

Great Ming 1241

Chapter 1241 The Old Lady Should Return

The words Great Khan of Mongolia struck Hong Chengchou harder than any spear.

So that was the truth.

These people had not merely negotiated with the Mongols. They had subdued them so thoroughly that even the Great Khan now stood within their system. No wonder the northern frontier had fallen quiet. No wonder Mongol traders now arrived at border markets in orderly fashion, exchanging horses and wool for tea and grain without incident.

Hong Chengchou was no ordinary scholar. He understood military structure, political leverage, and the delicate balance of power between steppe and agrarian empire. A few rapid deductions were enough.

If the Prince of Qin, Zhu Cunji, were to declare that he marched to protect the throne, if he raised troops and advanced toward the capital at this moment, Zhu Youjian would not be able to resist. The court armies were scattered. Border pressures had eased. The people's hearts seemed to lean elsewhere.

Yet they had not risen.

Perhaps they truly meant what they said. They did not wish the Manchus to seize advantage. They did not wish commoners to suffer war. Instead they transformed the realm from the outer provinces inward, step by step, replacing structure without open confrontation.

The dynasty might change hands without a single decisive battle.

The thought pressed on Hong Chengchou's chest.

Far away, in the capital, inside the imperial study, the emperor Zhu Youjian sat reviewing memorials.

Recently the work had felt unusually light. Sichuan was calm. The Central Plains were calm. The Mongols were quiet. The Manchus had not stirred. Even the Europeans along the Fujian coast had ceased causing trouble.

The world appeared tranquil.

He believed he had inherited chaos from his brother Zhu Youxiao and transformed it into order. Officials praised stability. Reports spoke of restoration. Confidence had returned to the court.

His mood soared.

At that moment an eight year old girl ran into the study, laughing brightly.

"Father Emperor, come play with me."

Zhu Youjian looked up. It was his eldest daughter. Her face seemed carved from jade. She radiated innocence.

History had not yet written her future. She did not know the suffering that would one day define her. In this moment she was only a child seeking attention.

The emperor smiled.

"Be good. Father is busy. Let the palace maids accompany you."

She pouted.

"You are always busy. I want to go outside the palace."

He stiffened.

"Absolutely not. The outside world is dangerous. There are many villains. Do not be foolish."

She huffed and ran out.

He watched her leave with softened eyes. Then the warmth faded. Fatigue returned as he picked up another memorial.

Before he had read two pages, a eunuch hurried in.

"Your Majesty, there is trouble."

Zhu Youjian looked up sharply.

"What now."

"The Eight Kings in the Central Plains were just suppressed. But the Chuang King has reappeared in Shandong. He is different this time. He does not burn or plunder. He spreads a children's rhyme. The Chuang King arrives and no grain is collected. The common people flock to him. Town gates open without resistance. Several counties have fallen without battle."

The emperor's face darkened.

Shandong.

That land had long been fertile soil for sectarian uprisings. The White Lotus movements had once flourished there. Rebellions had erupted before, drawing tens of thousands in mere weeks. Suppression had required enormous effort.

If peasants there were once again persuaded, momentum would build rapidly.

"Order the Ministry of War to dispatch troops immediately," he said.

The eunuch hesitated.

"The Minister of War has not yet taken office. The lower officials are waiting. They hesitate to act without direction."

Zhu Youjian frowned.

"Where is the new minister."

"Your Majesty removed Yang Sichang and appointed Hong Chengchou. He is still traveling to the capital."

The emperor remembered. He managed countless matters daily. Names and positions sometimes blurred.

"Hong Chengchou is capable. Especially in suppressing bandits. Once he arrives he will resolve Shandong swiftly."

Another young eunuch rushed in, breathless.

"Your Majesty. Disaster. Hong Chengchou has been seized on the road to the capital. His servants wait outside the palace crying for assistance. They claim he was captured by bandits."

Zhu Youjian stood abruptly.

"Captured."

"They speak incoherently," the eunuch continued. "Something about strange beverages. They mention three old enemies. Ji San'er. Wang Hu. And someone called Little Red Wolf."

Silence filled the study.

The emperor slowly sat down.

"If he has fallen into their hands, his life is likely forfeit."

Grief welled in his eyes. He valued Hong Chengchou's talent deeply. To lose such a minister before he even assumed office felt like a cruel blow.

The chief eunuch Cao Huachun bowed slightly.

"Regardless of his fate, the Ministry of War cannot remain leaderless. Your Majesty must appoint another without delay."

Zhu Youjian closed his eyes and considered.

This new Minister of War would immediately face the revived Chuang King. Only a proven commander would suffice.

Suddenly an idea flashed in his mind.

The previous Chuang King had been defeated by Sun Chuanting, who led the Tongguan garrison and local militias with decisive force. Sun had experience dealing with this exact enemy.

The emperor's lips tightened.

"Draft an edict. Summon Sun Chuanting from Shaanxi at once. Promote him to Minister of War. He will take charge of suppressing the Shandong uprising."

The order was given.

Messengers hurried out.

In another part of the empire, unaware of the imperial decision, a woman stood before a polished bronze mirror.

Her hair was arranged with meticulous care. Her expression sharp. Years of concealment had not dulled her presence. If anything, restraint had refined it.

She had watched events unfold from the shadows. Trade expanded. Power shifted. Old structures loosened.

She touched the edge of the mirror lightly.

"It is time."

A maid beside her looked up nervously.

"Madam."

"The stage has changed," the woman said calmly. "The old balance is breaking. I cannot remain hidden forever."

Her identity had once commanded fear. Her influence had shaped factions within court and countryside alike. When tides turned she withdrew, preserving strength.

Now currents aligned once more.

"The old lady should return."

Her tone carried neither vanity nor anger. It carried certainty.

Outside, wind brushed against hanging lanterns. News traveled along roads. Edicts sped toward provinces. Rebellions gathered rhythm. Officials repositioned themselves like pieces on a board.

In the capital, Zhu Youjian felt resolve harden within him. Sun Chuanting would restore order. The ministry would function. Stability would return once more.

In the west, Hong Chengchou remained within a system he did not yet fully comprehend. His capture might not mean death. It might mean transformation.

Across the realm, forces moved quietly.

The board was being reset.

And those who had once stepped away were preparing to step back into the light.

Chapter 1242 Storm One

Shaanxi, Governor's Yamen.

A eunuch stood at the entrance, swaying his head as if reciting poetry rather than an imperial decree. His voice rose and fell dramatically.

"Governor of Shaanxi, Sun Chuanting, you are to enter the capital immediately, assume the post of Minister of War, and take charge of bandit suppression affairs in Shandong..."

Sun Chuanting lowered his head.

"This minister accepts the decree."

The moment the eunuch finished reading, his solemn face flipped like a theatrical mask. In a blink, it became all smiles and flattery.

"Lord Minister, please take care of this humble servant in the future."

Sun Chuanting gave a soft grunt. No extra nonsense. He handed over a congratulatory silver ingot, clean and efficient, and dismissed the man.

Only after the eunuch's figure disappeared beyond the gate did Sun's expression harden.

He lowered his head and spoke quietly to the golden-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun embroidered over his chest.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, His Majesty orders this official to enter the capital. What should I do? The administration of Shaanxi is manageable. Frankly speaking, the junior high graduates from Gao Family Village can handle it better than I can now. But I am still the principal of the Huangpu Military Academy. If I go to the capital, my students..."

The golden-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun grinned.

"Leave the academy for now. Let the other instructors manage it. What awaits you in the capital is far more important."

Sun Chuanting bowed his head further.

"After I enter the capital, what direction should I take? I ask Dao Xuan Tianzun to illuminate the path."

Dao Xuan Tianzun let out a light sigh.

"First matter. Chuang Wang."

Sun's eyes sharpened.

"He has reemerged. That much I expected. The moment he shouted, 'When Chuang Wang arrives, no grain tax is collected,' I already knew he had gained a new strategist. His name is Li Yan. A capable man. Chuang Wang regained popular support with his help."

Sun Chuanting paused.

"Then... since he has changed, perhaps we should reassess him? A prodigal who returns is worth more than gold?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun shook his head gently.

"True transformation comes from learning. A man studies, refines himself, elevates his spirit. Only then can he turn back for real. Chuang Wang is not a man who loves learning. His change now is merely a strong dose of medicine administered by Li Yan. It is not self-elevation. When the medicine wears off, he will relapse into his old ways."

Sun Chuanting's scalp tingled.

Dao Xuan Tianzun continued.

"Li Yan is talented. He is also a good man. But when Chuang Wang inevitably returns to his old nature, Li Yan will be killed. A pity. Handle it as you see fit."

Understanding dawned instantly.

Chuang Wang was beyond saving.

Li Yan was not.

"Second matter," Dao Xuan Tianzun said. "The capital is a crucial defensive line against the Jian slaves. They suffered heavily at Pi Island. They may not dare invade again soon. But once you enter the capital, our militia can slip in under the name of your household guards. You will become a key piece in advancing toward Liaodong."

Sun Chuanting nodded slowly.

"In the past, we were too far from the Jian slaves. Even if we wanted to strike, it was inconvenient. But once I am in the capital, we can move militia into the city, then pass the frontier to attack them. That will be much easier."

"Third matter."

Dao Xuan Tianzun smiled.

"It is time to educate the capital officials. Bring new thought, new concepts, new productive forces into Beijing. Wash their brains a little. Those who can keep up with the era, absorb them. Those who drag behind the era, topple them. Let them understand this. When the era discards you, it shows no mercy."

This time, Sun Chuanting fully understood.

"I understand."

"Next," Dao Xuan Tianzun said, "you must select some militia to accompany you. Choose carefully."

...

Choosing who would follow Sun Chuanting to the capital was no small headache.

The core Gao Family Village militia would not do. They had never mixed within the imperial bureaucracy. They were raised entirely under Gao Family Village rules. Send them to Beijing and they would stick out like chili peppers in a bowl of plain porridge. Trouble would follow within days.

As for those who had once served within the system, such as Old Southern Wind, Shi Jian, and White Cat, they now held official posts granted by the court. They could not disguise themselves as household guards.

In the end, Sun selected six hundred of Old Southern Wind's former subordinates.

These six hundred men had once been border troops. They had served in the imperial establishment and understood court regulations. At the same time, they were small officers and rank-and-file soldiers. The court would not remember their faces. Disguised as Sun family guards, they would pass unnoticed.

One day later, Puzhou City.

Sun Chuanting stood before six hundred veteran border soldiers.

Old Southern Wind stood beside him and sighed.

"Principal Sun, it's a pity I hold the post of Puzhou Garrison Commander. I cannot accompany you. My men will follow you instead."

He turned to his old subordinates and shouted,

"You all know what kind of man Principal Sun is. After entering the capital, protect him well. Understood?"

"Understood! We swear to protect the Principal to the death!"

Among the crowd, one voice was particularly loud.

Chen Qianhu.

The moment Sun Chuanting saw his face, he deliberately unfocused his eyes, turning Chen into a blur to avoid injury.

"Chen Qianhu. A celebrity like you is also coming to the capital?"

Chen Qianhu puffed his chest.

"I'm only famous in the Liberated Zone. In the capital, no one will recognize me. I will take Southern Wind Brother's place and manage the men for you. Back when Southern Wind Brother was released early from the Huanglong Mountain Reform Camp, I was the one leading them."

Sun nodded.

"I see. That works. But... do be careful. Try not to frighten the children of the capital."

Chen Qianhu froze.

The soldiers froze.

Chen's voice turned tragic.

"Frighten children? These days I'm the one bullied by children! Every time I walk the streets, I get blasted with bamboo water guns until I'm soaked head to toe."

The soldiers burst out laughing.

Chen roared, "What are you laughing at?"

These old comrades feared neither his rank nor his face.

"Hahahaha!"

Old Southern Wind barked, "We're sending troops out. Be serious, damn it. No laughing."

Silence snapped into place instantly.

They did not fear Chen Qianhu.

They feared Old Southern Wind.

Thus, six hundred fierce border veterans disguised themselves as Sun family guards. Chen Qianhu took command. Gao Family Village's signature weapons were carefully concealed. And they followed Sun Chuanting toward the capital.

Meanwhile, the various units that had surrounded Dabie Mountain and annihilated the Eight Great Kings, after resting at home for a time, began to stir again.

"Vacation's over!"

"Gao Family Village First Regiment, return to formation!"

At the same time...

On the northern frontier line, the commander of the Gao Family Village Armored Cavalry Battalion, Zao Ying, gently set down her well-fed child, Zheng Xiaoniu.

Then she silently put on her uniform.

"The child's grown enough," she muttered.

"It's time for this old lady to return to the ranks."

Storm Number One had begun to gather over the capital.

Chapter 1243 A Natural Chasm Becomes a Highway

Early in the morning, Zhu Cunji knocked on Hong Chengchou's door.

At this moment, Hong Chengchou had just sat up in bed. He had not even brushed his teeth yet.

The knocking startled him.

This official's just-woken-up appearance, how could it be shown to others?

In a flash, he moved.

Zero point zero one seconds to comb his hair.

Another zero point zero one seconds to wash his face and brush his teeth.

Another zero point zero one seconds to smooth out every wrinkle on his robe, aligning each fold with military precision.

By the time Zhu Cunji knocked again, Hong Chengchou was already seated upright in a chair, dignified and serene, as if he had risen at dawn, read several classics, and meditated upon the fate of the empire.

"Rebel," Hong said calmly, "why do you come to see this official so early?"

Zhu Cunji grinned.

"Do you know? The court already considers you dead. They have appointed Sun Chuanting as Minister of War."

Hong Chengchou's brows twitched slightly.

Sun Chuanting was part of the rebel faction. Now promoted to Minister of War and entering the capital? What safety remained in the imperial city? At any moment he could coordinate inside and out, open the gates, and welcome disaster.

It's over. The Great Ming is truly finished.

That was what he thought.

On the surface, however, he merely lifted his eyebrow a fraction.

"Oh. Now I know."

Zhu Cunji tilted his head.

"We seized your position. No regrets?"

Hong replied evenly, "After order is restored, what belongs to this official will eventually return to this official."

Zhu laughed.

"You are quite broad-minded. Fine, I came to discuss something."

"Speak."

"After Sun Chuanting left, the court did not appoint a new Governor of Shaanxi. But the work still needs to be done. You are skilled in such matters. How about helping manage the governor's duties?"

Hong's expression did not change.

"You dare privately appoint a governor?"

Zhu waved his hand.

"Not appoint. Just let you sit there and handle the work. We are not saying you are officially Governor. Actually, Dao Xuan Tianzun told me that in the future we will not even have the title of governor. Only county magistrates and city mayors."

Hong's heart trembled.

They are already designing a new bureaucratic system? How utterly insane.

Zhu scratched his head.

"I do not understand it fully either. I am just informing you. Will you lend a hand?"

Hong said coldly, "You rebellious traitors are not afraid that this official will see all your secrets?"

Zhu burst into laughter.

"What secrets? Just internal administrative files. Look as much as you like."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"I do not know why, but Dao Xuan Tianzun seems to value you highly. He just said that letting you review internal affairs might be beneficial. Our Gao Family Village system is very advanced. But a system

that is too advanced cannot simply be imposed overnight. We need someone like you to integrate it, to blend it with current realities."

Hong's jaw tightened.

"This official will not work for rebels. Only death can repay imperial grace."

"Oh? Not willing? Then forget it."

Zhu waved casually and walked toward the door.

Just as he stepped out, a bit of dust drifted down from the ceiling and landed on Hong's sleeve.

Hong immediately flicked it away with precise movements, brushing his sleeve clean.

Zhu chuckled to himself as he left.

This fellow has no intention of dying. A man ready for death would not care about a speck of dust. He will surrender eventually. I will chat with him again tomorrow.

...

Elsewhere.

Early morning.

Li DaoXuan was still enjoying his lazy sleep.

Suddenly, from inside the box came a loud clang, clang, clang.

The "Special Divine Summoning Artifact."

A massive bell engraved with Dao Xuan Tianzun's likeness was ringing.

Li DaoXuan knew immediately.

Gao Yiye was calling him.

The little people rarely summoned him unless the matter truly exceeded mortal capability.

He propped himself up on the edge of the bed and leaned his face over the box.

Below was the watchtower. Gao Yiye stood on the third-floor balcony, gazing at the sky with joy.

"Tianzun, you have arrived."

Li DaoXuan smiled lazily.

"What problem cannot be solved?"

Gao Yiye clasped her hands.

"Reporting to Tianzun. The Mingyue Gorge plank road project has sent word. They cannot dig any further. They request your assistance."

Li DaoXuan understood at once.

Tens of thousands of former bandits plus tens of thousands of Sichuan civilians had been working from both ends toward the center. The Hanzhong to Guangyuan section of ordinary road had essentially been opened and leveled. Only certain parts lacked cement paving, and the railway tracks had yet to be laid.

Now over one hundred thousand workers were blocked at both ends of Mingyue Gorge.

Just this final stretch of Shu Road remained before full connection.

And this stretch truly could not be dug by human hands.

Recently, due to the pacification of the Central Plains and Sichuan, his "Box Salvation Index" had been increasing geometrically. His field of vision had expanded rapidly.

The radius now exceeded five hundred kilometers.

The most treacherous section of Shu Road, Mingyue Gorge, had just entered his field of view.

He had waited long for this day.

Naturally, he would make his move.

"Very well," Li DaoXuan said. "I will help them dig."

Gao Yiye's eyes sparkled.

"May I go watch?"

Li DaoXuan laughed.

"Of course. I need a few days to prepare magical treasures for moving mountains. Use that time to head over and enjoy the spectacle."

Gao Yiye beamed.

"Wonderful! We go watch the fun!"

She ran down from the watchtower, summoned her special guard unit, and set off toward Mingyue Gorge.

...

Up here, Li DaoXuan began to think seriously.

His hand inside the box turned into a giant hand dozens of meters tall. But even with such a hand, trying to dig through Shu Mountain was ambitious.

He needed tools.

Electric drills. Chisels. Hammers. Shovels. Essential.

Even then, competing against a mountain scaled down only two hundred times would be exhausting.

For example, a peak originally one thousand meters high, reduced two hundred times, would still be five meters tall.

Five meters.

Two and a half Li DaoXuans stacked together.

Even with drills and hammers, dealing with that would be tough.

And he could not let the little people see him struggling awkwardly.

That would damage his handsome celestial image.

Good.

Time to buy better toys.

He opened Taobao.

Search.

Click.

Order placed.

Storm Number One Micro Excavator.

Suitable for indoor and outdoor use. Length just over two meters. Width under one meter. Height only one point three meters. It could easily enter courtyards or even operate indoors.

Multi-functional with interchangeable front arms: mechanical rake, auger drill, hydraulic breaker hammer, soil ripper, grapple.

Perfect divine treasure for home living, travel, and moving mountains.

Mingyue Gorge.

He was coming.

Chapter 1244 No Big Deal

The Storm One excavator couldn't go up to the second floor, so Li Dao Xuan had to move the box back down to the first floor, into the yard.

As early as several years ago, Li Dao Xuan had already set up a canopy in the yard ahead of time, ensuring privacy so that people outside couldn't see what was going on in his yard.

Now, moving the box into the yard naturally wasn't a worry.

The box had a scaling function. He first restored the box to the size of a viewing box, carried it into the yard, then tapped "enlarge," and the box expanded again, turning into a massive viewing box that filled up half the yard.

A few days later, the excavator arrived.

When the delivery guy brought this excavator into the villa area at Zhaomu Mountain, he was a bit dazed. Nowadays, rich people living in villas were playing with excavators? Buying toys didn't have to be this outrageous.

But he didn't dare ask about a rich person's hobbies. After handing it over, he quickly took off.

Li Dao Xuan took over the excavator, studied the manual for half a day, then personally climbed aboard, drove it into his villa, and parked it in the yard.

Here, it was worth noting that operating this thing without an excavator license was illegal.

But using it a couple of times in your own yard, no one would come to bother you about it. Just make sure not to drive it out.

Li Dao Xuan carefully drove the mini excavator over to the side of the box...

It was his first time operating this thing, so he was a bit rusty, but it wasn't a big problem.

He first adjusted the view to a deserted mountain wilderness with no people around.

Then, he maneuvered the excavator and dug a claw right into the head of that barren mountain.

"Boom!"

A massive roar, the earth shook and the mountains trembled.

In the Ming Dynasty era, a small barren mountain was instantly scooped up into the sky like that, vanishing without a trace.

Great, the experiment was a success.

He'd play around a few more times to get proficient.

As a kid, Li Dao Xuan had always wanted to play with this stuff. Heavy machinery was a man's romance!

Did you know what kind of beauty men liked the most? A beauty who understood how to change shafts and maintain a Dongfanghong big tractor; that was simply a man's ultimate favorite.

Li Dao Xuan went into a frenzy of practice, and several barren mountains fell victim to his hands...

He reached out and tapped on the box, switching the view to Mingyue Gorge.

At this moment, Gao Yiye had just arrived at Mingyue Gorge.

Along the way, she'd eaten delicious food in Xi'an, then sampled local specialties in Hanzhong, eating and playing all the way, happy and carefree, finally reaching the most treacherous Shu Road in the world.

She looked up ahead and got a big shock: "The Shu Road is this dangerous?"

A subordinate beside her whispered: "The difficulty of the Shu Road is harder than ascending to the heavens; Li Bai even wrote a poem about it."

Gao Yiye: "I knew it was dangerous, but I didn't expect it to be this dangerous."

At this point, Gao Yiye actually felt a little worried.

She'd always been able to see the Tianzun's true form, and no one in the world knew better than Gao Yiye just how tall and big the Tianzun was.

The Shu Mountains in front of her were several times taller than the Tianzun. Would the Tianzun's magical power be enough?

Gao Yiye was a bit panicked!

Her somewhat troubled expression was immediately noticed by the labor reform prisoners nearby.

The bandit chief Mantianxing, from a distance, secretly pulled Mi Chuangjiang aside. The two retreated to a corner, and Mantianxing whispered: "Did you see the Saintess's expression? She seems really troubled! I think even the Tianzun might not be able to break through this section of the Shu Road."

Mi Chuangjiang looked up at the Tianzun sitting on the mountain peak and whispered: "I've actually been thinking about this too. Although the Tianzun is huge and majestic, he's only about a dozen zhang tall. Compared to the Shu Mountains that tower into the clouds, he's still a bit short. He might not be able to shake the Shu Mountains."

Just as the two were saying this, the Tianzun sitting on the peak of the Shu Mountains suddenly opened his eyes and smiled down at Gao Yiye below: "Yiye, tell everyone to move back a bit. I'm about to make my move."

Gao Yiye: "Huh? The Tianzun is making a move? Your magical power..."

"Hahaha, no need to worry." Li Dao Xuan laughed: "I've prepared a special magical treasure for moving mountains and overturning seas. Just wait and enjoy the show."

Gao Yiye was overjoyed and quickly had the special service soldiers start shouting: "Everyone, move back, move back! The Tianzun is about to cast immortal magic."

"All personnel retreat several li away..."

"Go watch from the distant mountain tops; don't get too close, or you'll die!"

"If you get caught in the mountain-moving, sea-overturning spell, you'll die without a whole corpse."

The labor reform prisoners on the northern side of Mingyue Gorge all started retreating.

At the same time, the Sichuan workers on the southern end of Mingyue Gorge also began to retreat.

People on both sides pulled back far away, climbed up to distant mountain tops, and opened their eyes wide, ready to watch the excitement.

Mantianxing and Mi Chuangjiang also stared wide-eyed.

Gao Yiye shouted loudly: "Don't blink; the Tianzun is about to make his move!"

Everyone: "Whoa!"

They saw the dozen-zhang-tall Tianzun suddenly fly up, whooshing into the sky and disappearing into the cloud layer.

Then, a metallic giant arm even larger than the Tianzun stretched down from the cloud layer... This metallic arm's forearm part was over a meter long outside the box, but inside the box, it became a super terrifying giant arm over two hundred meters long.

As soon as it extended out, it scared all the little people into exclaiming in unison: "Whoa!"

At the tip of the giant arm, what was now attached was a "breaker hammer." The "breaker hammer" reached the peak of the Shu Mountains, and with the power turned on... the "breaker hammer" immediately went to work, booming with a strike right onto the mountain rocks.

The power of this blow was truly earth-shattering!

The entire Shu Mountains trembled.

Distant peaks seemed to shake, and the little people were scared out of their wits.

Even bandits like Mantianxing and Mi Chuangjiang screamed in fright.

The "breaker hammer" started a continuous assault, a series of crazy strikes, with booming sounds ringing out nonstop. That mountain simply couldn't withstand such torment and, amid the terrifying loud noises, cracked into rubble, rumbling down.

The little people's faces turned pale with fear, not daring to imagine what their fate would be now if they hadn't retreated far and had stayed at the foot of that mountain.

"This... what kind of magical treasure is this? So terrifying?"

"Immortal realm magical treasures are truly too frightening."

The little people watched wide-eyed as that terrifying magical treasure hammered the entire mountain to pieces. Then, the giant arm retracted into the cloud layer. After a short while, it extended out again, but the tip wasn't the "breaker hammer" anymore; it had been switched to a massive digging claw.

It reached down from the sky, the huge digging claw aimed at the mountain body that had just been smashed, and fiercely scooped down...

A wave of earth-shaking, dust-flying chaos.

Large amounts of rocks and soil were dug up by it. Then, with a swing of the arm, all this mud and stone was dumped into a concave valley, instantly filling the valley flat. The bucket even flipped over and pressed down on the ground, compacting the mud and stone.

The natural chasm turned into a smooth path!

The little people: "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!"

Gao Yiye was excitedly shouting: "I've got the plot for episode nineteen of 'Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon Extermination Chronicles.' I'll draw this part in; it's too awesome."

Chapter 1245 Zhe Bu Goes Home

Before long, the five kinds of mechanical arms took turns in action.

One moment it was the auger drill, drilling a huge hole in the ground with one twist. The next moment it turned into a ripper, loosening the compacted soil in one go. Then a while later it became a grapple, reaching down from the sky, grabbing half a mountain, and flying up into the clouds.

The little people watched in stunned silence, utterly entranced.

It was so shocking that they couldn't speak for a long time.

It wasn't known how much time passed before Gao Yiye finally spoke: "Alright, the Tianzun has already helped everyone move the most difficult section of the Shu Road. Everyone can continue working now."

Her voice snapped everyone back to attention, and they all focused their eyes again.

They saw that the most dangerous part of the ancient plank road in Mingyue Gorge, which had blocked their way before, had disappeared, leaving only a cloud of dust still swirling.

A huge vacuum cleaner stretched down from the sky again, whooshing once, and all the dust vanished too. Now everyone could get a clear view of what was ahead...

Flat! It was flat ahead.

Gao Yiye said: "Get to work! Be careful as you advance; if there are any loose stones or sinking sand, you have to proceed cautiously. Pay attention to safety during construction."

The Workers: "Awoo!"

After a loud roar, the people from both the north and south ends of Mingyue Gorge rushed toward the middle together. With over a hundred thousand people working at once, in almost the blink of an eye, a flat road was connected.

Li Dao Xuan saw the people cheering on the newly opened road and felt quite happy inside.

This section of Mingyue Gorge wasn't easy to open even in later generations; it required tunnel boring machines, and it was a hard effort to finally open the Mingyue Gorge tunnel for traffic.

But in the box, he could handle it by smashing the entire mountain to pieces and carrying it away, which was actually simpler than in reality.

Hey!

The excavator was super fun to play with. What to dig next?

Now the view radius was 500 kilometers, so there were many places he could see.

Might as well go dredge the silt from the bottom of the Yellow River!

Managing the Yellow River was also a great deed that benefited the present and future generations.

Li Dao Xuan got addicted to playing with the excavator and didn't hold back at all. The view whooshed over to the Yellow River, found a spot where silt buildup made navigation difficult, and dug a claw right in...

The people on both banks of the Yellow River saw this scene and couldn't help but exclaim in surprise.

The voices on both banks didn't stop, but the excavator had already passed through ten thousand mountains.

...

Zhebu, the son of the chief of the Wushen tribe, had already grown into a sturdy young man this year. Originally, he should have become an illiterate grassland brute like all Mongolian kids when they grew up.

But his years as a hostage in Gao Family Village had turned him into a fine fellow proficient in both literary and martial arts.

"Sworn brother!" Zhebu clasped his fists toward Liu Maopao: "My father accidentally fell off his horse in a horse race a few days ago, got injured, and now has a disability. He walks with a limp. Although the other tribal chiefs aren't saying anything out loud, they're starting to look down on him in their hearts... If this continues, our Wushen tribe's leading position might not hold. Father wrote me a letter, wanting me to return to the grasslands and take over his position."

Liu Maopao heard this, and his eyebrows twitched upward slightly.

This was a good opportunity!

Gao Family Village's previous control over the Wushen tribe had only been through "threats and inducements," but control gained that way was ultimately unstable. Now it was finally time to send back a child who had grown up in Gao Family Village.

He thought this in his heart, but on the surface, he showed a very sad expression, patted Zhebu's shoulder: "Sworn brother, Erzhe went to the Maritime Academy, so only two of us three brothers are left in the village. Now you're going back too. I'm really reluctant to let you go."

Zhebu: "I'm reluctant to leave you too, sworn brother! But father can't do without me."

"Yeah! That's true." Liu Maopao said: "How about this: I'll go talk to the village committee about this, submit an application, and see if the Tianzun will allow you to go back."

Although no one said it out loud, everyone knew in their hearts that Zhebu was a hostage, not someone who could come and go freely. This point, Zhebu himself also knew.

He was already quite old when he came to Gao Family Village, much more sensible than Erzhe at the time.

Zhebu felt a little scared inside too. He was very worried that after he proposed "going back," it would arouse suspicion from the Han people, and maybe it would be unfavorable to him and his mother, so he didn't dare go directly to the village committee or to the saintess, but found his most trusted sworn brother Liu Maopao.

Liu Maopao told Zhebu to wait at home peacefully, while he quickly walked to the discussion hall in Gao Family Fortress and sat down in front of Shan Shier, who had returned to the village not long ago.

"Shan Manager! Zhebu wants to go back to the grasslands."

Shan Shier heard this, was slightly stunned, then said: "It's about time; he's reached the age. Even the smallest child has to grow up. Has he finally reached the point where he's unwilling to be a hostage and wants to break free from Gao Family Village's control? This is called [fledgling leaving the nest]."

Liu Maopao smiled: "Yes, he says he wants to go back to help his father, but in his heart, he's definitely thinking of using the opportunity to escape his hostage status. This is human nature, unavoidable, and I anticipated this day long ago."

Shan Shier nodded: "Handsome enough to the point of bubbling Liu Maopao, you know him best. Do you think we can let him go now? If he goes back, will the Wushen tribe break away from our control?"

Liu Maopao smiled faintly: "Actually, from the day we captured the Heavenly Khan Erzhe, Zhebu's political significance wasn't that important anymore. As long as Erzhe is still with us, whether Zhebu is here or not is the same."

Shan Shier nodded.

Liu Maopao continued: "Moreover, Zhebu has studied in our Gao Family Village for many years. He's accepted a lot of 'Gao Family Village culture,' learned many heavenly books, and he's personally seen the Tianzun manifest miracles. He knows our strength well. At this point, if we release him back to the grasslands, he won't dare have thoughts of betrayal. He's very clear that whether he's here as a hostage or not doesn't make much difference; we can send out a large army at any time to conquer the grasslands."

Shan Shier nodded again.

"Letting him go back has another benefit!" Liu Maopao said: "He'll become a spokesperson, promoting all our good points to other Mongolians."

At this point, Liu Maopao lowered his voice again: "If he goes back early, he can help us further control the Mongolian grasslands. When Erzhe grows up in the future and also wants to break free from our control, and returns to the grasslands, he'll find that Zhebu has already turned the grasslands into the shape of Gao Family Village, and no one will listen to the Heavenly Khan anymore."

Shan Shier laughed: "You kid, you're really [small person with big schemes]."

Liu Maopao: "Shan Manager flatters me."

Shan Shier: "Very good, just do as you say; let Zhebu go back to the grasslands. Oh right! Zao Ying returned to her military post a few days ago. The armored cavalry battalion, after years of preparation, has expanded many times in scale now. This is a good opportunity to go to the grasslands and [stir things up]."

Liu Maopao: "Third Manager, that's not an idiom, is it?"

Thirty-Two: "Not important, not important! [No big deal]."

Chapter 1246 Zhe Bu's Efforts

Zhebu was permitted to go home.

Moreover, even his mother Anjile was permitted to go home along with him.

This news, for Anjile and Zhebu, was without a doubt tremendously good news. They were so overjoyed that the mother and son hid in a place where others couldn't see and hugged each other, crying loudly.

Anjile's eyes were filled with tears: "Son, if this matter wasn't applied for properly, it could have brought disaster upon us mother and son. It's a good thing you dared to ask."

Zhebu: "Your child originally didn't dare to ask, but with Liu Maopao, this good sworn brother, your child mustered the courage and told the sworn brother. I didn't expect the sworn brother to be so loyal; he immediately helped by taking action and convinced the third manager."

Anjile let out a long sigh: "Liu Maopao has really been too good to our family. From the first day we mother and son arrived in Gao Family Village, we've received Liu Maopao's care. Over these many years, he's helped us in every aspect. This debt of gratitude, even after we return to the grasslands, must absolutely not be forgotten."

Zhebu: "Mother's lesson is right; your child will be good sworn brothers with him for a lifetime."

Anjile: "We still have shares in the Warm and Sleepy Wool Sweater Factory. Now that we're going home this time, what should we do about these shares?"

Zhebu: "Let's just keep these shares and not mess with them. Now, the major shareholder of Warm and Sleepy isn't the sworn brother anymore; the sworn brother transferred his shares to the village committee. Warm and Sleepy has changed from a 'private enterprise' to a 'village-run enterprise.' For us to hold a little bit of small shares in a village-run enterprise is a very good thing; we'll be seen as one of their own by Gao Family Village. We absolutely must not throw away these shares."

Anjile: "So that's how it is."

Zhebu: "Village-run enterprises won't make fake accounts. Even if we're not there in person, we don't have to worry about other shareholders swallowing our dividends. I'll have the sworn brother help us save the dividends."

At this point, Zhebu suddenly lowered his voice: "Mother, these shares can also become our fallback. If one day we can't make it on the grasslands, we can still come back to Gao Family Village and live off the shares from Warm and Sleepy."

Anjile suddenly realized: "Son, you're so smart now. You've become the smartest Mongolian I've ever seen."

Zhebu felt a little proud: "That's a must; I grew up studying heavenly books. In front of the Han people, I don't dare to be arrogant, but back on the grasslands, I'll be a top-notch smart person."

The mother and son happily packed their luggage, walked out the door, and saw Liu Maopao leading a group of village committee members coming to see them off.

The two sworn brothers "held hands, looked at each other with tears in their eyes, and were speechless, choked up."

In the end, it was still Liu Maopao who waved first: "Sworn brother, hurry and go, or I really won't be able to let you leave."

Zhebu clasped his fists, flipped onto his horse.

The mother and son together spurred their horses northward.

Mongolians were indeed awesome; Anjile, this middle-aged woman, could also gallop like the wind, steady on horseback as if sitting on flat ground.

Liu Maopao watched them go far away, then turned back and spread his hands to the group of village committee members: "Look at that Mongolian auntie's riding skills! Our Gao Family Village's cavalry battalion still needs a good hard training."

Zhebu and Anjile headed north all the way!

They crossed Huanglong Mountain, passed through Yan'an Prefecture, and soon reached the northern Shaanxi region...

To return to the grasslands from here, they inevitably had to pass through the Great Ming Dynasty's Yansui border town, and at this time, the Yansui commander was already Gao Family Village's person, Shi Jian.

Zhebu didn't dare to cross the border without permission; of course, he had to report to Shi Jian and hand over the pass issued by Gao Family Village's village committee.

The mother and son then rode toward Shi Jian's military camp.

Just as they arrived outside the camp, the mother and son saw a scene they'd never forget upon graduation. They saw ahead on the plain, a large pile of steam armored vehicles parked.

Moreover, they were all Gao Family Village's second-generation armored vehicles.

Using aluminum alloy to make the body, reducing the weight to one-third of before, lightweight yet not losing sturdiness.

At the forefront of the armored vehicle formation stood Zao Ying, loudly shouting to the soldiers: "This old lady went home to nurse the child for over a year, and now she's back again. In this over a year, have you guys trained properly?"

The soldiers replied in unison: "Daily training, we dare not slack off."

Zao Ying: "Now show me the results of your training!"

"Obey!"

The soldiers jumped onto the armored vehicles, closed the doors. A large swath of armored vehicles closed their doors at the same time, emitting a neat "bang" sound, with great momentum.

Zhebu and Anjile were almost dumbfounded watching the whole thing.

Then, all the armored vehicles moved at the same time, accelerating, charging into the distance. Over a hundred armored vehicles roaring together, charging together; it was simply a flood of steel...

Zhebu watched this scene in stunned silence: "This... how to resist this with flesh and blood?"

Anjile whispered: "Not being enemies with them, but being friends with them, might be the only way to resist."

Zhebu nodded dumbly.

The two, led by the duty soldier, found Shi Jian, submitted the "pass," and Shi Jian waved to let them through. Thus, the two finally crossed the Yansui border town and returned to the great grasslands.

They were finally home!

The mother and son's moods suddenly lifted, with a feeling of the vast sea and sky allowing birds to fly freely. They galloped wildly on the great grasslands for a while, and after spending a long time, finally returned to the Wushen tribe.

The Wushen chief came out to welcome them.

This chief, who had expanded his ambitions with Gao Family Village's backing and almost unified the grasslands, grinned: "Zhebu, you've finally come back!"

He was now the person with the greatest power on the grasslands...

But for some reason, when Zhebu and Anjile saw him at first glance, they suddenly felt a bit disappointed in their hearts. This wasn't the appearance they imagined a father (husband) should have.

In Zhebu's mind, the father he hadn't seen for many years should be as majestic as a fierce tiger, as proud as a gray wolf, carrying an aura like deep abysses and towering mountains.

But his father was too far from the image he imagined; in terms of temperament, he was quite lacking, just like a strong illiterate, the clothes he wore were of good quality, all top-grade animal skins, but his father wore them with a "dirty" feel, similar to the nouveau riche feeling over in Gao Family Village.

And Anjile also thought in her heart: The husband in my memory was a very capable man, but after getting used to seeing those heroes proficient in both literary and martial arts in Gao Family Village, looking at her husband again, she felt he completely didn't measure up.

Anjile suddenly remembered the new song recently released by Old Nanfeng's Huahua World Star Agency.

The lyrics went like this: "I really hope you've never seen the world, and love only my ordinary face for a lifetime."

The fault wasn't with the husband; it was with me!

It was me who had seen the world.

Wushen chief: "Anjile, what song are you singing?"

Anjile: "Ah, I'm happy, just humming a few lines casually."

Chapter 1247 I Have Been Waiting All Along

Zhebu ducked into the tent and sat down, but the moment he did, his whole body felt wrong, as if someone had dragged him off a brightly lit stage and tossed him into a cold iron pot, and no matter how he looked around, nothing felt right, nothing felt like home.

He had grown used to the solid brick houses of Gao Family Village, walls thick enough to block the wind and hold in warmth, windows that shut tight, doors that did not flap like nervous birds in a storm, and now that he was back in a tent, staring at felt walls that trembled with every gust, he felt as if the world itself had become flimsy.

Outside, the sky slowly darkened. One by one, the Mongols lay down to sleep.

But Zhebu's body clock refused to cooperate.

At this hour in Gao Family Village, the lights would just be turning on.

That was when the real life began.

The entire commercial district of Gao Family Village would blaze into color, lanterns and electric lamps glowing together in wild extravagance, red and gold and blue and green spilling over the streets like liquid festival. Villagers who had just gotten off work would flood in laughing and stretching, some heading straight for the snack stalls, some for the opera stage, others for the performances at the Huahua World Star Agency, where singers belted out love songs beneath dazzling lights.

The cinema entrance would be packed shoulder to shoulder. People would wait for the next screening, chattering excitedly, then surge forward the moment the doors opened, like a tide released from a dam. Street vendors would seize the chance, weaving through the crowd with trays of pastries and fried treats, shouting their prices with heroic determination.

Once you had experienced that kind of bustling splendor, you could not pretend it did not exist.

Zhebu lifted the tent flap and glanced outside.

Darkness.

A heavy, endless darkness stretched across the grassland. The night wind cut through the plains colder than the cafeteria auntie's fish knife, no, colder than her heart when she caught you trying to take an extra bun.

Zhebu suddenly realized something that frightened him more than any blade.

He could no longer live like this.

Just as the thought formed, a figure emerged from the darkness and hurried toward the tent. It was his mother, Anjile. She stopped at the entrance, saw that he was still awake, and froze for a moment before sighing softly.

"You too..." she murmured.

"Me too," Zhebu replied.

Mother and son stood there, staring at each other.

The silence was so strange it felt alive. It lasted at least three full minutes.

Finally, Zhebu lowered his voice. "Mother, how about this. After staying here a few days, you use the excuse that you need to return to manage the Warm-So-Cozy Wool Sweater Factory and go back to Gao Family Village."

Anjile blinked. "And you?"

Zhebu let out a long breath. "Your son cannot go back yet. Father is old. I must stay and assist him. And I have a duty to our people. I cannot let them live like this forever."

Anjile's eyes softened, but she said nothing.

"After you return," Zhebu continued, "help me think of a way to bring the good things from Gao Family Village to the grassland. I want our people to experience that life too."

"I do not understand any of that," Anjile admitted honestly.

"If you do not understand, ask my brother Liu Maopao. He is a good man. He will help us."

She nodded slowly. "Very well. I will stay a few days, then say I must return to manage the factory."

The next day at noon, beneath a blazing sun, Zhebu sat astride a tall horse and stared across the vast grassland.

How could he make it prosperous?

He forced himself to recall everything he had learned in Gao Family Village.

Scientific farming techniques? Impossible. The grassland was not suited for crops.

Commerce? How would that work? With so few people, how could goods circulate? Then his mind seized on an idea. The horse market. They could produce goods and sell them through the horse market to the Han people.

Just then, laughter drifted from a distance. Zhebu turned his head and saw Anjile chatting animatedly with several Mongol women.

"Anjile, you lived among the Han for years. What is it like there?" one woman asked eagerly.

Anjile straightened proudly. "Life there is wonderful. Let me tell you, they have something called electric lights. At night, you flip a switch, and with a snap the entire room becomes bright as day."

The women gasped. "Truly? Such a magical lamp?"

"Of course," Anjile said. "The Han people do not sleep when it gets dark. They light up whole streets in colors and then eat, drink, sing, and dance all night."

More gasps.

"The women there can work in textile factories. Some even become singers or actresses. One performance earns them a great deal of silver."

The gasps grew louder, tinged with envy.

Watching this scene, Zhebu felt a sharp ache in his chest.

Life here was too bitter.

At that moment, a young Mongol woman's hair slipped loose and fell across her face. She quickly pulled out a horn comb and began brushing it back while still listening to Anjile's stories.

Zhebu's eyes flashed.

In a single stride, he was beside her, grabbing her arm.

The young woman nearly fainted from shock. For one wild instant she thought the young clan leader had taken a fancy to her, and her face flushed red as she imagined the names of their future children.

Zhebu raised the horn comb high. "This. This thing is excellent."

She blinked in confusion.

He examined it carefully. "Horn combs are better than the wooden combs used by the Han. They have quality, texture. If we carve them beautifully, we can sell them at a high price."

He lifted his head. "I will build a factory. A factory dedicated to producing horn handicrafts."

Anjile stared at him. "Build a factory here? We cannot even put up stone houses."

"We will use tents as workshops," Zhebu insisted. "It can be done."

"But we are nomads," she reminded him gently. "When the grass is gone, we move. Will your factory wander with us?"

That question struck him like a hammer.

After a long silence, he clenched his teeth. "Then we must stop wandering endlessly. We must settle down and build a city."

Anjile shook her head. "If we gather in one place, how will we survive?"

"We ask the Han for help," Zhebu said firmly. "We build our city as close to them as possible. If we are near, they can provide materials and support during the difficult early years. Once we develop handicrafts and some of our people no longer rely solely on herding, the city will stabilize."

By now, many Mongols had gathered around, including the Wushen clan leader. They listened to Zhebu's plan with troubled expressions.

"Will the Han truly help us?"

"What do they gain from it?"

"If we build a city near them, will it not lead to war?"

In recent years, relations between Mongols and Han had improved beyond anything seen in centuries, yet fear lingered deep in their bones.

Could they really trust former enemies?

Zhebu looked at them, his voice steady but burning with conviction.

"I know you are afraid. I am afraid too. But we are too poor. If we continue wandering and herding as we always have, we will never become prosperous. We must build a true city. Some will live in the city, some will continue herding outside. We must change our industrial structure. We must evolve."

The wind swept across the grassland, carrying his words far into the open sky, as if even the earth itself had been waiting for someone to say them aloud.

Chapter 1248 How Exactly Do We Arrange the Strategy

When Zhebu spoke about "changing the industrial structure," the Mongols stared at him as if he had begun chanting scripture from the heavens, because to them those words were no different from celestial runes carved by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself, utterly incomprehensible and completely detached from the daily concern of sheep, grass, and whether the wind would freeze their ears off tomorrow morning.

But this time, Zhebu had returned not as a wandering son who had seen the world and come back with stories, but as the heir to the Wushen clan leader, the future head wolf of the grassland, and when the head wolf bares his teeth and speaks, the pack listens whether they understand or not.

"Pass down my order," Zhebu declared. "The tribe moves south. We settle as close as possible to the Han cities."

The reaction was immediate and anxious.

"Will they really not attack us?"

"If they see us moving in large numbers toward the border, will they not grow wary?"

"We finally reopened the horse market. What if this is seen as provocation and they shut it down?"

Voices overlapped like restless sheep.

Zhebu did not waver. In his eyes, the people before him were brave riders and fierce warriors, but in matters of economy and development they were illiterate children poking at a complicated machine with sticks, and if he allowed them to stumble forward blindly, the Mongols might remain poor for another several centuries.

If that was the case, then he would simply have to be a tyrant for a while.

He would ignore their fear, trust the knowledge he had learned among the Han, and drag his people forward even if they kicked and shouted all the way.

Thus the Wushen tribe began its southward migration.

They were already among the tribes closest to Han territory, and years ago when Gao Family Village first extended its influence toward the grassland, it was the Wushen who had encountered them first. Now,

with only a modest shift southward, they found themselves pressing close to the Yansui frontier garrison.

When they arrived, Zhebu did not waste breath on grand speeches.

"Set up the tents. We live here."

He pointed decisively.

"Those who must herd may take the cattle and sheep outward, but remember this place is home. After grazing, you return here."

Under his command, tents rose in dense clusters north of Yansui, forming a strange city made entirely of felt and rope, a city that looked as if the wind itself might pack it up and carry it away, yet stubbornly stood its ground.

On the second day after the tent city took shape, Zhebu issued another order.

"The factory recruits workers. Those skilled in making horn handicrafts report for work. Wages will be paid."

Of course, he was not foolish. Labor on the grassland was cheap beyond belief. He could not afford to pay Gao Family Village wages, nor did he need to. Even at twenty percent of what Han workers earned, he could hire more hands than he knew what to do with.

Families calculated carefully. The strong men would take the herds outward as before, while women and older children remained in the tent city to work in the factory. Unlike Gao Family Village, which refused to hire child labor, the Mongols saw no such problem. If a child could carry tools, polish horn, or run errands, then that child could earn coin.

Within days, a horn products factory operating entirely out of tents began production.

There was no accountant in the tribe capable of keeping proper books, so Zhebu did it himself, drawing on his experience as a minor shareholder in the Warm-So-Cozy Wool Sweater Factory. He calculated costs, tracked materials, counted finished goods, and discovered that numbers were far less frightening than charging into battle.

A few days later, the first batch of simple horn crafts was completed.

At that moment, Anjile stepped forward and announced that she would return to Gao Family Village to manage the sweater factory. The Wushen clan leader, who possessed several wives and had long since lost interest in his aging first wife, waved her off without hesitation.

"Go, go," he said casually, as if dismissing a servant rather than his own spouse.

Anjile took several curious women with her, loaded the first batch of horn products, and set off toward Gao Family Village.

Half a month later, money returned.

A large sum.

The horn products had sold out.

Sold out without suspense.

When Zhebu calculated the profits, his breath caught. The labor cost was astonishingly low, the selling price among the Han astonishingly high, and the difference between the two poured into his ledger like spring floodwater.

"So factories truly work," he muttered to himself, eyes shining. "We can expand production. Diversify the designs."

However, reality struck swiftly.

The first major problem of sedentary life emerged.

When Mongols gathered in one place instead of dispersing with their herds, survival resources tightened. In the past, hunger meant milking a sheep or slaughtering one. But now, the able bodied herders roamed far with the livestock, while those in the tent city had no immediate access to milk or meat.

Even if Zhebu paid wages, what good was silver without food to purchase?

Anxiety began to spread.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, the Han arrived.

Carriages rolled in, loaded with grain and daily necessities. The Mongols had feared that building so close to Han territory would provoke suspicion or even war, yet what came instead was assistance.

"Han and Mongols are one family!"

"Let us forget old grudges."

"Together we march toward a better future!"

The slogans from Gao Family Village spread quickly through the tent city, and relations between the two peoples reached a warmth unseen in a thousand years.

While this transformation unfolded on the grassland, another movement began far to the east.

Dongjiang Town, Pi Island.

A grand fleet eased into the harbor, hulls gleaming beneath the sun. Sailors unloaded supplies in relentless streams, passing crates and sacks down to waiting defenders, who hurried them into warehouses with broad grins.

Amid the bustle, Cao Wenzhao stepped off the Wanli Sunshine, planting his boots firmly on land before exhaling deeply.

"No matter how impressive the sea may be," he said, "I still prefer solid ground."

Dongjiang's commander, Shen Shikui, approached with a smile. "General Cao, it has been some time. What have you been busy with lately?"

Cao Wenzhao chuckled. "Nothing much. I have simply been waiting."

"Waiting?"

"For the Central Plains bandit suppression to conclude. Now it is largely finished. Only Chuang Wang remains in Shandong with a small force. Our strength can finally be redeployed."

Shen Shikui's eyes sharpened. "You mean..."

"Reinforcements have arrived."

The words struck like a drumbeat.

Shen Shikui turned toward the troop ships just as soldiers began pouring out in orderly ranks, movements crisp and disciplined.

A masked man leapt down from one of the ships and waved toward Cao Wenzhao. "General Cao, Liaodong will depend on you. We are not familiar with this place."

At that remark, several militia soldiers behind him exchanged peculiar looks and began whispering.

"General He has started pretending again."

"Yes, one of the Three Heroes of Liaodong claiming he is unfamiliar with Liaodong."

"He must be keeping a low profile on purpose."

"Ah, our General He has always been modest."

Cheng Xu sensed something off and turned sharply, glaring at the murmuring soldiers. They snapped their mouths shut instantly, as if they had never uttered a single word, their discipline returning as quickly as a blade sliding back into its sheath.

The sea breeze carried the scent of salt and iron.

They had all been waiting.

Now, at last, the board was set, and the next move would decide the fate of the northeast.

Chapter 1249 I Will Give You a Choice

Pi Island exploded into life.

There had already been nearly ten thousand defenders stationed on the island, and now more than two thousand elite Guan Ning cavalry led by Cao Wenzhao had arrived, along with five thousand Gao Family Village militia under Cheng Xu, so that the small island suddenly found itself crammed with close to twenty thousand men, enough boots stomping the ground to make the earth reconsider its structural integrity.

A decree came down in the name of Dao Xuan Tianzun, stating that the various forces should cultivate camaraderie before marching into battle together, because men who had shared food and laughter would guard one another with their lives when arrows began to fall.

And when such a decree descended, what else could one do but hold a banquet.

Soldiers slung arms over each other's shoulders and sat in long rows, tables groaning under plates of meat and vegetables, while the cooks delivered to each table a large wooden bucket of fermented rice water, which was not technically alcohol and therefore perfectly acceptable within military discipline.

"Brother, drink!"

Cups clinked, the cloudy liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim.

The Pi Island defenders were long accustomed to scarcity and nearly had heart attacks when they saw the drink almost spill, so they quickly stopped clinking cups for the second round and instead made a symbolic gesture in midair before pouring it straight down their throats.

"Ah, refreshing!"

The Gao Family Village soldiers burst into laughter.

"This is bland as ditch water," one of them said cheerfully. "Once the war is done and we are off duty, I will treat you to Wuliangye. That is real liquor, an immortal brew bestowed from the heavens by Dao Xuan Tianzun himself."

The Pi Island men stared in disbelief.

"You people live like this?"

"After this campaign we must find a way to try it."

Laughter rolled across the camp.

Inside the council hall, however, the mood was far quieter.

Several generals sat around a large table on which there was no food and no drink, only an enormous map weighted at the corners.

Cao Wenzhao gestured toward Shen Shikui.

"General Shen, brief us on the current situation around Pi Island."

Shen Shikui cupped his hands respectfully.

"After the naval battle off Pi Island, the Jianzhou forces suffered severe losses, roughly ten thousand men, and all of them elite troops. For them that was a wound too deep to ignore, so they have kept a low profile since then and have not attempted another assault on the island."

Cheng Xu nodded slightly.

Shen continued, "Huang Taiji has withdrawn his main forces. Intelligence suggests he is currently entangled in disputes with a Mongol tribe called Khalkha, though the details remain unclear."

Cheng Xu smiled faintly. "Entangled with a tribe?"

Shen Shikui chuckled. "In earlier years they would have crushed a minor tribe with a casual slap. After their losses here, even a small Mongol tribe can bargain with them. It is almost amusing."

The men around the table shared restrained smiles.

Cao Wenzhao leaned forward. "And Joseon?"

Shen's expression grew thoughtful.

"After subduing Joseon, they intended to demand money, troops, and grain for a renewed campaign against the Ming, but the losses at sea forced them to suspend that plan, so for now they have issued no new orders to King Injo."

He allowed himself another slight smile.

"King Injo still leans toward the Ming in his heart. He has not sent ships to harass Pi Island, nor has he stationed heavy forces in Tieshan across the strait. He is wavering."

Cheng Xu tapped the map lightly.

"In other words, if we demonstrate strength by striking the Jianzhou hard, King Injo may tilt back toward us."

Shen shook his head slowly.

"Strength alone may not suffice. When the Jianzhou invaded Joseon previously, King Injo appealed to the Ming for aid, and none came. He was left to fend for himself. If we appear powerful but fail to protect him when it matters, he will not dare break with the Jianzhou."

The logic was uncomfortably sound.

Cheng Xu's lips curved.

"Then we act on two fronts. We strike the Jianzhou to display power, and at the same time we send envoys to King Injo and make it clear that his elder brother has not abandoned him."

Soft laughter circled the table.

Cao Wenzhao returned to the map.

"How are the Jianzhou forces deployed?"

Shen Shikui's expression turned peculiar.

"Their main army has withdrawn, but three men remain stationed in Dandong, subtly containing Pi Island."

"Three?" Cao Wenzhao blinked. "Why three? Why not two or four?"

Cao Bianjiao rubbed his forehead.

"Uncle, perhaps the more relevant question is which three."

Cao Wenzhao coughed lightly. "Yes, yes. Which three?"

Cheng Xu spoke calmly.

"Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi."

Shen nodded.

"Correct. They know Pi Island best, so they were left in Dandong to monitor us and prevent raids into the rear. At the same time, their presence threatens King Injo, ensuring he does not dare defect."

Cheng Xu studied the map in silence for a long moment, eyes tracing rivers and roads.

"Very well. We begin with Dandong. We strike the Three Surrendered Kings hard, show King Injo our strength, and then open talks."

Shen Shikui nearly leapt from his seat.

He had witnessed the formidable naval strength under Cao Wenzhao, but the land forces of these newcomers remained untested in his eyes.

"This masked general," Shen began cautiously, "is this not somewhat bold? Dandong is heavily garrisoned. Kong Youde, Geng Zhongming, and Shang Kexi are not incompetent. Moreover, Shengjing lies not far away. The moment we attack Dandong, the Jianzhou main force will rush to reinforce. Their naval capabilities are poor, but on land they are formidable."

Cheng Xu inclined his head.

"Their land forces are indeed strong and must be respected. Yet they are not stronger than us."

Shen's face stiffened, suppressing the urge to call him arrogant.

Cheng Xu continued evenly.

"A capable general does not rely on bravado or flashy maneuvers with inferior numbers. One uses superior strength to encircle smaller forces and employs strategy to dismantle tactics. The highest form of warfare is to strike at plans."

Shen exhaled in relief, thinking perhaps the young man had reconsidered.

"Then perhaps we should avoid Dandong for now."

Cheng Xu shook his head.

"No. We simply arrange matters so that their main force cannot reinforce Dandong."

Shen blinked.

"And how exactly do you arrange that strategically?"

Cheng Xu's finger moved across the map, sliding from Dandong to Shengjing, then further west, then south toward the passes, as a faint smile appeared beneath the edge of his mask.

"We give them a choice."

He looked up, eyes sharp as drawn steel.

"When a man believes he faces two fires, he must decide which one to extinguish first, and while he hesitates, we strike where he is weakest."

Outside, the sound of soldiers laughing drifted faintly through the window, mingling with the distant crash of waves.

The board had been set long ago.

Now it was time to move the pieces.

Chapter 1250 These Bastards Are Playing Us

Cheng Xu leaned back in his chair with the kind of relaxed confidence that made other people nervous and said, "Did you not just tell me that the Jian slaves are currently busy squabbling with the Khalkha Mongols, tugging at each other like two dogs over the same bone, neither willing to let go and neither daring to bite too hard, so why not use that little quarrel to pin them in place and keep their hands tied?"

Shen Shikui frowned, clearly unconvinced, and replied, "The Khalkha are weak, painfully weak, and everyone knows it. The reason the Jian slaves are still wrangling with them instead of crushing them flat is simply because they are not taking it seriously. If we strike Dandong and the Three Shun Kings cry for help, the Jian slaves will immediately stop playing around. Once they get serious, they can slap the Khalkha over in a single blow, gather their banners, and march straight to reinforce Dandong without missing a beat."

Cheng Xu smiled, that infuriatingly calm smile of someone who already saw three moves ahead on the board. "The Khalkha alone may be weak, but Mongolia as a whole is not weak, and if we add just a little nudge, a little encouragement, perhaps even a little support, you might be surprised how loud the grasslands can roar."

Shen Shikui blinked in disbelief. "The whole of Mongolia? That sounds like a fantasy."

"Everything is possible," Cheng Xu replied softly.

...

Zhoushan, Maritime Academy.

Erzh'e had just completed two hundred meters of freestyle, slicing through the water with stubborn determination before erupting from the pool in a splash, hauling himself up to the edge and collapsing there, chest heaving, lungs burning, water streaming from his hair and down his shoulders. This Mongol boy had swallowed enough pool water to irrigate half the steppe before finally mastering the art of swimming, and now that he could keep himself afloat without flailing like a drowning goat, he swam with a speed that even surprised himself.

Two special service soldiers waiting by the pool stepped forward immediately and handed him a towel.

Erzh'e wiped the water from his hair and grinned broadly. "Tell me honestly, am I swimming well now?"

The two soldiers nodded in unison. "Very well, far better than before."

Joy lit up his face. "Next time the Demon Star rolls back into Zhoushan Harbor for resupply, I will cling to the side of his ship again even if I have to shamelessly beg my way aboard."

The two soldiers shot him a sideways glance. "You may apply properly, but you are not allowed to sneak on again. Last time we lost track of you, the two of us nearly got locked up in confinement."

Erzh'e scratched his head awkwardly. "Sorry about that. I truly did not mean to cause you trouble."

Just as he was speaking, a voice crackled from the device on one soldier's chest. "Erzh'e, there is something you need to be informed about."

He straightened at once. "What is it?"

"News has arrived from Bencun. The Jian slaves have begun stirring up trouble with the Khalkha Mongol tribes. As the Heavenly Khan of Mongolia, this concerns you directly, so you must be informed."

Erzh'e's eyes sharpened, and he listened intently.

"The Jian slaves are attempting to force the Khalkha to acknowledge their suzerainty and send tribute. Huang Taiji has even prepared to incorporate the Khalkha into his banner system. The Khalkha naturally refuse, and several small-scale clashes have already occurred, with casualties on both sides."

At this, Erzh'e's temper flared. "How outrageous. The Khalkha are part of my Great Yuan legacy. I am still the Heavenly Khan. How can they bow to another emperor while I yet live?"

The soldier nodded gravely. "Indeed, it is excessive. They did not even bother to consult you before reaching out to seize your subordinates. If it were me, I certainly would not endure such an insult."

Erzh'e clenched his fists. "What should I do?"

"You should exercise your authority as Heavenly Khan. Issue an order immediately, call upon all Mongol tribes to unite, support the Khalkha, and resist the Jian slaves."

"That makes sense," Erzh'e said eagerly, then hesitated. "But my imperial jade seal is not with me."

"That is no obstacle. The seal is safeguarded in the main fortress at Gao Village. As long as this is truly your will, or rather since it is your will, we can notify the fortress, draft a proclamation in your name, stamp it with the jade seal, and send it out. There is no need for you to travel thousands of li."

Relief washed over his face. "Excellent, then let us do it that way."

With that settled, he turned back toward the pool. "I will swim another lap. I just grasped a new trick for breathing, and I feel I can go faster and farther. As for the affairs of the steppe, I will leave them in your capable hands."

Soon afterward, a logistics officer arrived at the principal's office of the Maritime Academy. Li Dao Xuan's primordial spirit appeared there briefly each day during maritime lessons, and as long as one caught that window of time, matters could be reported directly to Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The special service soldier conveyed Erzhe's stance.

Li Dao Xuan sighed softly. "He understands, but he pretends not to understand, because even if he resisted, it would change nothing. Poor child."

Once news reached Li Dao Xuan, it might as well have been transmitted by wireless radio.

Minutes later, Gao Yiye took out the Yuan dynasty's imperial jade seal, dipped it into vermilion ink, and pressed it firmly onto a proclamation of punitive expedition that had long been prepared in advance, the sharp sound of the seal striking paper echoing faintly in the hall.

...

"The Heavenly Khan commands that all Mongol tribes unite under the leadership of Zhebu, the new chief of the Wushen tribe, and march to reinforce the Khalkha."

"The Heavenly Khan commands."

The proclamation spread across the grasslands with astonishing speed, as though it had sprouted wings and taken flight from tribe to tribe.

One chieftain in a relatively remote region, poorly informed about the shifting balance among the major tribes, glanced at the document and curled his lip. "After the old Wushen chief broke his leg, they pushed his son forward as the new leader. This Zhebu, who is he supposed to be, and why should we give him face?"

Someone nearby quickly interjected, "Do not underestimate him. Zhebu was raised among the Han people. He has gained even stronger support from them than the old chief ever had."

"Is that so?"

"It is absolutely true. The Han are backing him with full strength. He is not someone you should provoke."

The chieftain snorted. "I refuse to believe such nonsense."

He decided to acknowledge the order in name while ignoring it in action, reasoning that the Heavenly Khan's prestige had long since faded and the old Wushen chief could no longer fight, so what was there to fear.

A few days later, a terrifying wailing roar shattered his sleep. He stumbled out of his tent without even dressing properly and saw, stretching across the southern grasslands, a vast expanse of black iron vehicles rumbling forward like a moving wall of steel, while Mongol cavalry galloped ahead to clear the way.

At their head rode a young man.

Zhebu.

He reined in before the chieftain and shouted, "The Heavenly Khan has ordered you to raise your troops and aid the Khalkha. Why have you not moved?"

The chieftain was not frightened by Zhebu himself, but his gaze drifted to the iron monsters behind him, and he sucked in a sharp breath. "Those iron carts. The old Wushen chief only had a dozen or so. Now there are this many?"

Zhebu smiled proudly. "My father had ten. I have one hundred."

The man nearly lost his soul on the spot.

"Now you have a choice," Zhebu continued. "Option one is to raise your troops and fight me here and now. Option two is..."

The decision required no deliberation.

"I choose option two," the chieftain blurted out almost instantly.

Zhebu roared, his voice carrying the raw force of a young wolf asserting dominance. "Option two means you march to reinforce the Khalkha and fight the Jian slaves. What are you waiting for? Mobilize immediately, at once, right now."

Though young, when he shouted like that, there was already the bearing of a head wolf about him, and the chieftain, pale and trembling, scrambled back into his tent to don his armor, screaming to his men, "We march, we march at once!"