly he was certain it could be heard across the shop.

Yes. Interesting. Buy it. Take it home. Study it thoroughly.

The two scholars nodded at each other.

Then they put the book back.

Song Yingxing froze.

The scholars moved to another section and selected a different title.

How to Handle Public Relations, by San Shier.

They carried it to the counter, paid calmly, and left.

Song Yingxing lowered his head slowly.

"Ah," he muttered in despair. "Defeated by San Shier as well."

He took a long sip of tea that tasted like bitterness itself.

Moments later, another customer entered.

This one wore a Blue Hat.

A senior technical engineer.

Song Yingxing's eyes lit up again.

A Blue Hat. Surely a man of engineering would appreciate a comprehensive scientific compendium.

The Blue Hat did not even glance at Song Yingxing's shelf.

He walked straight to the miscellaneous non fiction section.

He picked up a book titled Earn Your First Hundred Thousand Taels, written by Wu Shen.

He flipped through it enthusiastically.

He nodded vigorously.

He paid and left.

Song Yingxing let out a strangled sound and collapsed onto the table, pressing both hands to his chest.

"I am finished," he whispered. "All the machines, all the craftsmanship, all the knowledge I painstakingly compiled. No one even wants to read it."

He felt worse than if he had suffered a romantic betrayal.

He genuinely felt like crying.

At that exact moment, Gu Yanwu walked in.

He smiled warmly and approached the counter. "Shopkeeper, did you not say that Master Song Yingxing's monumental scientific work, The Exploitation of the Works of Nature, would be published today?"

The shopkeeper nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir. Right over there. That entire row is his book."

Gu Yanwu turned immediately.

He picked up a copy.

He flipped through several pages.

His expression changed at once.

His eyes shone.

"It is all here," he breathed. "So comprehensive. This is practically a complete compendium of all the scientific inventions across our Great Ming, with Gao Family Village's new technologies appended at the end. This is exactly what I have been searching for. Magnificent."

In the corner, Song Yingxing nearly jumped out of his skin.

He is going to buy it.

Gu Yanwu strode to the counter with determination.

Song Yingxing gripped the edge of the table.

Finally. One copy sold.

Gu Yanwu spoke clearly. "I will take two hundred copies to start."

The shopkeeper blinked.

"What?"

Song Yingxing's mind went blank.

Two hundred?

He had been praying for one. This man wanted two hundred?

The shopkeeper stammered, "Master Gu... why so many? We assumed it would not sell widely, so the first printing was only one hundred copies."

"Only one hundred?" Gu Yanwu frowned. "That is far from enough. The school I established in Luoyang has already opened. Though we do not yet have many students, each student must have a copy. Books are easily damaged or misplaced. We must prepare extras. Please arrange another printing immediately."

The shopkeeper gasped. "It is to be used as a textbook?"

Gu Yanwu smiled. "Of course. It is perfect as a textbook."

Before the excitement could settle, two more figures entered the bookstore.

Dao Xuan Tianzun and Gao Yiye, walking side by side, both smiling.

The moment they stepped inside, Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke.

"Shopkeeper, The Exploitation of the Works of Nature is officially published today, correct?"

The shopkeeper immediately bowed deeply. "Reporting to Dao Xuan Tianzun, yes, it has been published today."

Li Daoxuan smiled lightly. "The Thirty Two Middle School in Gao Family Village requires five hundred copies for textbooks. The schools in Xi'an will require another one thousand. How many were printed in the first batch?"

The shopkeeper broke into a cold sweat.

"Only... one hundred copies," he admitted weakly. "Master Gu already wishes to purchase two hundred. I will arrange reprinting at once. The printing blocks are still here. We can produce more immediately."

"Only one hundred?" Li Daoxuan laughed softly. "So little faith in this book?"

The shopkeeper could only bow repeatedly.

In the corner, Song Yingxing felt his entire body go numb.

The schools of Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Using his book.

As a textbook.

Joy flooded him so intensely that he felt dizzy.

He could barely sit still.

Suddenly he leapt up and rushed forward.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

Li Daoxuan turned with a smile. "Ah, Master Song. You are here?"

Song Yingxing's voice trembled with emotion. "Dao Xuan Tianzun, I truly do not understand. You possess so many Heavenly Books of immense power and profound knowledge. Why would you choose this humble book of mine as a textbook? Surely your Heavenly Books are far superior?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head gently.

"The Heavenly Books are too advanced. They stand somewhat apart from the practical realities of our present society. Your book, however, is rooted in the current technological level of our world. Every device you describe is something that has already been implemented. Students can study it and immediately apply what they learn. That is true education."

He paused, then added with a faint smile.

"My own materials are better suited for those who wish to go further, to innovate, to shape the future. But before one reaches the heavens, one must first stand firmly upon the earth."

Song Yingxing stood there, speechless.

His eyes turned red.

All the bitterness from earlier vanished completely.

In its place remained only pride, relief, and a quiet, steady flame of purpose.

His life's work would not gather dust.

It would shape minds.

Chapter 1147 The Electric Motor

Only then did Song Yingxing fully understand.

His own writings were meant to serve as practical textbooks, firmly rooted in the present. Meanwhile, Dao Xuan Tianzun's Heavenly Books pointed toward the future, illuminating paths not yet walked.

"So that is the distinction," Song Yingxing murmured, enlightenment settling over him like dawn light.

Li Daoxuan casually flipped to the final section of Tiangong Kaiwu, the newly added chapter that recorded the marvels of Gao Family Village in careful detail. Steam engines. Electric lamps. The latest mechanical refinements. All of it was cataloged meticulously.

He tapped the page with a faint smile. "I look forward to your next new chapter."

Song Yingxing's heart trembled. A next chapter. Of course there would be a next chapter. Innovation had not stopped.

At that moment, a sudden commotion erupted outside the bookstore.

A young man burst through the entrance, breathing hard, eyes scanning wildly. "Teacher Song! Is Teacher Song here? I heard you were at the bookstore, so I came immediately!"

Li Daoxuan glanced over and instantly recognized him.

This was the graduate student whose hot air balloon experiment had once drifted straight into a young woman's chamber, producing a romantic conclusion that could only be described as destiny in action. Li Daoxuan could not quite recall the young man's name, but he distinctly remembered his wife, Hou Lan, one of the women rescued at Houjia Village alongside Zhang Fengyi of the White Pole Soldiers.

The student rushed inside and only then noticed Dao Xuan Tianzun and Gao Yiye standing there.

He nearly jumped out of his skin.

Dropping into a deep bow, he spoke rapidly, "Greetings, Dao Xuan Tianzun. Greetings, Saintess."

Li Daoxuan chuckled. "What matter compels you to seek Mr. Song with such urgency?"

Song Yingxing stepped forward. "Yes, what is it?"

The young man brightened at once. "Teacher, I have been studying the propeller at the rear of the Celestial Ship bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Li Daoxuan's interest sharpened. "Oh? And what conclusions have you reached?"

The student replied eagerly, "The propeller rotates and pushes water backward, which in turn propels the ship forward. After much thought, I realized the same principle should apply to air. So I conducted repeated experiments and designed a set of fan blades capable of continuously generating wind. If connected to a steam engine, turning like the Celestial Ship's propeller, it could produce an enormous gust of wind."

Li Daoxuan almost laughed aloud.

He has reinvented the electric fan.

Song Yingxing gave the young man an approving nod. "Excellent thinking. Truly excellent."

However, the student's expression darkened. "But there is a serious flaw. The steam engine is far too large. It burns coal, emits smoke, and roars like a beast. Using such a massive machine to power a small fan feels... disproportionate. Teacher, I hoped you might offer guidance. Is there another method?"

Song Yingxing fell silent.

The problem was obvious. The solution was not.

Li Daoxuan spoke calmly. "You have studied the power systems of the ships I provided, have you not?"

Song Yingxing immediately cupped his hands respectfully. "Indeed, Dao Xuan Tianzun. At first, we believed the Celestial Ships were driven by divine force. But through study, we discovered their power source is electricity. The solar panels bestowed by the Lord of the Sun Star convert sunlight into electricity, which then drives the propellers. This is as far as our research has progressed."

Li Daoxuan nodded. "Have you investigated how electricity causes the propeller to rotate?"

Song Yingxing hesitated. "The Celestial Ship is a sacred object. We dared not dismantle it."

Li Daoxuan smiled. "Electricity drives rotation through something called an electric motor. I will provide you with one. Dismantle it. Study it thoroughly. Once you understand its principles, you may use electricity to power Mo Li's fan directly from the village's electrical grid."

Gao Family Village already possessed a power grid. Since Li Daoxuan had provided large solar panels, the villagers had steadily constructed a network of wires throughout the settlement. Drawing upon the knowledge in their Middle School Physics and High School Physics textbooks, they had installed switches, designed circuits, and even invented electrical plugs. With Ji Menghan's development of the electric lamp, the village now shone brilliantly each evening. When the lights flicked on at dusk, it was a spectacle that left newcomers speechless.

Yet electricity had only begun to reveal its potential.

Li Daoxuan produced a small electric motor, the sort commonly used in children's toys and powered by miniature batteries, and placed it gently before the research building of Thirty Two Middle School.

To him it was tiny.

To the villagers, it was a massive construct several times their body length and taller than most of them.

Half an hour later, a crowd had gathered.

Song Yingxing stood at the front. Around him clustered graduate students, craftsmen, and curious onlookers.

"So this," someone whispered reverently, "is the true power mechanism of the Celestial Ship."

"It is enormous."

"Of course it is enormous. The Celestial Ship is vast. It must rely on something equally grand."

"What now?"

"We dismantle it."

Diagrams were unrolled. Tools were fetched.

Then came the first obstacle.

"There is a screw here. It requires an extremely large screwdriver."

They did not possess such a tool.

Fortunately, this was Gao Family Village.

An invisible force descended.

Though Dao Xuan Tianzun's hand was unseen, a colossal screwdriver appeared to move of its own accord, engaging the massive screw. It turned steadily. Once. Twice. Again.

With a sharp metallic snap, the screw came loose.

Cheers erupted.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is assisting us!"

Piece by piece, the motor was dismantled. Its casing removed. Its internal components laid out carefully.

Soon, what had once been a single mysterious machine became a neat array of parts.

Song Yingxing led the examination.

"Look here. Coils. Copper wire wound tightly."

"And here. A magnet."

"Why is a magnet present?"

A sudden pause.

One student slapped his forehead. "This was in Middle School Physics."

Another gasped. "The motor chapter."

Faces lit up.

They had studied electric motors before. They had memorized formulas and diagrams. At the time, it had seemed abstract, distant, almost mystical.

Now the physical reality lay before them.

Memory and understanding fused together.

"A current carrying conductor experiences force within a magnetic field."

"The direction of the force depends on the direction of the magnetic field."

Voices overlapped in excitement.

"I understand now."

"These copper coils are the conductors."

"The magnet generates the magnetic field."

"When current flows through the coils, the magnetic interaction produces force."

"And that force causes rotation."

One student could barely contain himself. "So long as electricity continues to flow, the rotation continues. Continuous rotation. Continuous motion."

Song Yingxing looked at the disassembled motor, then at his students.

In that moment, something shifted.

They were no longer merely recording existing knowledge.

They were beginning to command it.

Chapter 1148 Married to a Useless Husband

"I understand now. I understand everything!"

One of the graduate students practically jumped into the air.

"I feel like I could build this immediately!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" another shouted. "Let's try it!"

The research building instantly turned into a battlefield of enthusiasm.

Blacksmiths were summoned. The massive copper windings from the gigantic motor bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun were carefully removed. Under careful instruction, they were drawn out and reforged into thinner, more uniform copper filaments.

Magnets were collected.

Tables were cleared.

Graduate students rolled up their sleeves and began winding coils by hand.

It was exhausting work.

Each coil had to be tight, evenly spaced, layered carefully. One mistake meant starting all over again. A single uneven turn could ruin balance. A slight inconsistency could destabilize rotation.

But no one complained.

They were not producing thousands. They only needed one functioning prototype.

After hours of painstaking labor, a hand wound coil roughly the size of a dog's head lay before them. It was not elegant. It was not perfectly symmetrical. But it was theirs.

Magnets were mounted according to the design principles they had just dissected.

Wires were attached.

Someone swallowed nervously.

The switch was flipped.

"Vwoom."

The motor began to spin.

Not fast.

Not smoothly.

It wobbled slightly, its axis trembling from imperfect craftsmanship. After a few rotations it even swayed unevenly, threatening to veer off.

But it was undeniably rotating.

For a heartbeat, no one spoke.

Then the entire room erupted.

"It works!"

"It's moving!"

"It's truly moving!"

Some of them were so excited they nearly hugged the blacksmiths.

Immediately, analytical minds shifted into improvement mode.

"We need more uniform copper wire."

"The coil winding must be tighter."

"The bearings must be refined."

"If we improve friction reduction, rotational speed will increase."

The motor was no longer mysterious.

It was now a problem to be optimized.

—

Meanwhile, far from the research building, in the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory, Hou Lan was weaving wool yarn.

Her hands moved skillfully, rhythm steady and precise.

Not far from her, several women were whispering.

"Look at her. Hou Lan."

"I see. What about her?"

A middle aged worker leaned closer and lowered her voice. "A few years ago she married a graduate student from Thirty Two Middle School."

"Yes, I know. That sounds respectable. Educated husband."

The middle aged woman snorted softly. "Educated? His family is ordinary. No wealth. And he does not even have proper employment. He spends all day in a laboratory tinkering with strange devices, living off a small graduate stipend. Their entire household depends on Hou Lan's wages."

Several women gasped.

"So she married a man who cannot even support her?"

"Keep your voice down."

"Why? Someone should advise her. If a man cannot provide, how reliable can he be? She is still young. Still beautiful. No children yet. She should divorce him while she can and marry into a better household."

The whispers drifted.

Hou Lan heard them.

She had heard them before.

More than once, women had approached her directly. One auntie had even offered to introduce her to a "more promising" husband.

Utter absurdity.

Hou Lan lifted her head and smiled gently at them.

"Do not underestimate my husband," she said calmly. "He is intelligent. He is educated. One day he will invent something truly useful."

The women exchanged skeptical looks.

They shook their heads.

Hou Lan did not argue further.

When her shift ended, she returned home.

The house was quiet. The kitchen cold. No meal prepared.

She tied on her apron and began preparing dinner, lighting the stove, washing rice, cutting vegetables.

Halfway through cooking, her husband burst through the door.

His face was glowing.

"Xiao Lan," he said breathlessly, "in a few days, you may not need to work anymore."

Hou Lan blinked. "How can I not work? You are still a graduate student. You have not graduated. You have no salary. If I do not work, how will we eat?"

Her husband's expression softened.

"Xiao Lan, for years this household has survived because of you. Every coin we have come from your wages. I, as your husband, have contributed nothing."

Her cheeks flushed slightly.

"This is our home," she replied quietly. "Not yours alone."

He exhaled deeply. "I know people speak ill of me. I know you hear it. I know it burdens you. But it will not be long now. My invention is nearly complete. Once it is released, I will earn money. I will make you live comfortably."

Hou Lan laughed softly. "You are always dreaming."

Without responding, he rushed to his desk, grabbed paper and brush, and began sketching.

A compact motor.

Encased neatly.

A wire extending outward.

At the end of the wire, a plug designed to connect to Gao Family Village's power grid.

From the front shaft extended a rod.

Mounted upon it were spiral blades, inspired by the propellers of the Celestial Ship granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

He refined the angle.

Adjusted the curvature.

Enhanced airflow direction.

Finally, he leaned back.

With decisive strokes he wrote a name at the top.

Electric Fan.

He burst into laughter.

Hou Lan gently placed a bowl of rice beside him.

"The thing that will make us wealthy," she asked softly, "is this?"

He grinned. "Yes. Ji Menghan became wealthy by inventing the electric lamp. Next it will be us. Once the motor is finalized, I will present this design immediately."

Hou Lan tilted her head thoughtfully. "Ji Menghan's father funded his factory. We do not have such resources. Even if your invention succeeds, we can only sell the design."

Her husband shook his head vigorously. "Dao Xuan Tianzun encourages innovation. Even civilian inventions receive rewards. Once I receive support, we will build our own electric fan factory."

Hou Lan's smile grew sweeter.

"Then I will be the factory manager's wife?"

"Exactly," he said proudly.

—

Several days later.

At the official laboratory of Gao Family Village, under the leadership of Song Yingxing and a large group of graduate students, the First Generation Motor officially entered mass production.

It connected directly to the village power grid.

It rotated steadily.

It delivered reliable mechanical power.

But to ordinary villagers, it was merely a machine.

Useful, but abstract.

That very evening, Mo Li unveiled his application.

The electric fan.

Using the First Generation Motor as its core, mounted with carefully angled spiral blades, it generated cool flowing air when plugged into the grid.

It was not a complex device.

Yet it was the first civilian application of the motor.

When powered on, a steady breeze flowed through the demonstration hall.

On a warm evening, that breeze felt like a blessing.

Dao Xuan Tianzun personally praised the invention.

Innovation of theory.

Innovation of application.

Both were worthy.

Mo Li and Hou Lan received a Special Award for Applied Scientific Invention.

A large Silver Ball was granted to them as recognition.

Shortly thereafter, construction began on the Gao Family Village Electric Fan Factory.

On the day Hou Lan formally resigned from the textile factory to become the Electric Fan Factory's manager's wife and head of finance, the same co workers who had once whispered behind her back stood frozen.

Speechless.

The woman who had "married a useless husband" now walked past them calmly, posture straight, expression serene.

Not triumphant.

Not resentful.

Simply certain.

The breeze from the future had already begun to blow.

Chapter 1149 Breezy One

The tenth year of Chongzhen.

High summer.

July.

The heat descended like a punishment from the heavens.

Luoyang baked beneath a merciless sun. The city walls shimmered. The stone streets radiated heat. Even the air itself seemed to ripple and distort, rising in wavering currents as if the entire world were slowly melting.

Commoners hid beneath roof eaves, fanning themselves with broad cattail fans. Some lowered buckets into wells again and again just to splash cool water onto their faces. Life did not stop, but it slowed, heavy and exhausted.

Most people endured.

But there was one man who suffered more than most.

Zhu Changxun, Prince of Fu.

For a man weighing three hundred catties, summer was not a season.

It was a trial.

Inside his residence, curtains were drawn. Windows were opened. Servants fanned him from every direction.

It was useless.

The air felt thick. Suffocating. Even the shade seemed hot.

Maids stood on either side of him, waving fans desperately. Sweat ran down their faces. Their arms trembled from exhaustion. The breeze they produced was pitiful.

The Prince of Fu wiped his forehead again and again, sweat soaking his robes.

"Can no one bring me something to cool this prince down?" he groaned miserably. "Anything at all. I will grant a great reward!"

At his side, his trusted eunuch, Eunuch Zheng, leaned closer.

"Your Highness, at Xiaolangdi dock, the seafood merchants store large blocks of ice to preserve their catch. Perhaps we could purchase some?"

The Prince of Fu immediately shook his head so vigorously that his cheeks quivered.

"No. Absolutely not. That is celestial ice, a gift from Dao Xuan Tianzun. I dare not touch it. His Venerable Self may still be angry with this prince. Last time, he nearly swept me up to heaven like a locust. I have not forgotten."

The servants exchanged uneasy glances.

The Prince of Fu feared death more than anything. When rebels approached, he would surround himself with layers of guards. He had even hired mercenary fighters to protect him.

But if Dao Xuan Tianzun truly wished to act, what good were guards?

Thus, the Prince of Fu had resolved to avoid any object directly associated with Dao Xuan Tianzun unless he received unmistakable proof of forgiveness.

At that moment, a young eunuch rushed in.

"Your Highness! A young man from Gao Family Village has arrived. He claims to have something novel to present."

The Prince of Fu froze.

"From Gao Family Village?"

His tone changed instantly.

"We must not offend him. Invite him in at once."

Soon, Mo Li entered the hall.

Behind him, two assistants carried a large wooden box.

Mo Li bowed calmly. "I am Mo Li, a graduate student from Gao Family Village."

The Prince of Fu actually struggled to his feet in respect.

"Master Mo," he said hurriedly, bowing slightly. "This humble prince greets you. What brings you here? Do you have instructions from Gao Family Village?"

Standing alone already caused sweat to pour down his face.

Mo Li glanced at him with a faint smile.

"Your Highness seems rather warm."

The Prince of Fu nearly wept. "Every summer, this humble prince suffers greatly."

Mo Li nodded.

"Then perhaps Your Highness would like to examine my latest invention. It may make your summers more tolerable."

Curiosity overcame discomfort.

"What is it?" the Prince asked eagerly.

Mo Li opened the box.

He lifted out an electric fan.

The Prince of Fu stared at it blankly.

"What... is this contraption?"

Mo Li asked, "Is your residence connected to electricity?"

"Of course!" the Prince replied quickly. "This humble prince spent a fortune hiring Blue Hats from Gao Family Village to install wiring from the market. I have many electric lamps. There is one above us now, though it is not lit because of the sun."

"Excellent," Mo Li said. "Where is the socket?"

Eunuch Zheng hurried to show him.

Mo Li unplugged the electric lamp and inserted the fan's plug. He adjusted the angle carefully, directing it toward the Prince of Fu.

Click.

The switch flipped.

The blades began to spin.

A steady hum filled the hall.

Then came the wind.

A strong, continuous gust rushed forward, lifting the Prince's beard and fluttering his sleeves wildly.

He blinked.

Then his eyes widened.

"It blows wind!" he cried in disbelief. "Such a strong wind! Far stronger than what my maids produce!"

The maids silently stopped fanning and stared.

Mo Li smiled.

"In weather like this, forcing maids to fan you all day exhausts them terribly. It could give Your Highness a reputation for oppressing your servants. If Dao Xuan Tianzun heard of such behavior, he might be displeased."

The Prince of Fu nearly choked.

"Displeased?"

Mo Li maintained a perfectly serious expression.

"However, this electric fan requires no exhausted servants. Simply press this switch for wind. Press again to stop."

He demonstrated again.

The Prince's hair and beard danced wildly in the artificial breeze.

For the first time that day, relief spread across his face.

"Convenient?" he exclaimed. "It is beyond convenient! This humble prince has never felt such comfort in summer! What is this called?"

Mo Li gestured to the base.

"It is the first electric fan in the world. I have named it the Breezy One. You will find the name inscribed here. Later fans will not carry individual names. Nor will they have the same collectible value."

The Prince narrowed his eyes.

"So it is expensive?"

Then he hesitated.

"This device uses the celestial power provided by Dao Xuan Tianzun. If this humble prince uses it... will that displease him? I once offended His Venerable Self. I do not know whether his anger has faded."

Mo Li spoke confidently.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun encourages the spread of advanced technology. The more people use it, the more profit it generates. The more profit, the greater motivation for scientists to innovate further. His Venerable Self calls this a positive feedback loop. A virtuous cycle. If Your Highness uses this fan, you contribute to scientific progress. He will surely be pleased."

The Prince's anxiety transformed instantly into urgency.

"How much?"

"Five hundred taels of silver."

"I will buy it!"

He turned sharply toward Eunuch Zheng.

"Fetch the silver at once."

Eunuch Zheng moved faster than anyone had ever seen him move. Years earlier, in his terror of Dao Xuan Tianzun, he had even broken his own arm in a desperate attempt to show repentance. Now, hearing that this purchase would bring pleasure rather than anger, he dashed to the treasury and returned with five hundred taels.

The silver was weighed.

The Breezy One remained.

Both parties were extremely satisfied.

That very evening, Mo Li returned to Gao Family Village by train, carrying the heavy silver.

He went straight to report to the factory's financial director.

Hou Lan.

"The prototype sold," he announced proudly. "Five hundred taels."

Hou Lan's face bloomed like a flower.

"My husband is truly remarkable."

In the warm night air of Gao Family Village, electric lights glowed softly.

And somewhere in Luoyang, beneath the steady hum of the Breezy One, the Prince of Fu slept peacefully for the first time in many summers.

Chapter 1150 I Want to Film an Advertisement Too

In recent days, the common folk suddenly noticed something astonishing. The advertisements on their television sets had multiplied like rabbits after spring rain.

Previously, in the few minutes before Gaojia News aired, there had been only one lonely commercial looping again and again: the wool sweater ad from the Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. It played so many times that even the most patient auntie in the village could recite the lines by heart. Some children reportedly dreamed of wool sweaters chasing them through endless snowfields.

But ever since Madam San's down jackets stormed into that precious time slot, other merchants finally woke up. That golden stretch before the news was not a sacred shrine reserved for Warm and Sleepy Textile Factory. It was simply a slot. A slot that could be bought.

And so, once that realization spread, advertisements began bursting onto the screen from every direction.

"Divine Ship Brand Seafood!" one commercial declared proudly. "Our company has rented cargo space aboard the Divine Ship. Zhoushan's freshest seafood delivered at lightning speed. Every single fish guaranteed fresh to your table!"

Immediately after came another voice, brimming with enthusiasm:

"Come Quick Sichuan Hot and Sour Noodles! The newest delicacy from Sichuan. Even Dao Xuan Tianzun has praised it!"

The screen flickered nonstop.

They aired before and after Gaojia News. They squeezed in before and after Zhao Sheng's Agricultural Path to Prosperity. Even Shi Kefa's Legal Education, a program so solemn that half the viewers used it as a bedtime lullaby, now had commercial breaks wedged inside.

The treasury of Gao Family Village swelled with advertising fees. Silver flowed in like a steady river.

At the same time, the actors of Flower World Star Agency found themselves busier than ever. A group of well known performers, led by Chen Yuanyuan, were swamped with endorsement invitations. Every day, merchants lined up outside their rehearsal hall like pilgrims seeking blessings.

Yet among them sat one deeply miserable man.

He had not earned a single copper coin from advertisements.

That man was Chen Qianhu.

As the most villainous character in history, the man blamed for nearly every wicked deed under heaven, he carried an image so dark that even dogs barked when he walked past. Who would dare hire such a face to sell their goods?

Chen Qianhu sat on the stage of Flower World Star Agency, staring at the others as they rehearsed cheerful lines about noodles and seafood. His expression was lonely enough to scare crows out of trees. After a long while, he let out a heavy sigh that seemed to suck the warmth from the room.

Lao Nanfeng sat down beside him and chuckled. "Brother, are you really envious over a little advertisement money?"

Chen Qianhu shook his head. "Brother Nanfeng, it is not about money. I am simply... disheartened. Everyone else gets to dress handsomely, smile at the camera, hold some fine household product, and say, 'I recommend this to you.' But me? Not one merchant will approach. They all say I look too terrifying."

Lao Nanfeng burst out laughing. "You are a soldier. Since when does a soldier need a delicate image? Being fierce is your specialty."

"But I want to look refined for once," Chen Qianhu protested stubbornly. "I want to wear beautiful clothes, hold some elegant object, smile warmly at the audience, and say in a gentle voice, 'Chen Qianhu sincerely recommends this product.' Is that too much to ask?"

As they spoke, a man dressed in merchant's attire cautiously approached. He bowed deeply.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you Chen Qianhu?"

Chen Qianhu pointed at his own face. "Look carefully. Who else would possess such a face?"

The merchant glanced around nervously, then looked back at him and gasped. "It truly is Chen Qianhu. Such... such a frightening expression."

Chen Qianhu rolled his eyes. The motion alone made the merchant stumble backward three steps.

"What do you want? Speak quickly."

The merchant swallowed hard. "I... I would like to invite you to film an advertisement."

Chen Qianhu froze. Then he leaped to his feet in shock. "What did you say?"

The merchant, terrified by the sudden movement, turned and ran. "I was wrong! I should not have come! I will leave immediately!"

"Come back!" Chen Qianhu shouted. "Return at once!"

The merchant trembled but dared not disobey. He shuffled back with stiff legs. "P please... do not kill me..."

At this moment, Chen Qianhu's face was glowing with genuine joy. It was the happiest expression he had worn in years. Unfortunately, in the merchant's eyes, that smile looked like the cruel grin of a tyrant about to commit atrocities.

Chen Qianhu laughed loudly. "You came to hire me for an advertisement? Excellent vision! Superb judgment! No matter the product, I accept!"

The merchant blinked. "You... you accept?"

"Of course!" Chen Qianhu declared proudly. "This is a major breakthrough in my acting career. Finally, I can portray a character with proper temperament, promoting goods to the people. Do you know how long I have waited for this day?"

His laughter faded. His expression turned solemn.

"What is the product? How should I perform?"

The merchant cleared his throat and carefully produced a bottle.

"It is an insecticide bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun. The Village Committee entrusted me with its distribution. I have named it 'Locust Eradicator.' I would like you to star in its advertisement."

Chen Qianhu stared at the bottle.

The merchant continued nervously, "You will wear a costume shaped like this bottle. You will hold a long spear and chase a large group of actors dressed as locusts."

Chen Qianhu made a strange choking sound.

Then, with a tragic cry, he collapsed flat onto the ground.

Lao Nanfeng nudged him with his foot. "Get up. Stop pretending to be dead. You already agreed. A real man keeps his word."

Chen Qianhu flailed dramatically on the floor. "I do not want to be a man anymore. I am going back on my word. I refuse to film this!"

Lao Nanfeng's face darkened. "Get up this instant. What kind of tantrum is this? A man's word, once spoken, cannot be taken back."

The moment Lao Nanfeng raised his voice, Chen Qianhu's fierce aura vanished completely. He scrambled up meekly, head lowered like a scolded child.

"Fine. I will film it."

The merchant, witnessing this scene, could not help but think silently:

So General Lao Nanfeng is the truly terrifying one. Even Chen Qianhu becomes obedient in front of him. I must leave quickly.

He immediately ran off.

Chen Qianhu hurried after him. "Wait! We have not discussed the details!"

The merchant ran faster.

Chen Qianhu chased even faster.

The two figures dashed out of Flower World Star Agency, one fleeing in terror, the other pursuing eagerly. They raced down the street at full speed until both vanished from sight.

A few days later, a rumor spread through the streets:

Chen Qianhu had chased a poor merchant across five entire blocks.

No one knew that the chase had actually been about filming an advertisement for Locust Eradicator.

History, as always, chose the more dramatic version.