

## Great Ming 1181

### Chapter 1181 An Organization Like the Eastern and Western Depots

After Zhu Yujian left Xi'an, he did not hurry.

Unlike Zhu Cunji, who would stop for every scenic hill and ancient pavilion, Zhu Yujian cared about only one thing.

People.

He rode alone, slow and steady, observing the settlement outside the city gates. The houses were neat. Smoke rose from kitchen chimneys. Children chased each other along the road. Farmers bent over fields that shimmered with an almost arrogant shade of green.

Too green.

Healthy green.

Prosperous green.

He dismounted more than once to speak with farmers. He asked about harvest yields. About irrigation. About the so-called celestial fertilizer granted by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

One old farmer, missing two teeth but overflowing with pride, suddenly rummaged through his cloth bag and pulled out a small bottle.

"Look at this!"

He held it up like a treasure.

"Chen Qianhu's Locust Eradicator. Powerful stuff. No matter how vicious the pests are, once they run into Chen Qianhu, they're finished."

Zhu Yujian blinked. "Wait. The medicine is actually called Chen Qianhu?"

The old man burst out laughing.

"No, no! The official name is 'Happy Farmer's Locust Eradicator.' But nobody remembers that. Everyone calls it Chen Qianhu's. Look here, see? His face is printed on the bottle. Show that face to the locusts and they'll scare themselves to death."

Zhu Yujian accepted the bottle.

One glance.

He almost dropped it.

The face printed there was savage beyond reason. Thick brows slanted like blades. Eyes that screamed of bloodshed. A mouth curved not in a smile but in threat. It was the sort of face that made small children cry and grown men reconsider their life choices.

This man has boiled people alive before, Zhu Yujian thought instantly.

He handed the bottle back as if returning a venomous snake.

"Please. Put that away. I truly cannot look at it."

The old farmer only grinned wider.

After bidding him farewell, Zhu Yujian continued onward, deep in thought.

No wonder the crops here flourish like this. Celestial fertilizer to enrich the soil. Chen Qianhu to eradicate pests. Two blades drawn at once.

With such methods, how could the harvest not double?

He was still pondering agricultural miracles when he noticed a group of people ahead on the road.

Dozens of them.

Clothes dusty. Faces weary. Steps heavy.

Travelers. Or refugees.

His heart tightened immediately.

Without hesitation, he took out some of the silver Zhu Cunji had given him and walked toward them.

—

Mi Qianhu muttered under his breath, "The man in the conical hat is coming. Everyone, do not recognize him. Do not show weakness. If he senses anything, we're finished."

One Jinyiwei whispered, "Are his subordinates nearby?"

"They must be hiding," Mi Qianhu replied. "When he abducted Zhu Yujian before, he appeared alone in the road. His men were concealed on both sides."

The entire group tensed.

Zhu Yujian approached.

He held out the silver.

For a brief moment he almost spoke, then stopped himself.

If I say anything now, it will sound like charity from above. That would be vulgar. I am not Zhu Cunji, eager to show benevolence like a peacock spreading feathers.

Better to say nothing.

He simply extended the silver.

Mi Qianhu stared at the money.

What trap is this?

But remembering he was supposed to be a destitute refugee, he quickly reached out and accepted it.

Zhu Yujian gave a small nod.

No words.

Then he turned and continued toward Gao Family Village.

Mi Qianhu stood frozen.

The Jinyiwei exchanged looks.

Silence fell like a curtain.

Only after Zhu Yujian had disappeared far down the road did one whisper, "What was that?"

"He didn't see through us."

"He really thought we were poor."

"He gave us money."

Another frowned. "But the man in the conical hat is a lawless villain. Since when does he help refugees?"

"Perhaps it was a warning."

Mi Qianhu finally exhaled. "Enough speculation. Follow him. Keep your distance."

They abandoned their supposed journey to Xi'an and trailed behind.

Tracking was the Jinyiwei's craft. Their pride. Their rice bowl.

Zhu Yujian, who had zero Jianghu experience, never noticed.

He walked calmly ahead, unaware that an entire pack of imperial hounds followed his footprints.

—

After some time, a colossal structure rose before him.

High walls.

Vast grounds.

A complex so large it swallowed the horizon.

Zhu Yujian's eyes lit up.

"The Chang'an Automobile Factory."

This was Gao Family Village's military industry.

The pride of modern warfare.

He had heard of it countless times. Cannons. Vehicles. Strange machines that moved without horses. It was said that power here was forged not by swords but by steel and smoke.

"I must see it," he murmured.

Then reality intruded.

Military enterprises were not sightseeing gardens.

But suddenly he remembered the letter Zhu Cunji had given him.

He quickly took it out.

—

At the main gate, two factory guards immediately fixed their eyes on the man in the conical hat.

Suspicious.

"Chang'an Factory grounds," one barked. "Unauthorized entry is forbidden."

Zhu Yujian handed over the letter.

The guard read it.

His expression changed instantly.

"Understood. Please enter."

Zhu Yujian walked inside.

—

Far behind, the Jinyiwei watched.

"He went in."

"What is this place? The walls are so high."

"It looks... secret."

"There must be something unspeakable hidden inside."

"Could this be his headquarters?"

"Very possible."

Mi Qianhu narrowed his eyes.

"Zhu Yujian may be inside. We must enter."

"There are guards."

They hesitated.

Then one of them looked down.

"A paper."

He picked it up.

His face brightened.

"Chief. A recruitment notice."

Mi Qianhu took it.

The paper stated that the Chang'an Automobile Factory required numerous laborers for heavy work.

He slowly lifted his head and looked again at the massive compound.

Factory.

The word struck him.

In his world, "factory" meant something else.

The Eastern Depot.

The Western Depot.

Terrifying institutions of surveillance and punishment.

Organizations that made even seasoned officials lose sleep.

"This Chang'an Automobile Factory..." he muttered. "It must be similar. Some kind of carriage or horse administration organization. A special bureau."

He folded the notice carefully.

"They need laborers. We will enter as laborers."

The Jinyiwei nodded.

Then, with admirable professionalism, they rolled in the dirt, tangled their hair, smeared mud across their faces, and transformed from elite imperial agents into convincing refugees.

Mi Qianhu's voice grew grave.

"Everyone knows the Eastern and Western Depots. Since this place also bears the word 'Factory,' I fear it is just as formidable."

He looked at the towering walls.

"What lies ahead is a dragon's pool and a tiger's den. One mistake and we die without burial."

The men answered in unison, "Understood."

Mi Qianhu inhaled deeply.

He clutched the recruitment notice like a battle order and walked toward the gate.

No fear.

If you do not enter the tiger's den, how can you seize the tiger cub?

To capture Zhu Yujian.

To complete the Emperor's mission.

Today, they would gamble their lives inside this so-called Factory.

Chapter 1182 Spies Infiltrate the Factory

As Mi Qianhu approached the gate of the Chang'an Automobile Factory, the guards from the Security Department immediately fixed their eyes on him.

Professional eyes.

They scanned him from head to toe in a heartbeat.

Tattered clothes. Dust-caked hems. Cracked shoes. Shoulders slightly hunched from long travel.

Conclusion reached.

Just a poor commoner.

Their expressions softened at once. Moments earlier they had treated Zhu Yujian like a suspicious wanderer. Now their tone shifted completely.

One of them waved him over. "Hey, brother. What brings you to the Chang'an Automobile Factory?"

Mi Qianhu stepped forward, hands trembling just enough to sell the role. He produced the recruitment notice he had picked up.

"I found this by the roadside," he said humbly. "Are you hiring?"

The guard grinned. "Of course we are. Oh?"

His eyes flicked to the paper, then back to Mi Qianhu.

"You can read, brother? No one explained this notice to you, and you understood it yourself?"

Mi Qianhu's heart exploded inside his chest.

Finished.

Exposed before even drawing a blade.

To die at the gate without accomplishing anything. What a joke that would be.

Carelessness in small details often led to catastrophic failure.

Sweat streamed down his face. The dagger hidden in his sleeve slid smoothly into his palm. If he had to kill his way in, then so be it.

But the guard only laughed.

"Reading is a good thing! Why would a literate man like you come for heavy labor? You're lucky. Our Deputy Director is personally handling interviews in the Human Resources Department today. Tell him you can read. He might move you into a better position."

Mi Qianhu blinked.

"...What?"

He had lived.

The dagger slipped quietly back into his sleeve.

Behind him, his subordinates approached one by one. Each answered questions. Each passed inspection. None were exposed.

They entered together, yet carefully avoided looking at one another.

Strangers.

Utter strangers.

They followed the security staff toward Human Resources.

As they walked, Mi Qianhu caught sight of the man in the conical hat.

The Hat-wearing Man.

He moved freely.

No guard shadowed him. No questions were asked. He entered a massive building as though he belonged there.

From inside came strange mechanical sounds.

Whoosh.

Rumble.

Metal grinding against metal.

Mi Qianhu narrowed his eyes.

No hurry.

Once I am inside, I will have time.

Zhu Yujian may already be hiding somewhere within these walls.

Patience.

A hunter who rushes misses the tiger.

—

They arrived at Human Resources.

Deputy Director Bin Sheng happened to be present that day, inspecting recruitment personally.

Within the Chang'an Automobile Factory, Bin Sheng was practically a legend.

He had started as nothing.

Just a common laborer.

Within days, through absurd learning speed and terrifying diligence, he had become a skilled technician. After that, promotions came like spring bamboo shoots after rain.

Now he stood as Deputy Director.

He had married Yanzi. The factory had rewarded the young couple with a spacious new house. Dual income. Stable future. Bright prospects.

A model success story.

Yet even as Deputy Director, Bin Sheng remained disciplined as a veteran soldier. He worked alongside laborers, took no shortcuts, complained about nothing.

Even today, on what should have been his rest day, he stood inside Human Resources reviewing new recruits.

A guard called out, "Director Bin! The man applying today is impressive. He can read!"

Bin Sheng's eyes sharpened instantly.

"Literate?"

That was valuable.

A literate worker could become a technician. A technician could become a pillar.

His gaze fell upon Mi Qianhu.

Mi Qianhu felt the weight of it.

Exposure meant death.

He inhaled slowly and began his prepared lie.

"This humble one is from Northern Zhili. Last year the Manchu invaded. War ravaged our lands. I fled west to survive."

Bin Sheng's eyes flickered.

Interesting.

When I infiltrated this very factory long ago, I claimed to be from the Northeast, fleeing Manchu devastation. Now this man claims Northern Zhili.

Coincidence?

Perhaps.

Or perhaps not.

"Brother," Bin Sheng said evenly, "you can read and write?"

Mi Qianhu had no retreat left.

"I know a few characters."

"Excellent."

Bin Sheng nodded slowly.

"It would be wasteful to assign you to heavy manual labor. I believe you're better suited to an internal role."

Internal.

Mi Qianhu nearly smiled.

The deeper inside, the better.

The closer to secrets.

The closer to the Hat-wearing Man.

The closer to finding Zhu Yujian.

"An internal position would be most fortunate," he replied with humility. "This humble one will work diligently."

Bin Sheng paused.

"Tell you what. I need someone to help manage documents. Assist me with overseeing critical factory information."

Mi Qianhu feigned hesitation. "What kind of documents?"

Bin Sheng's tone lowered.

"Blueprints for heavy armored vehicles."

Mi Qianhu felt nothing. He had no idea what that meant.

"And the personal records of every individual in the factory."

That struck like thunder.

Personal records.

If Zhu Yujian was here, his name would be inside.

Mi Qianhu bowed deeply. "This humble one will devote himself fully."

Bin Sheng smiled warmly.

"Good. It's settled."

Then, without another word, he turned and left Human Resources.

The staff continued interviews as if nothing unusual had occurred.

Mi Qianhu remained where he was, believing fortune had embraced him.

—

Bin Sheng did not go far.

He walked swiftly, then turned sharply into the Security Department.

Inside, the Head of Security was dramatically recounting a tale of reinforcing Hanzhong.

"At that critical moment," he declared loudly, "the bandit's arrow was 0.01 centimeters from my throat, but—"

Bin Sheng entered.

His expression was grim.

"Security Department. We have a situation."

The room froze.

The Head of Security sprang up. "Director Bin! What happened? Workers fighting again?"

Bin Sheng shook his head.

"If my judgment is correct, spies have infiltrated the factory."

The word struck like a hammer.

Spies.

The previously laughing guards turned cold instantly. The air thickened.

The Head of Security lowered his voice. "Details."

Bin Sheng spoke calmly.

"The group currently interviewing in Human Resources. Every one of them is a spy."

He continued, "I have secured their leader. I will bring him to my office and keep him under observation. His subordinates are pretending not to know him. They intend to disperse into different workshops and steal critical information from our Chang'an Automobile Factory."

His tone carried absolute certainty.

"There is no doubt."

The Head of Security slammed his fist onto the table.

"How audacious!"

His eyes blazed.

"I'll take men immediately. We'll arrest them all and send them straight to Huanglong Mountain Labor Reform Camp!"

The room vibrated with murderous enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, in Human Resources, Mi Qianhu still believed fate was smiling upon him.

## Chapter 1183 Boundless Hell

The Head of Security was already halfway to issuing arrest orders when Bin Sheng suddenly raised a hand.

"Hold on."

The room froze.

The Head of Security looked at him, confused. "Director Bin?"

Bin Sheng spoke calmly, but his eyes were cold.

"We do not yet know where these infiltrators come from. They might be spies from Jin. Or Mongols. Or Joseon. Or even Western powers. If you storm in and arrest them now, and they refuse to speak no matter how we pressure them, then every lead dies with them."

Silence fell.

The Head of Security slowly nodded.

"A long line to catch a big fish."

"Exactly." Bin Sheng's voice carried frost. "In espionage work, impatience is a mortal sin. You wait. You endure. You pretend not to know. Only then can you follow the thread back to the bigger monster behind the curtain."

He swept his gaze across the room.

"This is not about arresting twenty-five men. This is about discovering their country of origin. What secrets they intend to steal. Who else inside the factory supports them. Who outside receives their information."

His voice lowered further.

"We are not catching mice. We are uprooting an entire network."

The guards straightened.

"Understood!"

The Head of Security looked at Bin Sheng with admiration. "Director Bin, I had no idea you were versed in intelligence warfare as well."

Bin Sheng coughed lightly, his weathered face faintly red.

"Ahem. I am not particularly skilled. And stop looking at me like that."

The guards laughed awkwardly.

But inside, Bin Sheng was already thinking.

No.

These are security personnel.

Good men. Brave men.

But espionage is a different battlefield.

In that world, one misstep means vanishing without a body.

If I leave this to them alone, they may die before even realizing they are dead.

He needed veterans.

People who had walked through that darkness before.

He walked casually toward the staff cafeteria as if stretching his legs.

At the entrance, in a hidden corner of the doorframe, he drew a tiny chalk mark.

Small.

Almost invisible.

Then he entered, collected an ordinary meal, and sat alone in a quiet corner.

He ate slowly.

Three minutes later, a man carrying a tray approached.

It was one of his former operatives from the old Jin state. Now Deputy Director of the Armored Plate Assembly Workshop.

He sat down heavily and spoke loudly, "Director Bin, mind if I join you?"

Bin Sheng laughed heartily. "We're all one family. Sit."

They had barely taken a few bites when another arrived. Then another.

Soon ten trusted subordinates sat around the table.

Eleven men in total.

They joked about production quotas. Complained about machine noise. Mocked cafeteria food.

Anyone watching would see nothing unusual.

But beneath the laughter, voices dropped low.

Bin Sheng smiled as he chewed, but his tone turned serious.

"Spies have entered the factory."

Chopsticks paused for a fraction of a second.

"Their leader's surname is Mi. Literate. Commands twenty-four subordinates. Steady footsteps. Trained in martial arts."

One muttered, "From Jin again?"

"It's called Qing now," another whispered.

"I still prefer Jin," came the quiet reply.

Bin Sheng continued, "He does not recognize me. So perhaps not Jin. But we assume nothing. They outnumber us more than two to one. If conflict comes, each of you must be prepared to handle two opponents."

One man frowned. "Did not the Heavenly Lord instruct us that upon discovering spies, we report to Security and avoid direct engagement?"

"I already informed Security," Bin Sheng said. "They will monitor them. But they do not understand this battlefield."

And that was the truth.

What do you call war between spies?

Boundless Hell.

A place without light.

A place where smiles hide knives.

Security guards could not see that abyss.

Bin Sheng lowered his voice.

"They will assist. But the true struggle falls to us."

Someone chuckled lightly. "Promotion and salary increase?"

Another shrugged. "I am already satisfied. Life here is a thousand times better than it was in Jin."

Heads nodded.

Yes.

Here they had steady wages. Warm homes. Respect. Dignity.

Bin Sheng's tone hardened.

"If we fail to protect this life, if these spies steal our secrets, if Gao Family Village's militia loses a future war, and if Dao Xuan Tianzun happens to be traveling some immortal island and does not intervene..."

He let the thought hang.

"Then everything we built disappears."

The laughter vanished.

Faces tightened.

"You're right," someone whispered.

Another nodded. "No one will protect this place for us."

Eleven voices breathed softly.

"Let's do it."

Moments later, smiles returned.

"Director Bin, I'm full!"

"Director Zheng, I stole a piece of your meat!"

"Hahaha!"

They rose one by one, trays in hand, blending back into the factory flow.

To any outsider, it was nothing.

To those who understood, war had begun.

—

At that very moment, Zhu Yujian stepped out of the armored vehicle workshop, eyes shining.

"Incredible! This Chang'an Automobile Factory truly deserves its reputation as a military powerhouse. I've never seen anything like it."

Vice Director Qi Cheng walked beside him, smiling.

"The armored workshop is impressive, but it is not our pinnacle. The motor workshop is where the real magic lies."

"Motor?" Zhu Yujian asked. "The heart of the electric fan?"

"Precisely. The motor is its heart. Like a steam engine, it produces continuous rotational force. With gears and bearings, we redirect that power across countless industries."

Qi Cheng's pride slipped through.

"Electric fans are merely the beginning. We are researching replacing steam engines in vehicles entirely."

Zhu Yujian frowned slightly. "But motors require electricity. Surely a carriage cannot drag a cable everywhere it goes?"

Qi Cheng smiled as if revealing a small secret.

"We erect power poles along the entire road. A thick cable runs overhead. The vehicle extends two connector arms upward, attaches to the cable, and draws power as it travels."

Zhu Yujian stopped walking.

His eyes widened.

"So that is the solution."

He laughed in admiration.

"Brilliant."

Qi Cheng nodded modestly. "Still in research. Not yet complete."

"I eagerly await its success."

As they walked and spoke, Mi Qianhu happened to pass nearby.

He glanced sideways at Zhu Yujian.

Just one glance.

Not long.

But sharp.

A short distance away, Bin Sheng watched Mi Qianhu from the shadows.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

Tsk.

Is he here for the motor technology?

Or something even deeper?

Inside the Chang'an Automobile Factory, beneath the roar of machines and the scent of oil and iron, Boundless Hell had quietly opened its gates.

Chapter 1184 They Want to Harm Lady Yanzi

Zhu Yujian followed Qi Cheng into yet another workshop, curiosity written plainly across his face.

At the entrance, two newly hired "workers" were pushing a cart stacked high with thick iron plates.

They looked miserable.

Sweat soaked their backs. Veins bulged at their temples. Their breathing came in ragged gasps.

In truth, both men were seasoned Imperial Guards. Martial artists capable of flipping that cart with one arm if they wished.

The exhaustion was pure theater.

Across the workshop, the director of the armored vehicle division, once a spy of the Jin state and now a model pillar of Chang'an Factory, observed them from the corner of his eye.

He let out a faint cold snort.

"As expected," he muttered. "The boss's judgment never misses. Those two are no real laborers. And now they're studying Deputy Director Qi Cheng."

His gaze sharpened.

Qi Cheng was not just another technician.

He was the core.

The spine.

The man who had boldly declared that heavy industry was the foundation of national strength. The one who dreamed aloud of turning Chang'an Factory into an industrial hegemon. Recently he had even begun exploring materials science, talking about building a materials empire.

His ambition was so grand it made ordinary men feel small.

If enemy spies were targeting someone, Qi Cheng would naturally stand at the top of the list.

—

Zhu Yujian toured workshop after workshop.

Steel shaping. Engine assembly. Precision machining.

His eyes widened again and again.

By the time he stepped out of the last one, his mind felt fuller than a scholar's library.

There was no need to rush onward.

He decided to stay the night.

—

That evening, Zhu Yujian entered the employee cafeteria.

The place was lively. Workers laughed, bowls clattered, steam rose from fresh dishes.

A woman steadily carried large serving bowls to the counter.

Her movements were practiced and efficient.

Sweat glistened on her forehead, but her expression was calm.

Other women teased her.

"Yanzi, you're the deputy director's wife now. Why are you still carrying heavy bowls?"

Yanzi wiped her forehead and smiled.

"What's wrong with being the deputy director's wife? My husband works alongside the laborers. If I start acting like some arrogant landlord's madam, wouldn't that embarrass him?"

The women burst into laughter.

"Yanzi, you and your husband are truly something."

Zhu Yujian, who had been listening from nearby, felt a stir in his chest.

He approached respectfully and bowed slightly.

"Madam, I could not help overhearing. You are the deputy director's wife?"

Yanzi waved him off. "No, no. I'm just a cafeteria worker."

Just.

The word echoed in Zhu Yujian's mind.

He stood there silently for a moment.

Since childhood, he had been taught hierarchy. Imperial bearing. Distance from commoners. How to sit. How to speak. How to command.

Status defined a person.

Yet here was the wife of a high-ranking factory official carrying bowls beside ordinary workers, laughing without reserve.

This was not merely sharing hardship.

This was blending with the people.

And the people loved her for it.

Zhu Yujian felt something inside him shift.

"So those in positions of authority should not float above the masses," he thought. "They should stand among them."

He returned to his seat, eating slowly, lost in contemplation.

In the distance, the two Imperial Guards watched him carefully.

And further still, the former Jin spy observed everything.

He quietly scribbled a note.

"These two spies appear to have set their sights on Bin Sheng's wife."

—

Half an hour later.

In the factory's back garden, beneath dim electric lamps, Bin Sheng sat with his ten trusted veterans.

One by one, they reported.

"Boss, the two under my watch are focusing on Deputy Director Qi Cheng."

"Mine are sniffing around the steam engine blueprints."

"Two of mine keep circling the employee dormitories."

Bin Sheng listened, face tightening.

"This group is ambitious," he said slowly. "They are not targeting one secret. They want everything. It appears we are facing a long battle."

He looked at each man in turn.

"We cannot act rashly. If we move too soon, we alert them."

Another subordinate stepped forward.

"Boss. The two I'm monitoring were watching Lady Yanzi in the cafeteria."

Silence.

Then Bin Sheng exploded.

"What?!"

His eyes turned red instantly.

"Come. We cut them down now. Contact Security. Close the net immediately!"

Two men grabbed his arms.

"Boss, calm yourself!"

"You just said we cannot alert them!"

"They're targeting my Yanzi!" Bin Sheng's voice trembled with fury. "Forget startling snakes. I'll slaughter those dogs and feed them to pigs!"

All ten men had to restrain him.

"Boss, we still do not know their mastermind."

"We cannot move yet."

His breathing was heavy.

Slowly, painfully, he forced himself to calm down.

"Intensify surveillance," he ordered coldly. "Not a single movement escapes our eyes."

"Understood."

Boundless Hell had just grown personal.

—

Night fell.

The factory closed.

Workers streamed into the residential area.

Electric lamps illuminated every corner. Bright, steady, unwavering light.

Some workers played cards beneath the lamps. Others tossed a ball across the courtyard. Elderly family members sat under trees, sipping tea and telling stories.

It was lively. Warm.

Alive.

Zhu Yujian smiled as he greeted a few of them before heading toward the guesthouse arranged by Logistics.

The guesthouse stood within the residential compound, a quiet detached building.

Peaceful.

Ordinary.

Mi Qianhu and his twenty-four subordinates also entered the residential area.

As newly hired workers, they had no private housing yet. They were assigned to employee dormitories not far from the guesthouse, separated by a single courtyard.

Each room housed four men.

Seven rooms total.

Now, at least, they no longer had to pretend to be strangers. In groups of four they could openly act as dorm mates. Casual introductions. Light chatter. Harmless laughter.

Mi Qianhu walked slowly with three subordinates.

"This," he murmured, "is where the people of this strange factory live. Zhu Yujian is likely somewhere among them."

One subordinate glanced upward.

"Boss... these lights. They do not burn. Yet they shine brighter than torches. How?"

Mi Qianhu snapped quietly, "Focus on the mission. We are not here to solve ten thousand mysteries. We are here to capture Zhu Yujian."

"Understood."

Another subordinate lowered his voice.

"Boss... ever since we entered this enormous factory, I feel like someone is watching us."

Mi Qianhu did not answer immediately.

Because he felt it too.

Chapter 1185 Covert Operation

Mi Qianhu's brow trembled ever so slightly, a movement so subtle that no ordinary person would have noticed it, yet inside his mind alarms had already begun to ring.

"We're being watched," he said quietly, his tone calm enough to pass for idle conversation. "I felt it the moment we stepped into this factory. It has to be the hooded man's black-clad subordinates. They have been observing us the whole time, but they have not acted. Either they are unsure whether we are spies

or genuine workers, or they are waiting for us to make the first mistake. Whatever the reason, we cannot afford to relax."

The subordinate beside him lowered his voice. "Boss, most of the people here really do seem like ordinary folk. This place does not feel like the Eastern Depot or the Western Depot. There are no obvious agents lurking around every corner."

Mi Qianhu gave a faint grunt of acknowledgment. He had noticed it too. The Eastern and Western Depots reeked of intrigue. Every corridor there felt like a snake pit. But here in the Chang'an Automobile Factory, the vast majority were plain workers with rough hands and simple expressions. And yet, strangely, that made him even more uneasy.

A place that looked ordinary yet made his instincts scream was far more dangerous than one that flaunted its fangs.

"It may look harmless," Mi Qianhu continued, "but this place is no less than a dragon's pond and a tiger's den. The people watching us are highly skilled. I cannot pinpoint their positions at all. That alone tells me they are at least our equals, perhaps even better than our Jinyiwei when it comes to concealment."

His men felt their backs grow cold.

Mi Qianhu's gaze shifted. "Look. The hooded man just entered that standalone building. It is separate from the workers' residences. That means it is reserved for someone important. Zhu Yujian may have been stripped of his princely title, but he is no ordinary man. There is a strong possibility he is staying there."

One subordinate frowned. "If we approach now, would that not be like beating the grass to startle the snake?"

Mi Qianhu nodded slowly. "Exactly. We will act as though nothing is wrong and return to our dormitories. Fortunately, our dorms face that building. We will have opportunities. Do not panic, and under no circumstances should we expose any weakness."

They dispersed smoothly, each movement practiced and natural. Seven rooms. Seven groups. Their original intention had been to act like wide-eyed newcomers who knew nothing about their surroundings.

Ironically, once they stepped inside, they found themselves genuinely bewildered.

Mi Qianhu noticed a rope hanging by the wall. It looked ordinary enough, yet its placement felt deliberate.

Without much thought, he reached out and tugged it.

A crisp click echoed through the room, and in the next instant a lamp on the ceiling burst into brilliance.

Light flooded the chamber with a force so overwhelming that it felt like noon had been dragged indoors. It was brighter than any oil lamp he had ever seen, brighter than palace lanterns during grand banquets.

Mi Qianhu staggered back. "What sorcery is this?"

"It is a lamp, Boss," one of his men whispered, equally stunned.

"A lamp?" Mi Qianhu stared upward. "Why did it ignite when I pulled the rope? There was no flame."

They stood there like villagers witnessing lightning captured in a glass sphere. The electric bulb glowed steadily above them, indifferent to their shock.

After a few moments their eyes began to ache from the intensity.

Mi Qianhu inhaled sharply. "Such a treasure, hanging so casually from the ceiling. This is no ordinary object."

One subordinate swallowed. "If we took it back and presented it to His Majesty, he would surely be overjoyed."

Mi Qianhu shot him a look. "And how exactly do you propose we steal it? Have you not seen the strange wire attached to it? That must connect to some hidden mechanism. If we tamper with it, this room might instantly release a rain of arrows and turn us into hedgehogs."

His men stiffened, their earlier greed evaporating at once.

"This light is too bright," Mi Qianhu said. "With the room illuminated like this, anyone outside can see us clearly. Turn it off."

He pulled the rope again.

Click.

Darkness reclaimed the room.

Only then did they breathe properly.

"Good," Mi Qianhu murmured. "We will observe from the shadows. Through the gaps in the curtains we can monitor that building. We rotate every two hours tonight."

Across the woods, Bin Sheng narrowed his eyes as he watched the dormitory windows.

"Suspicious," he muttered. "What kind of normal person dislikes a brightly lit room? They turned it off immediately. Only spies prefer darkness."

One of the Labor Models beside him asked, "What is our move?"

"We keep watching," Bin Sheng replied. "We rotate every two hours as well. If they sneak out in the dead of night, we catch them in the act."

Thus, without a single blade drawn, the invisible contest tightened around Zhu Yujian like a noose.

Meanwhile, the man at the center of it all remained blissfully unaware.

Zhu Yujian entered the guesthouse, cheerfully pulled the switch, and sat beneath the warm glow of the electric lamp. He laid out brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, then began to write down everything he had observed during his tour of the factory. Each character was carefully formed, as if he were engraving his thoughts into history itself.

"If I ever have the chance to govern again," he murmured to himself, "this is where I would begin."

He paused, then laughed softly at his own foolishness.

"What chance would I have to govern? I am still a prince, even if stripped of title. Perhaps living idly like Zhu Cunji is the proper path after all."

From the dormitory across the way, a Jinyiwei agent whispered, "He is writing. He has not removed his hood. He pauses often, deep in thought. Whatever he is recording must be important."

Mi Qianhu's eyes sharpened. "Then those notes may contain clues about him. Tomorrow we find a chance to enter that building and take them."

The men nodded.

Zhu Yujian soon extinguished the light and went to sleep. The spies continued their silent rotations, and Bin Sheng's people mirrored them in return. Each side watched the other, neither willing to blink first.

Morning arrived without incident.

At dawn, Zhu Yujian rose early and blended seamlessly into the crowd of workers. He ran laps around the sports field, chatting and laughing, looking every bit like an ordinary man enjoying simple labor.

Mi Qianhu observed from a distance, his eyes gleaming.

"Early morning is when vigilance is lowest," he said quietly. "This is our chance."

One of the Jinyiwei stepped forward immediately. "Boss, I volunteer."

Mi Qianhu regarded him for a long moment. "Be extremely careful. If you are captured, we will deny knowing you. We cannot rescue you until open conflict begins."

The agent did not hesitate. "Understood."

Mi Qianhu nodded and issued further instructions. "A few of you create a distraction. Draw the watchers' attention away from the building."

Four agents stepped out into the open ground between the dormitories. They pretended to collide by accident, then split into two pairs facing each other, voices rising in staged irritation.

"Why did you bump into me?"

Their argument grew louder, convincing enough to pull wandering eyes toward them.

And while attention shifted to the quarrel, one shadow detached itself from the edge of the dormitory and began moving silently toward the standalone building where secrets waited behind closed doors.

Chapter 1186 Action

"I did not do it on purpose!"

"Then apologize. Is saying sorry really that difficult for you?"

"For a tiny bump? What kind of apology do you want? Are you made of porcelain?"

"Damn you!"

"What, you want to fight?"

The four Embroidered Uniform Guards exploded into motion as if the argument had truly ignited something personal. Fists swung wildly, boots scraped against dirt, curses flew in all directions. They shoved, grappled, and howled like street toughs, drawing immediate attention.

Workers from every direction rushed over. Within moments a thick circle formed around the brawlers, dozens upon dozens of factory hands craning their necks, shouting encouragement, or yelling for them to stop. Dust rose. The noise swelled.

Commander Mi barked sharply from behind the chaos. "Move."

The Embroidered Uniform Guard who had been assigned the heaviest labor the previous day slipped out from his dormitory at once. Shielded by two comrades who staggered sideways as if trying to break up the fight, he dropped into a crouch and slid into the flowerbeds beside the building.

He crawled on all fours for several yards, dirt staining his sleeves, then rose behind the trunk of a broad tree. He waited half a breath, listening. No shout. No alarm. He lowered himself again and crept into a drainage ditch, using its shallow depression to conceal his advance.

In a few heartbeats, he vanished from sight.

Across the small copse of trees, one of Bin Sheng's Labor Models stiffened, his instincts prickling.

"This is not good," he whispered urgently to his companion. "I just saw three of them near the dormitory entrance. The commotion pulled my eyes away for a moment. When I looked back, there were only two."

The other Labor Model's expression hardened. "You stay here. I will search."

He dropped low and slipped into the woods, moving with controlled precision. Branches barely rustled as he circled toward the rear of the guesthouse.

By then, the Embroidered Uniform Guard had already reached it.

He examined the window quickly. No visible lock worth mentioning. With a practiced motion he eased it open and slid inside, landing silently on the wooden floor. He moved straight to the table.

Brush. Ink. Paper. Inkstone.

The writings were still there.

He gathered the pages and scanned them rapidly.

"The people are the foundation of the state. Governance must align with the people's will. Laws despised by the populace must not be enforced by force, lest resentment accumulate."

His eyes widened slightly.

"The rise of a nation depends on the people's support. Without trust, a person cannot stand. Without integrity, a business cannot endure."

His breathing grew heavier.

"Advanced productivity will determine the development of production relations."

He frowned in confusion, not fully grasping the terminology, yet sensing its significance.

"Igniting the enthusiasm of laborers is more effective than compelling them with blades. Those in power should understand this."

His fingers tightened around the paper.

"Clean governance cannot rely solely on moral exhortation. It requires institutional checks. Financial authority must be divided. The cashier handles funds, the accountant records them. The one who records must not control. The one who controls must not record."

His pulse began to hammer in his ears.

"The authority of a county magistrate is too concentrated. Power must be delegated. Legal advisors should be integrated into the official system to share authority and prevent monopolization. If so, is the emperor's power also too vast? Collective governance may need to be introduced..."

The Embroidered Uniform Guard felt as though thunder had struck him.

"This... this is not idle reflection," he muttered hoarsely. "This is the blueprint of rule. He is not studying governance for loyalty. He is planning to replace the one who governs."

In his mind the conclusion formed with terrifying clarity.

Zhu Yujian had raised troops before. Zhu Yujian was now surrounded by a massive ironworks factory capable of producing endless metal goods. Just yesterday he himself had transported a cart of iron plates.

Iron plates.

Armor.

Weapons.

An arsenal disguised as industry.

Cold sweat slid down his back.

This was no simple mission to monitor a deposed prince. This was treason. A rebellion in preparation.

And he was alone inside the lion's den.

He shoved the papers into his tunic without hesitation. There was no time to copy. No time to hesitate. He must bring this evidence back.

He pushed open the window and dropped lightly to the ground.

The instant his boots touched earth, he froze.

A Labor Model stood directly before him.

The man's expression was calm but his eyes were sharp.

"What are you doing here?" the Labor Model asked evenly. "This is the guesthouse. Guests stay here. You are a new worker. Why are you inside?"

The Embroidered Uniform Guard forced his voice steady. "I noticed the building looked different. I was curious."

The Labor Model's gaze lowered.

A sliver of paper protruded from the seam of the Guard's clothing.

The Labor Model's lips curved faintly. "Curious enough to steal documents? What did you take? What faction do you belong to?"

The Guard moved instantly.

His left fist shot forward toward the man's face. At the same time a small dagger slid from his right sleeve into his palm, reversing into a deadly grip. The blade followed the punch, aiming for the heart.

The Labor Model was already prepared.

His left hand snapped upward, striking aside the fist with a sharp crack. In the same motion, a dagger slipped from his own sleeve, thrusting toward the Guard's ribs.

Steel flashed.

Both men shifted their weight at the last possible instant, narrowly avoiding lethal contact. They separated by half a step, eyes locked.

A skilled opponent.

They reached that conclusion simultaneously.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard knew better than to shout for help. Commander Mi had been clear. If exposed, he was on his own. There would be no rescue.

The Labor Model, however, stood on home ground.

"Spy!" he shouted at full volume. "Get help!"

The word struck like a bell tolling doom.

The Guard did not hesitate. He hurled himself sideways, rolling hard across the dirt. In the midst of the roll, he slipped one sheet of paper from his tunic and rammed it into a narrow crevice between stones near the base of the building.

Another roll carried him upright. He bolted.

"Stop!" the Labor Model roared, sprinting after him with astonishing speed.

They tore across open ground. Shouts rose behind them. Workers dropped tools and gave chase. Security personnel converged. The alarm spread like wildfire.

Within minutes the fleeing Guard was overwhelmed, forced to the ground under sheer numbers. His arms were twisted behind him, rope biting into his wrists and ankles.

He struggled only once, then went still.

What none of them noticed was Commander Mi slipping quietly to the very spot where the Guard had rolled. He crouched as if examining disturbed earth, fingers probing the stones.

A folded sheet met his touch.

He retrieved it and moved away without attracting attention.

Back in his dormitory, he unfolded the page and read.

His breath caught.

"So his ambition truly reaches the heavens," he murmured. "This is no minor suspicion. This is open intent."

He lifted his head, eyes blazing with a mixture of fear and resolve.

"Our mission has changed," he told his men. "We are no longer here to apprehend Zhu Yujian. We must leave this place alive and carry this intelligence back to the capital. What we have uncovered is a conspiracy of rebellion."

The room fell silent.

"From this moment," Commander Mi continued, voice steady but grave, "your only objective is survival. If necessary, you abandon one another. If necessary, you discard pride. But you must live and return to the capital. The Emperor must know."

The Embroidered Uniform Guards straightened despite the tension gripping their chests.

"To repay the Emperor's grace," they answered in unison.

Commander Mi nodded once.

"Disperse. Escape by any means. Leave the Chang'an Automobile Factory. Leave Xi'an. Prove your worth now."

Outside, the factory continued its morning routine, smoke rising peacefully into the sky, unaware that beneath its orderly surface the gears of suspicion, fear, and impending collision had begun to turn.

Chapter 1187 Your Entire Family Is Wuzhen Chaha

The remaining twenty-four Jinyiwei scattered the instant Commander Mi gave the order.

Some moved in pairs, others in groups of three, and a few chose to run alone. Windows were pushed open. Doors were kicked aside. One man even dropped into a drainage ditch and crawled out like a rat fleeing a sinking ship.

There was no need for further instruction.

Survive.

Escape.

Mi Qianhu did not flee through a window or ditch. He walked straight out the front entrance.

He was a hereditary Thousand-Household Commander of the Great Ming. Even in retreat, he would not skulk like a thief. If he had to leave, he would do so upright.

The moment he stepped outside, he saw a single figure standing calmly in the middle of the path.

Deputy Factory Manager Bin Sheng.

Mi Qianhu's eyes narrowed. "You were waiting for me?"

"I was," Bin Sheng answered evenly.

Mi Qianhu widened his stance, shoulders settling, weight centered.

Bin Sheng's gaze sharpened. "Which faction do you serve? You might as well say it now."

Mi Qianhu let out a cold laugh. "You do not even know who I represent, and you expect me to enlighten you? Your intelligence network must be rather pathetic."

Bin Sheng snorted. "It is not hard to guess. You are one of the Manchu Qing's Wuzhen Chaha, are you not?"

Mi Qianhu's eyes flared.

Wuzhen Chaha.

The Han troops who served the Manchu barbarians.

For a heartbeat he could not even process the insult.

He, Mi Qianhu, hereditary Jinyiwei of the Great Ming, descended from generations who had guarded the imperial court. A Thousand-Household Commander. A Qianhu. Even high officials like Shi Kefa had once held only the rank of hereditary Hundred-Household Commander.

And now he was being mistaken for a Han dog serving the Manchus.

Rage detonated in his chest.

"You are the Wuzhen Chaha!" Mi Qianhu roared. "Your entire family is Wuzhen Chaha!"

Bin Sheng blinked, startled.

He instantly drew the opposite conclusion.

So they know my background. They know I once belonged to Later Jin. They must have been sent specifically to eliminate me. Perhaps they targeted Yanzi as well. Perhaps they came not only to silence a defector, but also to seize the steam vehicle blueprints.

Without another word, Bin Sheng drew his long saber.

Mi Qianhu reached behind him and pulled out an iron staff he had taken from the workshop. It was roughly the length of a Xiu Chun Dao and heavy enough to substitute for a blade in a desperate moment.

"Come," Bin Sheng said coldly. "Let me see how many assassins the Wuzhen Chaha can send."

"Say those three words again," Mi Qianhu snarled, "and I will make sure you die without a complete corpse."

Bin Sheng's expression hardened. "Wuzhen Chaha. Wuzhen Chaha. Wuzhen Chaha. I despise them. What are you going to do about it?"

If the Wuzhen Chaha had treated him well in the past, he would never have abandoned them and remained here at Chang'an.

Mi Qianhu lunged.

The iron staff swept forward in a vicious arc.

Bin Sheng's saber flashed to meet it.

Clang.

The impact rang like a struck bell.

They collided again and again in rapid succession, steel and iron shrieking against each other. One was a seasoned Jinyiwei commander trained in the martial disciplines of the imperial court. The other was a former Later Jin expert who had survived battlefields and betrayal alike.

Their duel was swift, precise, deadly.

Around them chaos erupted.

The former Later Jin men who had become Labor Models joined forces with the factory's Security Department and militia. Orders flew. Lines formed. Groups advanced with shields and staffs.

They sealed the dormitory district from every direction.

This was no chaotic scuffle. It was an organized net tightening.

A militiaman raised his shield just in time to deflect a Jinyiwei dagger. His face turned pale. "He is too fast. I cannot match him."

Another militiaman was kicked backward, tumbling across the dirt. "His martial arts are terrifying!"

"Seize them alive!"

"Do not kill them. We need to know who sent them."

"Over here. Reinforce this side."

"Cast the net!"

Several men rushed forward carrying a massive fishing net. They flung it high into the air, and it dropped over two Jinyiwei at once. The trapped men struggled violently, blades slashing at rope, but the mesh tightened as dozens of hands pulled in unison.

They were pinned, immobilized, breathing hard as the net cinched around them.

Another Jinyiwei burst through two defensive lines, hair whipping wildly, eyes bloodshot with desperation. At the third line a Labor Model swept his staff low against the man's calf. The Jinyiwei crashed face-first into the dirt. Three militiamen immediately rushed in, pressing pitchforks against his limbs until he could no longer move.

The Jinyiwei were like swimmers thrown into an ocean of people.

No matter how strong they were individually, there were simply too many hands, too many bodies, too many weapons.

Within a short span of time, all but one were captured.

Only Mi Qianhu remained standing.

He and Bin Sheng had already exchanged more than thirty blows.

Neither had yielded.

This was the employee dormitory area, close to the family housing. Workers and family members gathered in droves, forming a wide ring.

Yanzi pushed her way through the crowd. The moment she saw her husband locked in a deadly saber duel, her face drained of color.

"Be careful!" she cried. "Be careful!"

"Do not shout," someone whispered urgently. "You will distract him."

Yanzi covered her mouth with trembling hands.

The crowd murmured.

"I never knew Manager Bin was this skilled."

"He never showed it before."

"We thought he was just technically brilliant and hardworking."

"Look at that saber work. He must have trained for more than ten years."

"Yanzi, your husband is formidable."

Yanzi heard none of it. Her eyes were fixed on the flashing blades.

"Why is no one helping him?" she whispered. "Why are you just watching?"

"We cannot interfere," someone explained. "Manager Bin said this man came for him personally. He wants to settle old grievances himself."

"So this is a personal enemy?"

"With skills like that, and yet he chose to work here quietly. Manager Bin must have quite a past."

At that moment the duel intensified.

Bin Sheng slashed downward.

Mi Qianhu countered with a powerful sweep of the iron staff.

Both aimed for vital points.

Halfway through the motion, Mi Qianhu felt a chill.

He was not holding a Xiu Chun Dao.

He was holding an iron staff.

If they both struck cleanly, Bin Sheng's saber would pierce flesh and kill. His staff, even if it landed, would at most break bone.

He would die.

Bin Sheng might only be injured.

A flicker of alarm broke his rhythm.

He withdrew mid-strike and pivoted aside.

That single hesitation cost him everything.

Bin Sheng pressed forward instantly, chaining another attack into a tight combination that disrupted Mi Qianhu's footing. With a sudden sweep of his leg, he knocked the commander flat onto his back.

Mi Qianhu hit the ground hard.

In the next breath, the tip of Bin Sheng's saber rested against his throat.

Silence fell.

"Besides your two dozen men," Bin Sheng demanded, "how many more did the Wuzhen Chaha send? Are there others waiting outside?"

Mi Qianhu spat blood and saliva onto the dirt.

"You are the Wuzhen Chaha," he snarled hoarsely. "Your entire family is Wuzhen Chaha. Tungusic savages. Barbarians. Han dogs raised in wild boar skins."

Before anyone could react, a sharp crack rang out.

Yanzi had rushed forward.

Her palm struck Mi Qianhu across the face with stunning force.

"Who are you calling a savage?" she snapped, eyes blazing. "I am no savage."

Footnote:

In traditional Chinese culture, insults that involve "your entire family" carry far more weight than personal insults. Influenced by Confucian values associated with figures such as Confucius, identity was historically rooted not in the individual alone, but in the family lineage, clan, and ancestral line. A person's honor reflected the honor of their ancestors and descendants.

Moreover, in imperial eras such as the Ming dynasty, collective punishment was a real legal practice. Crimes like treason could result in execution or punishment extending to multiple generations of one's family. Because of this, family and bloodline were seen as a single moral and political unit.

Therefore, when a character says "your entire family is..." it is not casual profanity. It is an attack on lineage, heritage, loyalty, and ancestral dignity. In historical fiction and wuxia narratives, invoking someone's whole family signals that the conflict has escalated beyond personal grievance into a matter of honor and identity.

Chapter 1188 Celestial Treasures

An hour later, the security office of the Chang'an Automobile Factory felt more like a courtroom than a workplace.

Mi Qianhu and his twenty four men stood bound in a straight line, wrists tied behind their backs, faces stiff with forced composure. They tried to hold themselves upright, but the rope around their arms and the ring of militia surrounding them made their situation painfully clear. They were no longer hunters. They were prey.

The militia formed a tight perimeter, muskets ready, watching for the slightest movement.

Chief Director Gao Yiyi had arrived in person, which was rare enough to send a ripple through the workers who had gathered outside. Beside him stood Deputy Directors Qi Cheng and Bin Sheng. Even Zhu Yujian had come, his bamboo hat pulled low as he observed quietly from the side, unwilling to miss what might become an important turning point.

The mood in the room was heavy, and everyone felt it.

Gao Yiyi spoke first, his voice calm but carrying weight.

"Bin Sheng, you believe they were sent by the Manchus to steal the manufacturing methods of our ironworks?"

Bin Sheng cupped his fists respectfully before answering.

"Yes. Based on accent, behavior, and the intelligence we intercepted, this man likely belongs to the former Jin forces, now calling themselves the Qing Dynasty."

He coughed slightly as he corrected himself, as though the new name tasted unpleasant.

Gao Yiyi's eyes shifted toward Mi Qianhu.

Mi Qianhu let out a short laugh full of disdain.

"Rebels calling others traitors. How amusing."

Gao Yiyi did not rise to the bait. He turned back to Bin Sheng.

"Are you certain he is Wuzhen Chaoha?"

Bin Sheng hesitated.

"I cannot confirm with absolute certainty. It is an informed deduction."

Gao Yiyi fell silent for a moment.

In truth, he was not a trained interrogator. Not long ago, he had been nothing more than a village blacksmith who understood iron better than men. Only in the past decade, under the guidance and enlightenment of Dao Xuan Tianzun, had his knowledge broadened beyond the forge. Even now, when it came to political maneuvering and psychological pressure, he relied heavily on the two men beside him.

Qi Cheng had once fought as a rebel.

Bin Sheng had once served the Jin.

Strange times forged stranger alliances.

Qi Cheng stepped forward, his expression thoughtful rather than angry.

"Let us proceed carefully. Rushing will gain us nothing."

He unfolded a stack of confiscated papers and held them up.

"These were found on one of your men."

The papers were covered in dense writing. Observations about Xi'an's daily life, infrastructure, production lines, trade routes, agricultural organization, transport logistics, and even notes on social morale.

The depth of it was unsettling.

Qi Cheng's eyes locked onto Mi Qianhu.

"Why steal these? Planning to rebuild our system in your own territory?"

At that moment, Zhu Yujian felt a cold sweat run down his back. Those were his notes. He had thought them harmless, simple observations of a functioning society. Yet seeing them displayed like captured intelligence made him question his own assumptions. Perhaps transparency itself was strength. Perhaps openness was not weakness at all.

Mi Qianhu lifted his chin.

"You may kill me. You will not extract a word."

His men echoed him almost in unison.

"We would rather die."

Bin Sheng's jaw tightened. This was exactly what he had feared. If the captives refused to speak, they would gain nothing from this operation. Worse, they might never uncover the greater network behind them.

Perhaps they had acted too early.

Qi Cheng exhaled slowly.

"Then we will have to apply pressure."

Mi Qianhu laughed.

"You think pain frightens us? We are not cowards who switch loyalties when convenient."

Bin Sheng leaned closer to Gao Yiyi and lowered his voice.

"They are hardened. Ordinary torture may not work."

Qi Cheng agreed silently. He had seen men endure shattered bones without yielding a single secret.

For a brief moment, uncertainty hung in the air.

Then Gao Yiyi smiled faintly.

"There is another method."

Both deputies turned toward him.

"In Gao Family Village, we possess a celestial treasure bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Their eyes sharpened.

"When assassins once killed four of our men during an attempt on Bai Yuan's life, Dao Xuan Tianzun granted us a means of extracting truth. That treasure is called Cooling Oil."

Even the name caused unease.

Qi Cheng frowned slightly.

"And where would we obtain such a thing now?"

"I will return to the village and request it," Gao Yiyi began.

He never finished the sentence.

Shouts erupted outside the office.

"Something has appeared!"

"A huge green vat!"

"My eyes are burning!"

"Move back!"

The commotion rolled inward like a wave.

Gao Yiyi's expression shifted from surprise to delight.

"There is no need to travel. Dao Xuan Tianzun has already answered."

Outside, an empty water vat near the entrance now brimmed with a viscous green liquid. Fumes rose from it in shimmering distortions, sharp enough to drive the crowd several meters back. Workers covered their faces, eyes watering violently.

Above it all, unseen, Li Daoxuan observed with quiet amusement. The uproar over captured spies had drawn half the factory's population, and he had noticed quickly enough to understand the situation. He had not heard every detail, but he had heard enough. When the word torture was mentioned, he had casually allowed a few drops of Cooling Oil to fall into the vat below. That was all it took.

Gao Yiyi turned toward the prisoners.

"The gift has arrived. Begin."

Mi Qianhu straightened despite the ropes binding him.

"My will is unbreakable. My loyalty is unshakable. Do not think that a mere substance can—"

He did not finish.

He was lifted and thrown into the vat.

The effect was instantaneous.

The burning was not limited to skin. It invaded eyes, nose, throat, lungs, and every sensitive surface at once. It felt as though invisible needles pierced him from all directions, as though his very breath had turned into fire.

His composure shattered.

"You rebels," he screamed, voice breaking. "How dare you use such methods. My ancestors have served faithfully for generations. I will not yield. I will not—"

The words dissolved into raw, animal cries.

For a few seconds that felt endless, he endured.

Then pride crumbled.

"I confess," he shouted hoarsely. "I confess. Pull me out."

Silence filled the courtyard.

Two workers rushed forward, squinting through tears, dragging him out before drenching him repeatedly with clean water. They lowered him into a basin to neutralize the sting.

Mi Qianhu lay there trembling, chest heaving, every breath shaky.

"That is inhuman," he whispered. "Too brutal."

The remaining twenty four men stared at the vat.

None of them spoke about loyalty again.

Chapter 1189 A Beginning with a Bang, an Ending with a Whimper

Gao Yiyi did not raise her voice, yet the pressure in it was unmistakable.

"Speak. Who sent you? And what exactly were you trying to steal?"

Mi Qianhu lifted his head despite the bruises blooming across his face. His lips curled in disdain.

"Hmph. You underestimate me. I am a Jinyiwei thousand-household commander. Do I look like some petty thief sneaking around for scraps?"

That gave everyone pause.

"A Jinyiwei thousand-household commander?"

The atmosphere shifted at once. What had felt like an industrial security incident suddenly carried the weight of imperial authority.

Mi Qianhu seized the moment. He jabbed a finger toward Zhu Yujian, who still wore his bamboo hat.

"You. The one in the bamboo hat. You abducted the imperial fugitive Zhu Yujian from Henan. Where have you hidden him? Hand him over now, and perhaps you will be allowed a clean death. Continue shielding that traitor, that renegade guilty of high treason, and His Majesty will see that you die without a whole corpse. Your entire clan will be wiped from the earth."

He was bound. He had just been thoroughly "educated" with essential balm. And yet, the moment he regained enough breath to speak, he roared like a tiger that refused to admit it was in a cage.

Zhu Yujian blinked.

"Huh? What?"

For a few seconds, confusion ruled his face. Then realization struck.

Ah.

Of course.

When Zhu Cunji rescued him before, he had been dressed exactly like this. Bamboo hat. Same cut of clothes. Same silhouette. To the Jinyiwei who had only glimpsed him from a distance, he and his rescuer must have looked identical.

So in their minds, the man in the bamboo hat had kidnapped Zhu Yujian.

And now they had been tracking him ever since.

Which meant they had technically followed him... to him.

Zhu Yujian let out a long sigh and turned toward Gao Yiyi, Qi Cheng, and Bin Sheng.

"I owe you three an apology. This mess is mine. They weren't after your factory at all. They were after me."

The moment he spoke clearly, Mi Qianhu froze.

"A Henan accent?"

The others stiffened.

Wait.

The man who rescued Zhu Yujian had spoken with a Shaanxi accent.

This one... did not.

They were seasoned investigators. The confusion lasted only a heartbeat.

Then their eyes widened.

"You... you are Zhu Yujian!"

"The bamboo-hatted man rescued you, then disguised you as another bamboo-hatted man!"

"You're planning a rebellion!"

The words burst out together, as if they had been corked too long.

Zhu Yujian immediately began waving both hands in panic.

"No. I'm not. I didn't. Absolutely not."

Mi Qianhu barked a harsh laugh.

"You are plotting rebellion. You, Zhu Yujian, have harbored treasonous ambitions for years. Setting up a massive factory in Shaanxi to produce weapons. Do you think we are blind? His Majesty was right to strip your title and reduce you to a commoner. You are an arch-rebel!"

"I'm not!" Zhu Yujian protested, voice cracking. "I truly am not!"

Mi Qianhu's eyes blazed.

"Confound it! If I were not bound here like a dog, I would fight you to the death myself, traitor!"

At that moment, he clearly understood his situation. Once he had exposed what he believed to be Zhu Yujian's treason, survival was unlikely. Even if these people did not kill him, he would never leave quietly.

So he poured everything into curses.

"There are more Jinyiwei than just us. Others will track you down. Someone will report your wicked rebellion. I will wait in the underworld and watch you be dragged to execution like a dog before His Majesty!"

He ranted with astonishing stamina.

Meanwhile, Gao Yiyi, Qi Cheng, and Bin Sheng exchanged glances.

"So... they weren't trying to steal industrial secrets?"

Qi Cheng rubbed his forehead. "If that idiot had just explained himself earlier, we wouldn't have needed to baptize him in essential balm."

Bin Sheng sighed. "I thought he was from Wuzhen Chaoha. Turns out he's just Jinyiwei. All that chaos for nothing."

Gao Yiyi tilted her head thoughtfully.

"So what do we do now? Arresting a prince inside Dao Xuan Tianzun's liberated territory... does that even count as a crime? Do these Jinyiwei require labor reform?"

The three of them looked upward at the sky almost in unison.

They genuinely did not know whether Dao Xuan Tianzun would be amused or irritated by this farce.

High above, Li Daoxuan was indeed amused.

He laughed. Properly laughed.

Once he finished, he considered the matter seriously.

Strictly speaking, these Jinyiwei had committed no grave crimes. No theft. No murder. No arson. No fraud. They had stormed into the Chang'an Automobile Factory in an official capacity and made an enormous blunder.

Death was excessive.

Severe injury was unnecessary.

Several years of labor reform would be disproportionate.

A few days of labor reform would be meaningless.

Temporary detention seemed reasonable. Yet if released, they would report Zhu Yujian's "rebellion" to the capital. And Li Daoxuan did not want flames of civil war consuming the realm. His aim was transformation, not catastrophe.

After only a few seconds of thought, he synchronized with the golden embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Gao Yiyi's chest.

"Hand them over to the Jinyiwei in Xi'an."

The Jinyiwei in Xi'an had once served under Shi Kefa. Since Shi Kefa had long ago become a devoted follower of Dao Xuan Tianzun, the Xi'an Jinyiwei had effectively joined the Daoist sect as well. Each bore an embroidered image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on their uniform.

When the message came, they arrived swiftly at the factory.

They took one look at the two dozen capital Jinyiwei, bruised, tied, and deeply humiliated, and could not help shaking their heads.

"You traveled all this way and did not even contact us first? Investigating on someone else's turf without coordination? You brought this on yourselves."

Mi Qianhu's expression darkened further.

"You saw Zhu Yujian and did not arrest him? Have you joined the rebellion too?"

The Xi'an Jinyiwei spread their hands.

"There is no point debating that now. Come with us."

They did not untie them. Bound hand and foot, Mi Qianhu and his men were escorted away.

And just like that, peace returned to the Chang'an Automobile Factory.

Zhu Yujian stood there looking painfully awkward.

"Now that you all know who I am... you won't report me, will you?"

Everyone burst into laughter.

"The ones who wanted to report you are already being handled by the Xi'an Jinyiwei. Who else would report you? Relax. Continue enjoying your visit."

Someone chuckled.

"What a spectacle. Thunder at the beginning, drizzle at the end."

"Exactly. A grand explosion that fizzled into nothing. Like a comedy that forgot its own punchline."

The crowd began dispersing.

Almost.

Yanzi turned slowly toward her husband, Bin Sheng. Her eyes were sharp.

"My dear husband. It seems you have hidden quite a bit from me. With those martial skills of yours, you cannot possibly be just some refugee from the Northeast. Who are you, really?"

Bin Sheng looked as if he were about to be executed.

"My wife... if I tell you, promise you won't hit me."

"Speak."

He swallowed.

"I used to be an elite soldier of the Later Jin."

Yanzi inhaled.

Then she screamed.

It was not a small scream. It was the kind that shook rafters.

Everyone who had just started walking away turned back instantly.

"Oh?"

"So the grand farce did not end after all."

"Looks like the real drama is starting now."

Bin Sheng flailed his hands.

"Yanzi, I didn't mean to hide it from you."

"I don't want to hear it!"

"I was wrong!"

"I said I don't want to hear it!"

And thus, what had begun with accusations of imperial treason ended with a domestic battlefield far more terrifying than anything the Jinyiwei could have staged.

Bang at the start.

Whimper at the finish.

Or perhaps... not quite yet.

Chapter 1190 Complying with Heaven's Will

Bin Sheng had once infiltrated the Ming Dynasty under far more dangerous circumstances.

He had crossed borders, concealed identities, swallowed humiliation, and survived battles that could have killed him ten times over.

None of that compared to this.

Yanzi was angry.

Now, a reformed prodigal is worth more than gold. Yanzi did not truly care that Bin Sheng had once been a man of the Later Jin. That was the past. The world had changed. People had changed.

What angered her was something far more serious.

He had kept it from her.

"I'm not talking to him," she declared, lips pressed tight. "I am absolutely not talking to him anymore."

Then she turned on her heel and marched toward the cafeteria kitchen, sleeves rolled up like a general preparing for war, and began cooking with enough force to intimidate the vegetables.

Bin Sheng stood in the yard, pale.

"Help me. Someone help me. Think of something."

This was a man who could master machinery after glancing at a blueprint once. A production pacesetter. A Labor Model. One of the Ten Outstanding Young People. The sort of person subordinates described as omnipotent.

Now he looked like a drowning man clutching at reeds.

He grabbed a few workers.

"How do I make Yanzi stop being angry?"

The workers stared at him blankly. Their understanding of women was even shallower than his.

One coughed. "Maybe... buy her a gift?"

Another brightened. "Yes! The navy brought back rouge and powder from Jiangnan. I heard women love that. Madam Yanzi will surely like it."

Bin Sheng's eyes lit up like someone had just handed him a military strategy manual.

"You're absolutely right. Let's go. Now. We buy gifts."

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Yanzi was waiting.

Waiting for him to come in. To apologize. To coax her. To lower his voice and admit he had been wrong.

Instead, a group of female workers rushed in with fresh news.

"Factory Director Bin left."

Yanzi froze. "Left?"

"They say he took people with him. Boarded a train to Xi'an."

The kitchen knife hit the chopping board with a sharp crack.

"He made me angry," Yanzi said slowly, "and instead of apologizing, he ran off to Xi'an?"

The female workers gasped in unison.

"That's outrageous."

"You must teach him a lesson."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun just descended earlier and even gave us cooling balm. Let's ask Dao Xuan Tianzun to judge this!"

That was all the encouragement needed.

Within moments, a small army of female workers surrounded Yanzi and marched toward the open yard where Dao Xuan Tianzun had manifested earlier.

Yanzi lifted her face to the sky.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun! Bin Sheng is bullying Yanzi. You must preside over justice!"

A breeze passed overhead.

Then, from the sky, a large sheet of paper slowly floated down.

On it were written clear, elegant characters:

"Dao Xuan Tianzun finds it difficult to arbitrate domestic disputes."

And just like that, Li Daoxuan vanished without a trace.

He could reshape economies. He could redirect the fate of provinces.

He was absolutely not stepping into a marital argument.

---

Meanwhile, Mi Qianhu and his bound entourage were escorted onto the great iron train.

Even after having ridden it once, the machine still unsettled them. The thunder of its wheels, the sheer weight of iron and steam, the sense that mountains themselves might tremble before it.

But what frightened Mi Qianhu more was another realization.

The capital knew nothing of this.

He turned sharply to the Xi'an Jinyiwei.

"You are all in league with rebels, aren't you? Has news truly been sealed within Shaanxi? Not a single report about such a strategic transport has reached the capital?"

The leading officer, Hundred-Household Commander Zhou, glanced at him calmly.

"Commander Mi, several years ago, Governor Wang Shunxing submitted a memorial describing this iron vehicle to His Majesty."

Mi Qianhu blinked. "And?"

"His Majesty declared the governor was speaking nonsense and deceiving the throne. He was dismissed shortly afterward."

Mi Qianhu went silent.

Commander Zhou continued, "The next governor, Lian Guoshi, naturally did not mention it again. Not everyone wishes to lose his post."

Mi Qianhu clenched his fists.

"If one report can be dismissed, what about multiple? The Censor-Inspector. The local Jinyiwei. If all of you had submitted memorials together, His Majesty would have believed it."

Commander Zhou smiled faintly.

"At the time, the Censor-Inspector Wu Shen was a member of our Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect. The local Jinyiwei commander, Shi Kefa, was also one of us. Why would we memorialize?"

Mi Qianhu felt the blood drain from his face.

"So for years... you have all been part of the rebel faction."

The word rebel hung heavy in the carriage.

Then something else struck him.

Wu Shen... was now Governor of Shanxi.

Shi Kefa... now held military authority in Anqing and Chizhou.

Mi Qianhu groaned softly.

"Three provinces... already in your hands. If you rebel..."

He did not finish the sentence.

Commander Zhou only said, "You will see."

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The train arrived in Xi'an.

Waiting at the station stood Zhu Cunji.

Here, in his own domain, he did not bother with disguise. He wore the robes of the Qin princely heir, attendants flanking him in neat rows, the air thick with pomp and confidence.

Mi Qianhu was brought before him.

The moment he saw Zhu Cunji standing there openly, Mi Qianhu's last strand of hope snapped.

"So even the Prince of Qin's Residence has joined the rebels. You are colluding with Zhu Yujian. You defy Heaven's will."

Zhu Cunji laughed lightly.

"Defy Heaven? That depends on who you think Heaven favors."

He raised a hand and pointed upward.

"This heir is complying with Heaven's will. Heaven believes Zhu Youjian is not doing a very good job. So the old man himself descended to guide us. We are merely following Heaven's instructions, striving to make this world better."

Mi Qianhu snapped, "Nonsense. 'Heaven descended,' 'the old man,' these are the same empty slogans as the Eternal Venerable Mother or the True Void Homeland. Tricks to deceive the ignorant masses."

Zhu Cunji's smile sharpened.

"Only the ignorant masses? Then say that to Wu Shen. Or Shi Kefa. Or Sun Chuanting, the current Governor of Shaanxi. Are they ignorant? Do they lack discernment?"

Mi Qianhu hesitated.

Zhu Cunji spread his hands.

"But in truth, this heir has no interest in rebellion. Court politics exhaust me. I prefer eating, drinking, sightseeing."

He paused, then grinned.

"The only things I have done for the realm are build two railways. And begin planning a third."

Mi Qianhu's heart skipped.

"A third?"

"Yes. From Hanzhong to Guangyuan. Then extending all the way to Chengdu. Once complete, the West Han Railway will become the West Chengdu Railway."

Mi Qianhu recalled the iron monster that had carried him through mountains as if they were flat plains.

If that machine connected Xi'an and Chengdu, transporting thousands across the perilous passes of Shu...

The strategic implications were terrifying.

Then another thought struck him.

"You dare build into Sichuan? Are you not afraid the people there will report you?"

Zhu Cunji laughed openly this time.

"Sichuan?"

He tilted his head.

"It is already ours."

Mi Qianhu's vision went dark at the edges.

And for the first time since leaving the capital, he truly began to wonder whether the empire he served still existed in the shape he believed it did.