

## Great Ming 1261

Chapter 1261 Approved. Carry It Out Immediately

Since Binsheng had already spoken with such certainty, Gao Yiyi no longer had any objections. He reached out and shook Binsheng's hand.

"Then this glorious yet extremely difficult mission will be entrusted to you."

Binsheng straightened his back.

"We guarantee we will accomplish the task entrusted to us by our leadership."

His ten subordinates spoke in unison.

"We will never fail the expectations of the village committee."

Yanzi pouted unhappily, her lips sticking out in protest, but she did not say a single word against the decision.

Binsheng turned to her and gently took her hand.

"Thank you, my wife."

Yanzi blinked. "What are you thanking me for?"

Binsheng smiled softly.

"Usually you like to act stubborn with me and insist I listen to you. But when something this big happens, you did not oppose me even once. You simply stood there worrying quietly. If a man can marry a wife like this, what more could he possibly ask for?"

Yanzi blushed instantly.

"Hey, what are you saying in front of everyone? Now they all heard it. You are making me embarrassed."

She shook free from his hand and ran away as fast as she could.

Gao Yiyi chuckled.

"Alright, let us talk about the serious matters. Binsheng, what kind of support do you need from the village committee? Just ask."

Binsheng answered without hesitation.

"We only need one thing."

"Oh?"

"A set of Great Iron Wagon blueprints that are convincing enough to pass as real."

Gao Yiyi blinked.

"Hm?"

Binsheng explained calmly.

"When we originally came here, our mission was to steal the blueprints for the Great Iron Wagon. After we arrived, all contact with Jin was cut off. Over there they probably believe we already failed our mission."

Gao Yiyi immediately understood.

"So if you return with the blueprints, you can claim that you spent all this time infiltrating us and finally succeeded in stealing them."

Binsheng grinned.

"Exactly. That way the eleven of us can return openly to Jin territory. Moving around will become much easier. That is why I said this mission is not nine deaths and one life, and not even five deaths and five lives."

He tapped the table lightly.

"It is one death and nine lives."

Gao Yiyi raised his thumb in admiration.

"As expected. You professionals really do think differently."

Binsheng laughed.

"Just wait for our good news."

Gao Yiyi clasped his hand firmly.

"Return safely. That alone will count as a tremendous achievement."

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Liaodong – Jinzhou

This city had originally belonged to the Ming dynasty. But after Liaoyang and Shenyang fell into Manchu hands, Jinzhou and Lüshun also slipped into their control.

During the Tianqi era, the city had changed hands repeatedly between Ming and Manchu forces.

But by the eleventh year of the Chongzhen era, the city firmly belonged to the Qing. Ming no longer had the strength to even touch it.

The Qing soldiers responsible for defending Jinzhou were extremely nervous these days.

Only a few days earlier, news had arrived that Dandong had fallen and the Three Shun Kings had been killed.

The defenders of Jinzhou were terrified.

They understood very well why Dandong had fallen.

Strange Great Iron Wagons had appeared on the Mongolian grasslands, sweeping across them like monsters. The Qing banner cavalry had been beaten badly, and even the long-time Qing ally, the Khorchin tribe, had been crushed by those wagons and forced to submit to Ming.

No one in Jinzhou knew when a fleet might suddenly appear to attack their city, just as it had attacked Dandong.

At dawn, the sentries on Jinzhou's walls spotted something on the sea.

A battered merchant ship drifted toward the coast.

It looked like it had survived a brutal battle. Arrows were stuck all over the hull, several parts of the deck were burned black, and the sails were full of large holes.

A ship damaged like that should never have been able to sail at all.

Yet somehow it staggered forward.

With a scraping sound, it ran aground on the beach outside Jinzhou and stopped.

Eleven men jumped off the vessel and began waving wildly toward the city walls.

The defenders shouted nervously.

"Who are you?"

The leader among the eleven raised his voice.

"Ujen Chaha agent... Binsheng... requesting immediate report to your superiors. Inform them we have successfully completed the 'Jiang Gan Steals the Book Operation.'"

The ordinary soldiers at the bottom level had obviously never heard of any "Jiang Gan Steals the Book Operation."

They looked utterly confused.

Still, the message was passed up through the chain of command.

When it finally reached the highest officer stationed in Jinzhou, the reaction was instant.

The moment he heard the words "Jiang Gan Steals the Book Operation," he leaped to his feet.

"What? Quickly. Bring them into the city immediately!"

The gates of Jinzhou were opened, and soldiers rushed to the beach to escort Binsheng and his companions inside.

But Binsheng pointed back toward the wrecked merchant ship.

"The blueprints we stole are inside the ship. Please send more men to help move them."

The soldiers were puzzled but obeyed.

When they entered the cargo hold, they froze.

The entire hold was filled with paper.

Stack after stack after stack of drawings.

One soldier picked up a sheet and glanced at it.

His face instantly turned blank.

The drawing showed a strange stick-like object, sketched again and again from multiple angles.

"What... what is this?"

Binsheng snorted coldly.

"My advice is that you should not know. The higher the level of this secret, the closer you stand to death."

The soldier jumped in fright and immediately put the paper back.

Soon large numbers of soldiers began carrying the drawings out.

Each man hugged a thick bundle of papers.

The ship's hold was filled with so many blueprints it felt endless.

After a long time of hauling, the ship was finally emptied.

Meanwhile, a warehouse inside Jinzhou had become completely packed with paper.

Every soldier who helped carry them felt uneasy, worried they might now be silenced for knowing too much.

The commander of Jinzhou hurried over to Binsheng.

"You actually succeeded. The higher command believed you were all dead."

Binsheng cupped his fists.

"It was nine deaths and one life. We endured humiliation and hardship to finally steal the blueprints. Ming pursuers fought us several times at sea and nearly destroyed us. Fortunately heaven favors our great Jin, and we managed to return alive."

The commander waved his hand.

"Not Jin. We are called Qing now."

Binsheng froze in exaggerated confusion.

"What?"

"When you were carrying out the operation, our Great Jin renamed itself the Great Qing."

Binsheng scratched his head, pretending to be stunned.

"Ah? Ah? Really?"

The commander did not bother explaining further.

"In any case, the Great Qing is currently facing a crisis. Your return could not have come at a better time. Once these blueprints are delivered to the emperor, he will be extremely pleased. I will arrange transport immediately and send you to Shenyang."

Without hesitation he ordered a large number of wagons.

The enormous stacks of blueprints were loaded onto them.

More than ten carts were required before everything could be transported.

The commander did not understand why so many drawings were necessary, but he did not dare question it.

Soon a long convoy departed Jinzhou.

Binsheng and his companions traveled with the wagons full of blueprints, heading toward Shenyang.

Along the road they saw Qing soldiers everywhere digging trenches, piling stones, building low walls, and creating all sorts of strange obstacles.

Clearly, they were desperately trying to prepare defenses against the terrifying Great Iron Wagons.

Chapter 1262 Uncle Gives You Candy

Shengjing. The Imperial Palace.

Hong Taiji sat on the throne with a grave expression, scanning the ministers gathered in the hall.

"Regarding methods to deal with the Great Iron Wagons, does anyone have any better ideas?"

Fan Wencheng stepped forward and cupped his hands.

"We could also pour large amounts of fire oil onto the ground in areas where trenches cannot be dug in time. When the Great Iron Wagons approach, we ignite the oil. A large area will burst into flames, and the wagons will naturally be unable to advance. Otherwise, the people inside the iron wagon would feel as if they were trapped inside a steaming pot."

Hong Taiji thought carefully for a moment and nodded.

"Feasible. Record this plan for future use."

Next, Dorgon stepped forward.

"Although the Great Iron Wagon is sturdy, its wheels appear to be made from some relatively soft material. We could scatter large numbers of iron nails and caltrops across the ground to obstruct its movement."

Hong Taiji nodded again.

"Feasible. Record this plan as well. Have the blacksmiths begin forging large quantities of iron nails and caltrops."

Ajige stepped forward.

"If burning fire oil can stop the Great Iron Wagon from advancing, we could also organize a group of fearless warriors willing to sacrifice themselves. They would carry oil pots, rush forward, crawl beneath the Great Iron Wagon, and hang the oil pots underneath it before igniting them."

Hong Taiji frowned slightly.

"Feasible, but this tactic should not be used unless absolutely necessary."

The ministers continued offering suggestions.

Yet every proposal was purely defensive. Not a single one could be used for offense.

Hong Taiji felt his head throb.

"Does this mean that whenever the enemy brings out the Great Iron Wagon, all we can do is hide behind piles of messy defensive fortifications and tremble in fear?"

The ministers fell silent.

At that moment, a subordinate burst into the hall from outside, shouting excitedly.

"Your Majesty! Good news! Excellent news! The 'Jiang Gan Steals the Book Operation' has succeeded! The Jinzhou commander has escorted our spy team back, and they have brought with them the manufacturing blueprints for the Great Iron Wagon!"

The moment these words were spoken, Hong Taiji's face lit up with joy.

The entire court burst into excitement as well.

Hong Taiji's body trembled slightly.

"The manufacturing blueprints for the Great Iron Wagon have returned?"

"Yes!"

"The same Great Iron Wagon that left us completely helpless?"

"Yes!"

Hong Taiji could barely contain his excitement.

"Quick. Quickly bring the blueprints in so I can see them."

The civil and military officials all rushed outside. The rougher generals could not contain their curiosity and wanted to see the mysterious plans immediately.

In truth, Hong Taiji also wanted to rush outside and look.

But he was the emperor after all. He had to maintain some dignity and could only sit there and wait.

Soon a series of loud exclamations erupted outside the hall.

"What? This many blueprints?"

"You must be joking. The plans for a single wagon filled more than ten carts?"

"What in the world are these drawings?"

"Is this the blueprint for a single nail? Why are there more than ten drawings for one nail?"

Hearing all this, Hong Taiji's expression turned strange. His curiosity scratched at his mind like an itch he could not reach, yet he still forced himself to maintain composure.

After a long while, Fan Wencheng finally entered the hall, holding a single sheet of paper.

"Your Majesty, please examine this. It is the blueprint for the connecting axle of the Great Iron Wagon's left rear wheel."

Hong Taiji stared.

"The connecting axle for the left rear wheel requires its own blueprint?"

Fan Wencheng quickly waved his hand.

"No, no. The connecting axle for the left rear wheel has a total of thirty-two drawings, depicting it from thirty-two different angles. The one I brought in is merely one of them."

Hong Taiji froze.

This was utterly ridiculous.

"Bring all the blueprints inside. Let me see them."

Soon stacks upon stacks of drawings were carried into the hall. They quickly piled up along both sides of the chamber.

Each official picked up a sheet and examined it over and over, scratching their heads until they nearly grew lumps on them. Not one of them could understand what they were looking at.

Hong Taiji himself picked up a drawing and studied it carefully.

After a moment he set it down again.

He understood absolutely nothing.

So he asked, "Where is the man who stole these blueprints? Ask him to explain what exactly this is about."

Soon Binsheng was summoned into the hall.

As he stepped inside, he saw everyone flipping through the blueprints, yet not a single person looked at him with encouragement or praise.

A cold snort rose silently in his heart.

When he had achieved success at the Chang'an Factory, how had he been treated?

At the Model Worker Commendation Assembly, how glorious he had been.

But here in Manchu territory, he had accomplished such a tremendous feat, yet these high officials could not even be bothered to look at him.

In their eyes he was merely a lowly Ujen Chaocha spy.

A disposable tool.

Garbage to be thrown away once used.

Heh.

Hong Taiji spoke from the throne.

"You are the person responsible for the 'Jiang Gan Steals the Book' operation?"

"Yes."

Hong Taiji did not even ask his name.

"What exactly is the meaning of these blueprints?"

Binsheng replied calmly.

"The Great Iron Wagon is the crystallization of an entire industrial system. It involves countless technologies and requires multiple workshops..."

Hong Taiji interrupted.

"What is a workshop?"

"That is the Han people's term. It means a factory. Several factories are needed, each responsible for producing a specific component. In the end, all the parts are assembled together."

He picked up a drawing and pointed to it.

"For example, this component would be produced by one specific workshop."

Hong Taiji immediately sensed that the matter was far more complicated than expected.

"Then why does each component have dozens of drawings?"

"Because the parts are extremely complex and require very high precision. Otherwise problems will occur during assembly. Therefore every single surface of the component must be drawn clearly to ensure absolute accuracy."

The rough generals understood none of it.

But cultured officials like Fan Wencheng understood and nodded.

"That makes sense. Every surface of every component must indeed be clearly drawn. Otherwise craftsmen in different workshops would rely on their imagination and randomly shape the unseen sides. That would create chaos."

Hong Taiji frowned deeply.

"If so many drawings are required just to build a single Great Iron Wagon, then if we wanted to build one ourselves..."

Binsheng replied frankly.

"That would certainly be somewhat difficult."

Hong Taiji's face stiffened.

Depressing.

Just moments earlier he had been delighted.

He had assumed that once they obtained the blueprints for the Great Iron Wagon, they could manufacture their own and use them to fight back.

Just like in the past when they acquired the Ming dynasty's cannon-making technology and began producing cannons of their own to duel against Ming artillery.

But now he realized things were not so simple.

This entire room filled with drawings...

How many craftsmen would be needed to handle all this?

Binsheng cupped his fists.

"Your Majesty, while I was in Ming territory, I did not merely steal the blueprints. I also learned some of the basics. I can organize craftsmen to attempt building Great Iron Wagons."

Hong Taiji's eyes lit up.

"You can do this? Excellent."

"But I require a large number of workers."

"Take as many as you need."

"Our own craftsmen alone will not be enough. I have heard that after we conquered Korea, we captured five hundred thousand Korean slaves. Among them there must be many skilled craftsmen. I request permission to select some of them for use."

Hong Taiji immediately agreed.

"Approved. Carry it out at once."

Chapter 1263 Who Is Going to Feed Your Army?

The capital.

Lately the princes, dukes, ministers, and every other breed of highborn noble in the capital had begun to feel a creeping sense of panic.

Not ordinary panic, either.

The kind of panic that settles into a man's bones and refuses to leave.

The reason was simple. Chuang Wang, who was now raging across Shandong and the northern Zhili region, had been stirring up more and more trouble with every passing day.

Shandong had long been a nest for the White Lotus sect, and the imperial court had never been especially popular there to begin with. Once Chuang Wang's little nursery rhyme began spreading among the villages, the situation deteriorated even faster.

"Chuang Wang is here, no taxes this year."

Wherever that song was heard, the common people followed him as if carried along by the wind.

Not long ago, the Grand Secretary Li Jiantai had left the capital to investigate the situation outside the city. He traveled with a small escort of household guards and made his way to Dingxing County in Hebei, a place barely two hundred li from Beijing.

When he arrived outside the county gates, the people inside the city walls shouted down to him.

"Are you an official of the Great Ming, or an official of Chuang Wang?"

Li Jiantai replied proudly, "This official serves the Great Ming."

The result was immediate.

The gates slammed shut.

The county refused to receive him.

Li Jiantai was so angry his nose practically twisted sideways, but with nothing more than a few household guards at his back, attacking a county town was out of the question. He could only swallow his anger and leave in humiliation.

After traveling a bit farther, hungry and thirsty, he came across another county town.

He rode up to the gate.

The people on the wall asked the exact same question.

"Are you an official of the Great Ming, or an official of Chuang Wang?"

This time Li Jiantai thought for a moment and answered cleverly.

"I serve under Chuang Wang."

The gates opened immediately.

The townspeople welcomed him inside, set out an abundant feast, and sent him on his way with a full stomach.

The whole thing was so absurd it bordered on lunacy.

When Li Jiantai returned to the capital, he immediately gathered a force of pampered young soldiers from the capital and marched back to attack Dingxing County.

These "young master soldiers" were not exactly elite troops, but conquering a small county town was still well within their abilities.

Li Jiantai broke the city.

Then he flogged the county officials.

Thus the history books recorded a scene so ridiculous that later generations would read it and shake their heads in disbelief.

A county town only two hundred li from the capital had already reached such a state.

One could easily imagine how tense the situation in the capital had become.

Civil and military officials alike went about their days in constant anxiety.

Just then, a piece of uplifting news arrived in the capital.

"The newly appointed Minister of War, Sun Chuanting, has defeated the previous Chuang Wang. He has arrived!"

The moment this news spread, the entire capital erupted with excitement.

Officials and nobles poured out of the city like a flood and rushed toward the gates to greet him.

In the distance, Sun Chuanting's ministerial procession slowly approached.

At the front rode a tall man on a powerful horse.

His frame was broad and strong, the sort of body that clearly belonged to someone capable of fighting. Yet he lacked the crude roughness of a typical battlefield general. Simply by looking at him one could understand the phrase "a scholar who commands the sword."

Behind him marched six hundred household soldiers.

Every one of them looked alert and spirited, their posture straight and their aura fierce. At a glance anyone could tell they were seasoned fighters.

The nobles on the city wall immediately burst into cheers.

"Minister Sun!"

"Just looking at Minister Sun's bearing makes me feel reassured."

"As expected of the famous general who defeated the previous Chuang Wang."

"Now that Minister Sun has arrived, Chuang Wang will surely be pacified."

"Minister Sun, are you married yet? I have a daughter, eighteen this year, still unmarried..."

The crowd shouted happily, growing more excited by the moment.

Inside the procession, however, there was another man who was equally delighted.

The commander of the household guards.

That man was Chen Qianhu.

The capital had never screened any of those strange "films," so nobody here recognized him as the villain who had once been portrayed as committing every evil deed under heaven.

Chen Qianhu thought to himself with great satisfaction.

Heh.

In this place, no children are chasing me with bamboo water guns anymore.

They do not treat me like a villain here.

I, Chen Qianhu, will reclaim everything that once belonged to me.

I will rebuild my glorious and upright reputation.

There is absolutely no way children will hate me again.

This time I will show the utmost sincerity.

I will become a hero admired by all children.

With that noble resolution burning in his heart, Chen Qianhu stepped forward slightly within the formation, positioning himself just behind Sun Chuanting. He raised his hand and waved toward the crowd.

Especially toward the children.

He displayed what he believed was his warmest and most friendly smile.

Surely this level of sincerity would melt anyone's heart.

"Waaah!"

A child in the crowd suddenly burst into terrified tears.

"That man is scaring me!"

The child's parents followed the direction of the pointing finger and looked over.

They were instantly startled.

What kind of terrifying fellow was that?

The man possessed an extremely ferocious face. His expression was filled with killing intent, his entire aura radiating danger.

No investigation into his background was necessary.

Just looking at that face was enough to conclude that his hands had taken thousands of lives.

The sort of person who might casually dip small children in sauce and eat them, washing it down with a bowl of fermented bean juice.

The parents quickly pulled their child behind them.

"Do not look at him."

"Never make eye contact with him."

Chen Qianhu glanced to the left.

The entire crowd on the left immediately lowered their heads to avoid his gaze.

He looked to the right.

Everyone on that side also averted their eyes.

His gaze was like an area attack sweeping across the battlefield.

Wherever it passed, people scattered in panic.

Chen Qianhu fell silent.

At that moment a eunuch pushed his way out of the crowd.

It was Cao Huachun, one of the most favored eunuchs beside the Chongzhen Emperor. He hurried forward and bowed toward Sun Chuanting.

"Minister Sun, His Majesty has been waiting for you for quite some time."

Sun Chuanting replied calmly.

"On the road to the capital we encountered a small band of bandits. I dealt with them along the way, which caused a slight delay."

Cao Huachun looked surprised.

"Oh? Minister Sun also eliminated a band of rebels on the way? May I ask which group it was?"

Sun Chuanting said, "They seemed to be members of the White Lotus sect. Taking advantage of Chuang Wang's rebellion, they also came out to cause trouble. My men wiped them out. Three thousand White Lotus followers were captured."

Everyone present froze.

You captured three thousand rebels...

And you say it so casually?

Cao Huachun asked curiously, "Then where are these three thousand prisoners? I do not see them with you."

Sun Chuanting smiled faintly.

"How could I bring three thousand prisoners into the capital? That would create chaos. I had my household guards deal with them appropriately."

The moment those words left his mouth, the crowd's gaze slowly drifted toward Chen Qianhu.

They only dared to glance for an instant before quickly looking away, whispering among themselves.

"Did you see that man?"

"The commander of Minister Sun's household guards."

"With someone like him around, those White Lotus prisoners must have been handed over to him for execution."

"He looks like the type. Killing three thousand people probably would not even make him blink."

"Not just killing them. If you simply executed someone you would say 'put to death.' But he said 'deal with.' Think carefully about when people use that word."

"Tsk tsk. How exactly do you 'deal with' three thousand corpses?"

"There is only one possibility."

"They were eaten."

"Ah! Yes! That must be it!"

The faces of the capital's nobles instantly turned pale.

What kind of horrifying monster was this?

He had eaten three thousand people on the road to the capital.

With a collective rustling sound, the crowd retreated several zhang backward.

Chen Qianhu blinked in confusion.

"Huh? Huh? Huh?"

"I am clearly doing my best to show goodwill and repair my image."

"Why are they still afraid of me?"

This would not do.

It seemed he had to invest some real capital now.

Chen Qianhu reached into his robes and pulled out a small iron box.

Inside it were divine treasures bestowed from the heavens by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

They were called fruit candies.

Originally they had been huge, solid pieces of sugar. Merchants from Gao Family Village smashed them apart with large hammers, breaking them into small colorful chunks before packing them into iron boxes for sale.

Bright red, yellow, green, and orange pieces gleamed like jewels.

Each one carried the faint aura of heaven itself.

The price, naturally, was outrageously expensive.

But when it came to winning the hearts of children, nothing worked better.

Chen Qianhu had spent a small fortune buying them.

All for the sake of repairing his reputation so that children would stop chasing him with bamboo water guns.

Holding the expensive candy box in his left hand, he waved to the children with his right.

He revealed what he believed to be the gentlest smile of his life.

"Come here," he said warmly.

"Uncle will give you some candy."

The children screamed in terror.

Then they turned and ran for their lives.

Chapter 1264 Brother, I Have an Objection

Inside the Forbidden City, at Wenhua Hall.

Zhu Youjian stood there looking at the man before him, and the more he looked, the more pleased he became.

Sun Chuanting stood straight and calm. His bearing carried both the refinement of a scholar and the imposing aura of a seasoned general. Anyone who saw him would instinctively feel admiration.

Zhu Youjian spoke first.

"Sun Aiqing, the calamity caused by the bandit Chuang Wang, how do you believe it should be resolved?"

Sun Chuanting bowed slightly.

"Your Majesty, the reason Chuang Wang has grown so powerful is because corrupt officials have harmed the people for years. The court has lost the hearts of the common folk. In Shandong, the White Lotus sect has been active for a long time already, and resentment has been brewing among the populace."

He continued calmly.

"When Chuang Wang appeared and spread the children's rhyme 'When Chuang Wang arrives, no more taxes,' the people naturally flocked to him the moment they heard it."

Zhu Youjian sighed softly.

Sun Chuanting then said, "To defeat Chuang Wang, we must first break that rhyme."

Zhu Youjian looked puzzled.

"And how exactly do we break it?"

Sun Chuanting answered with confidence.

"Use public opinion to counter public opinion. Let the common people think carefully about those three words: 'no taxes.' Is such a thing truly possible?"

Zhu Youjian paused.

Then suddenly his eyes lit up.

"This plan... is brilliant!"

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"As long as the people understand that 'no taxes' is nothing more than a hypocritical lie, then I need only five thousand troops to crush the bandits completely."

Zhu Youjian was overjoyed.

"Excellent! Sun Aiqing, this matter will be entrusted entirely to you."

He raised his hand.

"I grant you the Imperial Sword. You may act with full authority."

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Outside Jinan Prefecture.

Chuang Wang stood with his army stationed outside the towering city walls of Jinan.

His strength had recovered surprisingly quickly.

When he had fled Sichuan earlier, he had barely escaped with only the old Eight Units still under his command. But after adopting Li Yan's strategy, the number of followers had grown at a terrifying speed.

Peasants from all over the region joined as soon as they heard the news.

In a short time, his forces had swelled to eighty thousand men.

This time there were no Shanxi merchants supporting him, and no other bandit armies coordinating with him.

But it turned out that the support of the common people was far stronger than any merchants or fellow rebels.

Chuang Wang turned to Li Yan beside him.

"How much longer before we can take Jinan?"

Li Yan smiled calmly.

"Not long at all. Our children's rhyme has already spread throughout the city. The people are waiting for us to enter so they will no longer need to pay taxes."

He pointed toward the distant walls.

"We only need to wait for the emotions of the people to erupt. When that moment comes, they will open the city gates for us themselves."

"Jinan will fall without a fight."

Chuang Wang looked at him with deep admiration.

"Mr. Li, you are truly remarkable."

Just as the two were speaking, Liu Zongmin came running over at full speed.

"Brother Chuang Wang! Strategist Li! Big trouble!"

Chuang Wang frowned.

"What happened?"

Liu Zongmin said hurriedly,

"Our spies disguised as beggars inside Jinan have reported something strange. A group of scholars has appeared inside the city. They are giving lectures in the streets and markets, telling the people things that are harmful to us."

Li Yan raised an eyebrow.

"Harmful to us? What exactly are they saying?"

"They are saying the 'no taxes' promise is a lie."

Li Yan looked genuinely confused.

"A lie?"

He shook his head firmly.

"We have never intended to deceive anyone. When we say no taxes, we mean no taxes. There is no trick behind it."

His voice grew more passionate.

"What I want is a world where no one bullies the common people, where everyone can live happily."

Then he asked quickly,

"The people surely do not believe such nonsense, do they?"

Liu Zongmin looked slightly embarrassed.

"The people... seem to be wavering."

Li Yan froze.

Impossible.

Absolutely impossible.

They had already promised no taxes. Why would the people hesitate?

Could it be that the people actually enjoyed paying taxes?

Li Yan asked seriously,

"What exactly did those scholars say?"

Liu Zongmin scratched his head.

"Our spy is illiterate. He did not understand most of it. The report he brought back is a complete mess. I cannot figure out their argument."

Li Yan sighed.

"Then I must go into the city myself and find out."

Chuang Wang was startled.

"Mr. Li, that is too dangerous. If something happens to you, I would lose my right arm."

Li Yan shook his head.

"This matter must be understood clearly. Otherwise we cannot succeed."

He paused.

"No matter the risk, I must go."

Seeing his determination, Chuang Wang knew he could not stop him.

So his men prepared a respectable scholar's outfit for Li Yan.

Once dressed, he looked exactly like a young scholar traveling to the capital for the imperial examination.

Very much like Ning Caichen from A Chinese Ghost Story.

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Early the next morning, Li Yan arrived at the gates of Jinan.

After paying the entrance tax, he quietly slipped into the city.

The moment he entered, he noticed a large crowd gathered at a street corner.

In the middle of the crowd stood a young scholar who looked no more than twenty years old. He held a folding fan and spoke confidently to the surrounding commoners.

"Everyone, please listen to me," the young man said loudly. "The bandits outside the city are deceiving you."

Li Yan listened carefully.

"When Chuang Wang arrives, no taxes. That rhyme is the greatest lie in the world."

The scholar continued.

"They say they will not collect taxes from you, but once they take power they will double and triple the taxes instead. Your lives will become even worse than they are now."

Only then did Li Yan learn the young man's name.

Liu Maopao.

He looked like someone who was very good with words.

Li Yan snorted inwardly.

Being eloquent meant nothing if the argument itself was nonsense.

Every false argument had weaknesses.

Breaking it would be easy.

He raised his hand and spoke like an ordinary citizen asking a question.

"Brother Liu, I have a question. May I ask it?"

Liu Maopao turned his gaze toward him.

"Of course. Please go ahead."

Li Yan asked calmly,

"How do you know Chuang Wang is lying? From what I can see, his army truly intends not to collect taxes from the people. The tens of thousands who have already joined him do not seem to be paying taxes at all."

He spread his hands.

"They are already doing it, yet you call it deception. Is that not simply baseless slander?"

The surrounding people immediately nodded.

"Yes!"

"That's right!"

"Chuang Wang's army has not taken even a grain from the people."

"They promised no taxes in the future too."

"Why do you say they are lying?"

Liu Maopao laughed.

He imitated Bai Yuan's usual style and pretentiously waved his fan.

"Since this brother has raised the question, then let us debate it properly."

He pointed his fan at Li Yan.

"I have a question in return."

"If the people do not pay taxes to Chuang Wang, then where will the army's pay come from?"

Li Yan smiled.

"That is simple. Take it from the rich landlords and gentry who exploit the people. Take it from the corrupt officials' treasuries."

He spoke with conviction.

"Use the wealth of the rich to support the poor. That is how the world can improve."

The common people immediately cheered.

"Exactly!"

"The landlords are all rich!"

"The rich people are bad anyway!"

"They got rich by oppressing us!"

"Just take their money to support the army. Why take taxes from us?"

Liu Maopao burst into laughter.

"That method works in the beginning."

He paused for effect.

"But the rich people in the world are not endless."

"Today you kill one landlord."

"Tomorrow you kill another."

"The day after that you kill another."

He leaned forward slightly.

"What happens when every landlord and wealthy family has been killed?"

Then he asked the question that made the crowd fall silent.

"When that day comes..."

"Who will feed your army?"

Chapter 1265 Finding a Supply Harbor

The moment Liu Maopao asked that question, Li Yan froze.

He was stunned.

Li Yan was indeed an educated man, but his learning still carried the limitations of his time. Compared with the people from Gao Family Village, whose knowledge was wide and strangely modern, Li Yan's understanding of deeper economic matters was actually quite shallow.

He had never really thought about such things before.

He had simply followed a burning sense of justice and joined Chuang Wang to overthrow the corrupt Ming court.

But expecting a young scholar to fully understand economics was truly asking too much.

That single question made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

Li Yan thought for several seconds before finally replying.

"It is true that one day all those exploitative landlords will be eliminated. But when the last of them is gone, the world will naturally already be at peace. Once peace arrives, there will be no need for armies anymore."

He spread his hands.

"When that day comes, the army can simply be disbanded. The people will not need to pay taxes to support it."

The poor villagers around him immediately began shouting in agreement.

"Exactly!"

"This gentleman speaks wisely!"

"If all the corrupt officials and greedy landlords are wiped out, the world will naturally become peaceful. Why would we need an army anymore?"

Liu Maopao nearly burst out laughing at such childish logic.

Holding back the laughter was not easy.

Fortunately, Liu Maopao was an excellent performer.

"Brother, your argument is truly... profound."

He waved his fan dramatically.

"Very well. Let us temporarily assume that the world will no longer need an army."

Then he stomped his foot lightly on the stone road beneath them.

The blue stone slabs of Jinan's main street were solid and well maintained.

He grinned.

"When Chuang Wang conquers the world and nobody pays taxes, the government will have no money."

He tapped the road again.

"So tell me. Who will repair this road?"

The moment this question came out, Li Yan felt as if something exploded inside his head.

But the poor villagers around him reacted faster than their brains.

One particularly loud man shouted immediately.

"Repairing bridges and roads does not have to be done by the government. The local gentry and landlords always love doing that sort of thing. They say it earns merit for their descendants."

Liu Maopao clapped his hands.

"Well said!"

Then he smiled slowly.

"But... did we not just say that during the process of achieving that peaceful world, all the landlords and gentry would already have been killed?"

The crowd suddenly fell silent.

Even the dumbest among them began to sense that something felt wrong.

Liu Maopao pointed toward the drainage ditch running along the side of the street.

"If the government has no money, who will clean this sewer?"

He tilted his head thoughtfully.

"The residents living beside it?"

"If the neighborhood shares the responsibility, will the neighbors quarrel when it is time to divide the work? What happens if one household refuses to do their part?"

He shrugged.

"Then no one does it?"

"Three monks with no water to drink. Sound familiar?"

The crowd exchanged uneasy glances.

Liu Maopao pointed again, this time toward a bun shop down the street.

"If the government has no money, there will be no constables or yamen runners."

"What if someone robs that bun shop? What if they beat the shopkeeper while stealing his buns?"

"Who will handle the case?"

"Will the local baojia system deal with it?"

He paused.

"But the baojia leaders are usually local gentry and landlords."

"And according to your plan, they have all just been killed."

The crowd's eyes widened.

Liu Maopao then raised his hand and mimicked the gesture of a night watchman striking a clapper.

"Third watch! Third watch! Beware of fire!"

He chuckled.

"If the government has no money, who pays the night watchmen?"

"They will have to go back to farming."

"And without night watchmen..."

He looked around at the crowd.

"Do any of you actually know what time it is right now?"

The crowd was completely stunned.

Finally Liu Maopao turned back toward Li Yan with a polite smile.

"Brother, you appear to be a man of learning."

"So allow me to ask one more question."

"If the government has no money, how will all these problems be solved?"

Li Yan sucked in a sharp breath.

Coincidentally, the aroma of Jinan's famous Four Happiness Meatballs drifted from a nearby shop.

Even the air he inhaled tasted fragrant.

But sweat the size of beans was already rolling down his forehead.

Liu Maopao turned back to the surrounding crowd.

"Look. Our learned friend has no answer now."

"That is because he has already realized something."

He raised a finger.

"A world without taxes is impossible."

"So I boldly predict that Chuang Wang's promise of 'no taxes' is merely a trick to amuse everyone."

He chuckled.

"Once he takes the throne, taxes will immediately return."

"And I suspect they will not be lighter than what the current court collects."

He looked around slowly.

"In fact, life may become even harder for you."

Li Yan clenched his teeth.

"Brother, after thinking about what you said earlier, I admit that 'no taxes' may indeed be unrealistic."

He paused.

"But when you say life will become worse for the people, I cannot agree with that."

"That is pure speculation without evidence."

"No evidence?"

Liu Maopao laughed.

"How could there be no evidence?"

"If brother wishes to hear it, I can analyze the matter a little."

Li Yan nodded.

"I am listening."

Liu Maopao began calmly.

"First of all, when Chuang Wang conquers the world, the rich people will all have been killed. Correct?"

Li Yan gave a reluctant grunt.

"Yes."

Liu Maopao spread his hands.

"Then let me ask another question."

"Are the rich people currently managing workshops, farmland, and all kinds of productive resources?"

Li Yan replied,

"Yes. That is precisely the foundation of their oppression."

"If they are eliminated, those resources can be handed to the poor. The poor will finally become prosperous."

The poor villagers immediately erupted into cheers.

"Exactly!"

"Kill the corrupt officials!"

"If I became an official I would do a better job than them!"

Liu Maopao suddenly pointed his fan at one of the loudest men in the crowd.

"You."

"Can you read?"

The man froze.

"No."

Liu Maopao continued calmly.

"If we make you the county magistrate, could you handle the job?"

"Would you even understand the government documents?"

The man instantly fell silent.

Li Yan immediately realized what Liu Maopao was trying to imply.

He quickly argued back.

"That is sophistry."

"You are trying to say that rich people are more capable while poor people are incompetent. That idea is completely wrong."

"There are capable individuals among the poor as well."

"If given the opportunity, they could manage these affairs just as well."

"They would not be inferior to the rich."

Liu Maopao sighed softly.

"I do not deny that."

Then he looked directly at Li Yan.

"But for a person to grow from knowing nothing into someone capable takes time."

"It requires experience."

He smiled slightly.

"For example, you, brother. I can tell you are highly educated."

"If given the opportunity, you could even handle the duties of a prime minister."

He paused.

"But if tomorrow morning someone suddenly made you prime minister without giving you time to learn the job..."

"Would you truly be able to manage every affair of the empire perfectly?"

If Li Yan had been an unreasonable hothead, he would probably have shouted immediately.

Of course I could. I would do far better than that useless Grand Secretary who does nothing but eat the nation's salary.

But Li Yan was not that kind of man.

He thought about the question carefully.

And suddenly his heart skipped a beat.

That was right.

If the rebel army captured Beijing tomorrow, killed the Grand Secretary, and forced him to take over the government immediately, could he really handle it?

No.

It would be impossible.

He had no administrative experience at all.

If he suddenly took charge of state affairs, the result would likely be chaos.

At the very least he would need several years to learn step by step before he could manage such responsibilities properly.

Liu Maopao smiled.

"Throughout all of history, every change of dynasty has followed a similar rule."

"No ruler has ever succeeded by killing all the wealthy and powerful at once."

"A portion of them must be preserved and temporarily used by the new regime."

"Only afterward can gradual replacements occur."

He folded his fan.

"That is because a nation cannot survive endless upheaval."

"Government must transition step by step."

"If every official position from top to bottom is suddenly replaced with inexperienced newcomers, the country will collapse immediately."

He then looked around at the crowd.

"And that is why I say your lives would become even harder."

"If the rebel army truly kills all the wealthy and replaces them with inexperienced poor men overnight, the nation will inevitably fall into chaos for several years."

He spoke slowly.

"You will live through turmoil far worse than what you suffer today."

"At least for a time."

"It will take many years before the situation stabilizes again."

The common people burst into a loud uproar.

"Wah!"

Chapter 1266 Heaven Behind, Hell Ahead

Sweat began to run down Li Yan's back again.

Only now did he finally understand what Liu Maopao had been trying to tell him.

Compared to the man standing before him, his own understanding of politics and economics suddenly seemed painfully shallow. His ideas were still immature, far from the level required to govern an entire nation.

Yet within the Chuang Army, he was already considered one of the most learned men alive. People praised him as clever, knowledgeable, a man who understood politics and statecraft.

If someone like him represented the highest level of intellect in the rebel camp...

Then if the Chuang Army truly seized the empire, how could the common people possibly live well afterward?

Li Yan's voice dropped unconsciously.

"Even so... the Chuang Army does not necessarily have to kill every rich man. Perhaps... perhaps only half of them..."

Liu Maopao raised an eyebrow.

"A moment ago you argued that killing the rich would fund the army through their wealth. Now you say only half should die."

He spoke calmly, but every word struck like a hammer.

"If only half are killed, will the money from the remaining half still be enough to fund the army? Enough to maintain the troops until the empire is pacified and the soldiers can finally be dismissed?"

He paused briefly.

"If the money runs out, what happens then? You will have to start collecting grain taxes earlier than planned, will you not?"

Li Yan froze.

"The world is not yet pacified, yet the Chuang Army suddenly begins collecting taxes ahead of time. What will the common people think then? The very peasants who followed the rebels will suddenly find themselves paying grain again."

Liu Maopao looked at him quietly.

"Will they not feel deceived?"

Li Yan fell silent.

Liu Maopao sighed softly.

"My friend, we have debated for less than the time it takes a stick of incense to burn. Yet already your ideas have begun to contradict one another, twisting and collapsing into confusion."

He tilted his head slightly.

"If the strategist of the Chuang Army were truly a man of such reasoning, how could that army ever govern a nation properly?"

He chuckled.

"In that case, it might as well declare its own collapse today."

The words struck Li Yan like a blade.

A sword thrust straight through the chest.

For a long moment he could not speak.

He staggered backward several steps.

Just then, one of the poor townsfolk spoke up from the crowd.

"Sir, after all your explanations, are you trying to say the imperial court is right to impose heavy taxes? That we deserve to be taxed and bullied?"

Liu Maopao shook his head.

"No. That is not what I mean."

He folded his hands behind his back.

"The current court is riddled with corruption and failed policies. Reform is already unavoidable."

"Taxes must exist. A country cannot operate without them."

He paused.

"But they must be reduced. Collected only within a reasonable range."

His gaze swept across the crowd.

"The rich should pay more. The poor should pay less, or perhaps none at all."

The moment those words were spoken, Li Yan's eyes lit up.

Even the poor listeners seemed to feel the argument made some sense. One by one they leaned closer, listening more carefully.

Liu Maopao continued speaking.

He began discussing politics.

Then economics.

Then trade.

Then commercial taxation.

Unfortunately, those subjects quickly grew dry and complicated.

The genuinely poor peasants began scratching their heads in confusion. One by one they drifted away, losing interest.

But something interesting happened.

Whenever a scholar happened to pass by and heard a few sentences, he would instinctively stop to listen.

And once he stopped...

He could no longer leave.

Gradually the crowd changed.

The mass of ragged peasants slowly transformed into a gathering of scholars, students, local gentry, landlords, and merchants.

Li Yan listened more seriously than anyone else.

Because compared to ordinary wealthy men, he needed this knowledge far more urgently.

In the near future, he might very well become the Grand Secretary of the realm.

At least that was what he believed.

The impromptu lecture lasted for more than an hour.

Only when Liu Maopao finally grew tired did he stop speaking.

Li Yan reluctantly walked away.

He had barely gone one street further when he discovered another scholar standing at a crossroads, explaining to a fresh crowd why the slogan "The Chuang King comes and no grain will be collected" was fundamentally impossible.

Li Yan listened for a short time.

Then suddenly his mood sank.

He sighed.

Leaving Jinan Prefecture, he walked slowly along the official road outside the city.

Turning back, he gazed at Jinan from afar.

"So the court still has men of true talent," he thought silently.

"I once believed myself knowledgeable. But compared to these people..."

He shook his head.

"I am not merely one move behind."

"I am dozens of moves behind."

"The hearts of the people in Jinan will soon stabilize under their guidance."

And it was not only Jinan.

Across Shandong Province, scholars claiming to be "sent by Sun Chuanting" had begun appearing in cities and towns everywhere.

On street corners and marketplaces they patiently explained facts and logic to the people.

Again and again they dismantled the slogan:

"When the Chuang King arrives, no grain tax will be collected."

At first the poor refused to listen.

"I will not listen!"

"Anyone who asks us to pay grain must be a villain!"

"Anyone who says we do not have to pay is the good man!"

But as more and more people began to understand the reasoning, the direction of public opinion slowly began to change.

Common people were not truly stupid.

Nor were they completely ignorant.

They simply lived hard lives and could easily be manipulated by those with ulterior motives.

But once someone pointed them toward the correct path, they were perfectly capable of thinking for themselves.

And once they thought about it...

They could reach the correct conclusion on their own.

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Far to the south.

Quanzhou, Jinjiang County.

The ironclad vessel Little Black One slowly sailed into Weitou Harbor.

Two small boats belonging to Zheng Zhilong's fleet guided the way ahead.

A sailor shouted from one of the boats.

"You can dock here! No risk of running aground! Come straight in!"

Only then did Little Black One cautiously approach and anchor steadily within the harbor.

Soon afterward, large numbers of sailors began disembarking.

After spending too long at sea, men needed time on solid land. Otherwise their legs would forget how to walk properly.

Yaoxing Juan jumped ashore as well, stretching his arms and legs.

A soldier from Zheng Zhilong's forces approached and saluted him with clasped fists.

"The coal you requested has already been prepared."

Yaoxing Juan's face lit up with delight.

"That is truly excellent news. Many thanks!"

It turned out that Yaoxing Juan had come to Weitou Harbor specifically to resupply coal.

Previously, whenever his coal supply ran out, he had to sail all the way back to Zhoushan Island. The journey was long and inconvenient, wasting a great deal of time.

But several days earlier he had encountered a ship belonging to Zheng Zhihu while sailing at sea.

During their conversation he learned that Jinjiang County also produced coal, and in fairly large quantities.

Enough to support the fuel consumption of Little Black One.

So this time, instead of returning to Zhoushan Island, he came directly to Weitou Harbor.

At a command from the Zheng clan's men, the doors of a warehouse beside the harbor were thrown open.

Laborers carried out basket after basket of coal.

Soon a large pile had formed.

Yaoxing Juan was overjoyed.

"This is wonderful! From now on I only need to cross one stretch of sea to replenish coal. Then I can go back to Yi Province Island and tease the Dutch again."

The Zheng clan soldier laughed.

"Your cannon shells are special, are they not? Those cannot be supplied here. If you need ammunition, you will still have to return to Zhoushan Island."

Yaoxing Juan waved dismissively.

"That is no great problem. As long as there is coal here, half the trouble is already solved."

"As for cannon shells, we can think of other methods."

In truth, Yaoxing Juan carried orders from Dao Xuan Tianzun himself.

His mission was to explore the coastline and locate suitable locations for future supply ports.

It was a long-term mission.

Because Tianzun's vision was extremely ambitious.

Supply ports would one day spread across every ocean on earth.

Yaoxing Juan immediately sent messengers aboard a Zheng clan boat back to Zhoushan to report the discovery of coal in Jinjiang.

As for himself, after finishing the resupply and purchasing fresh food and drinking water within Jinjiang County, he once again raised sail.

Little Black One cut through the waves.

Its bow pointed straight toward Yi Province Island.

The Dutch would soon have company again.

Chapter 1267 The King of Dadu and Fruit Candy

Yizhou Island, central region.

Along the coast of the Mazhilin area.

A small village was currently fighting a desperate battle against the Dutch.

This village belonged to the Kingdom of Dadu.

The Kingdom of Dadu was a cross-tribal proto-kingdom formed by several indigenous groups of Yizhou. The Babura people, the Babuza, the Papora, and a portion of the Hoanya tribes had all gathered under one banner.

Their shared leader was called the King of Dadu.

Some people also called him the King of Daylight, or simply the Sun King.

The titles sounded extremely impressive.

Unfortunately, the kingdom itself was not.

Because the truth was painfully simple.

They were far too primitive.

The Kingdom of Dadu possessed almost no decent weapons. Most of their warriors still fought with sharpened wooden sticks, or heavy clubs made by tying stones to wooden poles.

Only a very small number of them possessed metal weapons, pieces that had been traded from the Dutch or obtained from Han Chinese settlers who had migrated to Yizhou.

And even those were rare.

With equipment like that, fighting the Dutch was practically hopeless.

In fact, the Dutch could not even be bothered to fight personally.

They sat leisurely at the rear of the battlefield, laughing and chatting while watching the fight unfold in front of them.

On the field itself, a group of African slave soldiers captured by the Dutch were battling the tribesmen with cold weapons.

The slaves were not particularly clever.

But their bodies were incredibly strong.

Life in Africa had been harsh for generations, and over countless years that brutal environment had produced people with extremely powerful physiques.

Even in this era, their physical strength surpassed most other races in the world.

Stronger bodies.

Better weapons.

Against the warriors of the Kingdom of Dadu, the outcome of the battle was almost predetermined.

The tribal warriors retreated step by step.

If one could even call them an army.

Soon the villagers were on the brink of collapse, facing the fate of being slaughtered where they stood.

Then suddenly, from the distant jungle, a loud roar erupted.

Another group of black-haired, dark-skinned islanders burst out of the forest and charged toward the battlefield.

The Dutch glanced at them and snorted with laughter.

"More natives?"

"Look at them. Torn clothes, primitive weapons."

"Send as many as you want. They are all just here to die."

But then someone noticed something strange.

Their weapons.

Something was wrong.

The man charging at the very front swung a gleaming steel blade.

Even from afar, the shine of the metal was unmistakable.

That was clearly high-quality forged steel.

He rushed straight toward an African slave soldier and shouted loudly before slashing down.

The slave reacted instinctively, raising his wooden spear to block.

A dull sound rang out.

The spear shaft split cleanly in half.

The slave's eyes widened in horror.

Before he could react, the blade flashed across his body.

Blood sprayed.

He collapsed instantly.

And that was not an isolated case.

The African soldiers soon realized with growing panic that this group of natives who had just emerged from the forest were all holding excellent weapons.

Some wielded finely forged steel sabers.

Some carried spears tipped with iron spearheads.

Others held wooden shields reinforced with iron plates.

One man even carried a Japanese katana.

These were weapons that should never have appeared in the hands of the indigenous tribes of Yizhou.

With these weapons, the new group of warriors joined the battle.

And in an instant, the situation on the battlefield changed.

The African soldiers no longer had the advantage in weapons.

As for physical strength, the difference was no longer so obvious.

After all, both sides came from fairly primitive cultures.

In close combat, primitive peoples often fought with terrifying ferocity.

Steel flashed.

Blades clashed.

The natives also had superior numbers.

Very soon the African slave soldiers began to collapse under the pressure.

The tribesmen of the Kingdom of Dadu, who had nearly been wiped out just moments ago, suddenly found themselves saved from disaster.

They shouted in excitement toward the newcomers.

"Thank you!"

"You saved us!"

"Where did you get that sword?"

One of the newcomers replied proudly.

"People from across the sea gave them to us. The ones who fly the five-colored banners."

"Oh! Them?"

"We have seen them too!"

"But we were afraid of them, so we never approached."

While the natives were celebrating happily, the African soldiers were in no mood for joy.

One slave, his arm severed, staggered back toward the Dutch officers, screaming loudly in an African dialect no one else understood.

Another pointed desperately at the excellent weapons in the natives' hands while shouting.

The scene quickly descended into chaos.

The slave soldiers were driven out of the village step by step.

A Dutch officer suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Arquebusiers, prepare!"

"Slaves, fall back!"

The moment the slaves heard the order for the musketeers to prepare, they panicked.

They knew their Dutch masters very well.

When the guns fired, the masters would not care in the slightest if the slaves were caught in the crossfire.

The slaves immediately threw themselves to the ground, rolling and scrambling in every direction.

A hundred Dutch soldiers quickly formed a firing line.

Gunshots exploded.

The smoothbore muskets were notoriously inaccurate. The bullets began drifting the moment they left the barrels.

Although one hundred soldiers fired simultaneously, only a handful of bullets actually flew toward the natives.

About a dozen islanders were hit and fell.

The casualties were not heavy.

But the warriors of the Kingdom of Dadu had long been traumatized by Dutch firearms.

The moment the Dutch muskets roared, panic spread through their ranks.

People screamed.

Some cried.

Others ran blindly.

Some jumped in fear.

The battlefield dissolved into chaos.

The momentum they had gained thanks to their superior weapons was rapidly collapsing again.

Just as the situation was about to break completely.

Suddenly, from the forest on the flank, another series of gunshots rang out.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The natives were startled.

For a moment they thought more Dutch soldiers had arrived from the side.

But this time, the gunfire was not aimed at them.

It was aimed at the Dutch.

The musketeers who had just fired their volley collapsed almost instantly.

Several fell in the blink of an eye.

Then a figure leaped out from the forest.

A one-eyed man.

He laughed loudly.

"The great sea pirate Yao Xingjuan has arrived!"

The warriors of the Kingdom of Dadu had no idea what he was shouting.

But among the Dutch, there were people who understood Chinese.

Their faces changed immediately.

"The Ming pirate!"

"Damn it, that man again!"

"The one with the black pirate ship!"

"Return fire!"

"Hurry!"

The Dutch soldiers frantically began reloading their muskets.

But no matter how skilled they were, their speed could not match the firearms of Gao Family Village.

Before they could even finish loading their second shot.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Another volley thundered out from the forest.

More Dutch musketeers collapsed instantly.

"Shit!"

The Dutch officer turned and roared at the slave soldiers.

"What are you waiting for?!"

"Charge into the forest!"

The slaves hesitated.

Their minds were not the sharpest.

But they still obeyed.

They began charging toward the forest.

Meanwhile, the Dutch officer quietly turned to the white soldiers beside him.

"Run."

"We retreat to the ships."

White men to the rear.

Black men to the front.

Heaven behind them.

Hell ahead.

At that moment, the paths of fate crossed.

Gunfire erupted once more from the forest.

The brave slave soldiers who had rushed forward were all cut down in an instant.

And the Dutch officer, together with the remaining white soldiers, ran as fast as they could.

In the blink of an eye, they vanished into the distance.

Chapter 1268 Binsheng's Scheme

The Dutch had fled.

The natives of the Dadu Kingdom burst into cheers the moment they saw the foreigners running for their ships. Their shouts echoed through the forest and along the beach.

But the celebration did not last long.

Soon, their attention shifted to the musketeers standing in the woods.

The villagers of the Dadu Kingdom tightened their grips on their crude weapons. Some held wooden spears, others clutched clubs or stones tied to sticks. Their knuckles turned pale from the force of their grip, and the nervous tension on their faces was impossible to hide.

These newcomers looked even more terrifying than the Dutch.

If they decided to attack...

The villagers swallowed hard.

"Don't be afraid! They're friends!"

Suddenly, the natives who had arrived earlier with better weapons began shouting loudly.

They lowered the steel sabers in their hands and waved vigorously toward the other group of villagers. Then they started speaking rapidly in their own language, a string of strange sounds that Yao Xingjuan could not understand at all.

The villagers of the Dadu Kingdom looked uncertain at first.

Slowly, the wooden weapons and stone clubs in their hands lowered.

Then the two groups of natives gathered together and began talking loudly in their unfamiliar tongue.

"Wala wala wala..."

"Wala wala..."

No one outside their tribe could make sense of it.

After quite some time passed, the tension finally eased.

The villagers put away their weapons completely.

However, they still did not dare approach.

Instead, they stood at a distance and stared at Yao Xingjuan and his men.

They stared from the left.

Then from the right.

Then they even walked in circles around them, examining them from every angle like curious animals studying a new creature.

Yao Xingjuan chuckled.

He did not mind at all.

Pirates, after all, were probably the best communicators with foreign peoples in this era.

Language barriers were nothing.

Human beings had invented body language precisely for situations like this.

Yao Xingjuan began gesturing with exaggerated movements.

The natives responded with gestures of their own.

You wave your hand, I shake my head.

You smile, I spin around.

You point at the sea, I point at the forest.

Surprisingly, communication slowly started to happen.

Before long, the two sides reached a rough understanding.

Several villagers from the Dadu Kingdom suddenly ran toward the interior of the island.

A short while later, they returned.

With them came a middle-aged man holding a rattan staff.

The staff was clearly no ordinary object.

It symbolized authority.

In fact, its role in the Dadu Kingdom was probably similar to the legendary Beggar Sect leader's Dog-Beating Staff in the martial world.

Wherever the rattan staff pointed, the natives immediately knelt.

One villager stepped forward and began gesturing wildly toward Yao Xingjuan.

He pointed repeatedly at the middle-aged man while shouting the same words again and again.

"Gan Zai Xia A La Mi!"

"Gan Zai Xia A La Mi!"

Yao Xingjuan quickly understood.

So this man was the king of the Dadu Kingdom.

His name was Gan Zai Xia Alami.

The man gave off the unmistakable vibe of a tribal chieftain from some mountain stronghold. He stood there proudly, chest puffed out, looking extremely imposing.

Even though he clearly knew he could not defeat the muskets of Yao Xingjuan's men, he showed not the slightest hint of weakness.

He struck the ground with his rattan staff.

Tok. Tok. Tok.

He said nothing.

But the meaning was obvious.

His expression practically shouted the question.

You outsiders.

You came onto the territory of the Dadu Kingdom.

What exactly do you want?

Yao Xingjuan watched him and thought to himself with amusement.

Oh?

Quite a proud fellow.

Good thing I brought a special artifact designed specifically for dealing with proud fellows like this.

He reached into his robe.

Then he pulled out a small tin box.

The box looked exactly like the one Chen Qianhu had once used at the capital's city gate to amuse children not long ago.

Inside were colorful candies from the Heavenly Realm.

Fruit candies in bright red, purple, yellow, and green.

Yao Xingjuan opened the lid.

He took out a single candy and tossed it into his own mouth.

Then he handed the rest of the box to one of the natives.

The native carefully held the box with both hands and knelt before Gan Zai Xia Alami.

Alami maintained a proud expression.

His face clearly said:

I refuse to believe such a tiny thing could taste good.

But then he saw Yao Xingjuan rolling the candy around in his mouth with his tongue, clearly enjoying it.

The king hesitated.

If the other tribe's leader was eating it like that...

Then refusing to do the same might make him look weak.

Finally, he pinched a red candy between two fingers and tossed it into his mouth.

The next moment...

The king's proud, smug expression shattered completely.

His face instantly transformed into the look of someone who had just discovered a miracle.

A man who had clearly never experienced such flavor in his entire life.

Alami hummed happily.

Then he whispered something to the villager beside him.

The villager hurried over to Yao Xingjuan and began gesturing enthusiastically.

Yao Xingjuan understood immediately.

He pointed at the red candy.

"Fruit candy. Strawberry flavor."

Alami slowly repeated the strange words.

"Fruit candy... strawberry flavor."

From that moment onward, the native language of Yizhou Island gained a new foreign loanword.

Fruit candy.

Strawberry flavor.

Yao Xingjuan then picked up a purple candy.

"Fruit candy. Grape flavor."

Alami copied him and tossed another candy into his mouth.

Once again, the king revealed the delighted expression of a man seeing the world for the first time.

At this point, His Majesty had completely confirmed something.

This box of candies...

Was treasure.

No doubt about it.

Soon his tongue was rolling the candy around his mouth exactly the same way Yao Xingjuan had done earlier.

His cheeks bulged left and right as he sucked on the hard candy.

The proud aura from before had completely vanished.

One villager stepped forward and began gesturing again.

Yao Xingjuan understood instantly.

They wanted more candy.

They wanted to trade.

Yao Xingjuan grinned.

Success.

He had established a connection with the king of the Dadu Kingdom.

With that bridge built, operating in the central region of Yizhou Island would become far easier.

At this time, the island was effectively divided into three sections.

The northern coast and the southern coast were both under the control of Western colonists.

But the central region of the island was still firmly controlled by the Dadu Kingdom.

Building a good relationship with the Dadu Kingdom meant gaining a foothold in the middle of the island.

After more rounds of energetic gesturing, King Gan Zai Xia Alami ordered his people to bring gifts.

They returned carrying a large basket filled with betel nuts, mangoes, and pineapples.

These were presented as return gifts for the precious fruit candies Yao Xingjuan had given him.

The Dadu Kingdom even designated several coastal villages where Yao Xingjuan's group could safely trade with the natives.

Everything was proceeding smoothly.

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Liaodong

Shengjing

Binsheng and his eleven subordinates were walking through a massive crowd of Korean captives.

During the Qing invasion of Joseon, the Qing army had not only captured two important hostages.

The Crown Prince Sohyeon.

And Prince Bongrim.

They had also captured half a million people.

This had always been one of the Qing's standard strategies.

Whenever they invaded Ming territory, they would seize large numbers of Han Chinese and bring them back to their own lands as laborers.

This policy had allowed their national strength to grow rapidly.

People often cursed them as "Tungusic barbarians."

But compared with certain so called "civilized nations" that loved to massacre entire populations and wipe out conquered peoples completely, the Manchus actually understood economic development far better.

Binsheng walked slowly among the prisoners.

After observing for a while, he selected several hundred craftsmen with useful skills.

Then he picked a number of strong young men capable of heavy labor.

Soon he organized a small workshop.

He took out a blueprint.

Then he tossed it onto the table in front of the Korean craftsmen.

"Make this."

The drawing showed a bearing.

The Koreans had no choice.

They began working.

Binsheng then turned around and reported to Hong Taiji.

"Your Majesty, these Korean craftsmen constantly weep because they miss their homeland. Their work efficiency is extremely poor."

Hong Taiji frowned slightly when he heard this.

"The Ming Empire's great iron vehicles are already stationed near our borders."

"We urgently need our own iron vehicles to counter them."

"If the craftsmen refuse to work properly..."

"How can that possibly do?"

Chapter 1269 No Unauthorized Entry

Dorgon suddenly jumped forward from the side, clearly losing his patience.

"If they refuse to work properly, then beat them. Give them a whipping every day. If that still doesn't work, execute a few in public. The rest will naturally start working harder."

Binsheng immediately waved his hands.

"That cannot be done!"

Dorgon frowned.

"And why not?"

Binsheng spoke calmly.

"The Great Iron Chariot is an extremely precise machine. Every single component must fit perfectly. If even one tiny part is slightly off, the whole machine may fail. And if that failure happens on the battlefield, it could cost the soldiers their lives."

Dorgon snorted.

"So what?"

Binsheng lowered his voice slightly.

"If these craftsmen are forced to work while full of resentment, they might intentionally sabotage the work. Suppose when forging a part for General Dorgon's chariot, one of them deliberately leaves a tiny flaw on the edge of a component."

He paused.

"When Your Excellency drives the chariot onto the battlefield, the machine suddenly falls apart."

Binsheng spread his hands.

"Then Your Excellency would be finished."

Dorgon froze.

The more he thought about it, the more terrifying the possibility sounded.

And the worst part was that it was completely possible.

Hong Taiji also frowned.

"That makes sense," he said slowly. "So how should this be resolved?"

Binsheng replied immediately.

"There are two approaches."

"First, strict quality inspection. Every part produced by the Korean craftsmen must be examined carefully. Not once or twice, but again and again until we are absolutely certain there are no defects."

Hong Taiji nodded.

"Very good."

Binsheng continued.

"The second approach is to deal with the craftsmen's emotions. We need people familiar to them to supervise them."

Hong Taiji raised an eyebrow.

"Explain."

Binsheng said,

"In my humble opinion, Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim could serve as nominal factory directors. They would oversee the Korean craftsmen."

He paused briefly.

"If the craftsmen see that their own countrymen are in charge, they will feel more at ease and naturally work more diligently."

The suggestion surprised everyone present.

For a moment the hall fell silent.

But the more they thought about it, the more reasonable it seemed.

After all, they would only be nominal directors. They would not actually control anything. Their role would simply be to persuade the craftsmen to work harder and maintain quality.

That sounded like a very convenient arrangement.

Fan Wencheng, the notorious collaborator, stepped forward and spoke.

"Your Majesty, the Ming Empire's Great Iron Chariots are already pressing toward our borders. Our nation stands in great danger. If there is any method that can speed up the production of our own chariots, we must attempt it."

Hong Taiji then turned to look at Dorgon and Ajige.

Both generals nodded.

"Without the Great Iron Chariot," Dorgon said bluntly, "our army cannot defeat the Ming. We must produce them as quickly as possible."

Hong Taiji made his decision.

"Very well."

He looked at Binsheng.

"I will leave this matter to you. Go find Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim. Let them manage the Korean craftsmen in name and persuade them to work diligently. Show them a little false benevolence if necessary."

Binsheng lowered his head respectfully.

"Your Majesty is wise."

But inside, his heart was already celebrating.

Excellent.

Now he could finally approach the two royal hostages openly.

Their mission was already halfway complete.

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Crown Prince Sohyeon, whose personal name was Yi Wang, was the eldest son of King Injo of Joseon.

He had once been the beloved heir of the Korean throne.

His future had been bright. The crown had practically been waiting for him.

But now both he and his wife had become prisoners of the Qing.

They were confined inside a residence in Shengjing, living a dull and humiliating life.

Every day people looked down on them.

And at any moment they might lose their heads.

Crown Prince Sohyeon spent his days sighing endlessly, longing only to return home.

Today was no different.

He sat beneath the eaves, staring blankly at the birds flying beyond the courtyard wall.

A guard assigned by the Qing suddenly ran into the courtyard.

"Your Highness, someone has come to see you."

Sohyeon blinked in surprise.

"Who?"

The guard clearly held little respect for this captive prince. His tone was dismissive.

"One of our Great Qing officials. Wuzhen Chaocha officer Binsheng. He has some business with you. You'd better cooperate."

A flash of anger passed through Sohyeon's heart.

I am the crown prince of a kingdom, yet a mere guard dares speak to me like this.

When the tiger falls to the plains, even dogs dare bully it.

Just wait until I rise again one day.

If that happens, I will not spare you.

The guard barked impatiently.

"What are you staring at?"

Sohyeon immediately backed down.

"I will go at once to meet Lord Binsheng."

The guard escorted him to the reception hall.

Inside sat a very young man.

The Wuzhen Chaocha officers were mostly Han Chinese rather than Manchu, and this man clearly carried the demeanor of a literate scholar rather than a rough soldier.

Seeing that made Sohyeon feel slightly more at ease.

Binsheng glanced toward the guard standing beside them.

"My friend, you know what task I have been assigned, correct?"

The guard nodded.

"I know."

Binsheng spoke calmly.

"The blueprints for the Great Iron Chariot are not something ordinary people are qualified to hear about. If you remain here and accidentally overhear details about a key component, you might end up bearing responsibility for it."

The guard jumped in alarm.

"In that case, you two talk. I will wait outside."

He quickly withdrew.

As soon as the guard left, Sohyeon's anxiety increased.

What does this man want from me?

It sounds extremely serious.

Could he be planning something against me?

Father... I am afraid. I want to go home.

While his thoughts were in turmoil, Binsheng suddenly spoke.

"Crown Prince Sohyeon. Cooperate with me, and I will ensure you return home."

The words struck like lightning.

Sohyeon froze completely.

He looked up sharply, suspicion filling his eyes. He feared it might be some sort of trap.

Binsheng quietly took a jade pendant from his robe and handed it to him.

"This is your father's token."

"He has already reached an agreement with the Ming Empire. If you and Prince Bongrim can safely return to Joseon, he will immediately rebel against the Qing and return to the Ming camp."

Sohyeon grabbed the jade pendant.

The moment he recognized it, he burst into tears.

Binsheng continued calmly.

"Next, you must cooperate with my plan."

"We will pretend to build the Great Iron Chariot. That will give you the opportunity to leave this residence and visit the workshop."

"Once there, my people will secretly prepare a safe escape route."

Sohyeon's eyes lit up.

"So once we reach the border, my father's men will come to receive us?"

Binsheng shook his head.

"That will not work."

"The moment the Qing discover you have disappeared, they will immediately send pursuers south to block the road. We would be caught long before reaching the border."

Sohyeon frowned.

"Then where do we go?"

Binsheng smiled faintly.

"North."

Sohyeon blinked.

"North? Into Mongolia?"

Binsheng nodded.

"Exactly. We move in the opposite direction of what they expect. Once we reach Mongolian territory, someone will receive us there. After that, we circle around Liaodong and return to Korea."

Sohyeon hesitated.

"Will the Mongols really help us?"

Binsheng's smile widened.

"Do not worry about that. Everything has already been arranged."

Sohyeon was overjoyed.

He grabbed Binsheng's hands tightly.

"Then my life is in your hands."

Binsheng stood up.

"Come. We must also inform Prince Bongrim."

He paused briefly.

"During the next few days, you should secretly train your body. At the very least, you must have the strength to endure a long journey."

He glanced toward the inner courtyard.

"And your wife should train quietly as well."

Chapter 1270 Wait Until He Returns from Suppressing the Bandits

In the capital of the Great Ming, morning drills were underway.

A brand new army was training under the command of Sun Chuanting.

This army had only recently been formed. After Sun Chuanting was appointed Minister of War and granted the imperial sword of authority, he immediately began building his own force.

He deliberately avoided recruiting the pampered young men of the capital. Instead, he turned his attention to the poor.

Thus this army was assembled from the sons of ordinary villagers.

The process was not easy.

In the territories under the protection of Dao Xuan Tianzun, years of films, theater, and political education had already changed people's thinking. The old saying "a good man does not become a soldier, good iron is not used for nails" had long been discarded.

But near the capital, the old mindset was still deeply rooted.

Most families living in the capital had a little money. None of them wanted their sons to become soldiers.

So Sun Chuanting shifted his recruitment efforts to the countryside outside the capital.

Those villages were poor. They frequently suffered whenever the Qing army crossed the border during raids. Their lives were harsh and uncertain.

These families were far more willing to send their sons to join the army.

Of course, there was one condition.

The pay had to be good.

Fortunately, Sun Chuanting was a man of considerable personal wealth. When the court refused to provide proper military salaries, he paid them himself.

He simply treated the army as if he were raising a personal retinue.

In truth, the Ming court tacitly allowed officials to maintain private household troops.

As long as you did not raise too many men and did not secretly stockpile large amounts of armor, no one would interfere.

Sun Chuanting was currently supervising the drills when suddenly a large procession appeared outside the camp gates.

At the front of the group flew a banner bearing the character Gao.

The visitor had arrived.

It was the Grand Eunuch Gao Qiqian.

Gao Qiqian was one of the eunuchs most favored by the Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu Youjian.

The emperor firmly believed that Gao Qiqian possessed remarkable military insight. Whenever a major campaign began, Gao Qiqian was frequently dispatched as a supervising eunuch.

Historically speaking, however, the man possessed little real ability. He feared battle and lacked courage. His reputation in the history books was far from flattering.

Gao Qiqian's entourage reached the camp entrance and immediately began walking straight inside.

As a supervising eunuch, Gao Qiqian oversaw military commanders across the empire. Generals feared him, and he had grown accustomed to entering any military camp without permission.

Announcing himself at the gate?

He had never needed to do such a thing.

But this particular camp was different.

The soldiers guarding the entrance were Guyuan frontier troops.

Although they were currently wearing the uniforms of Sun Chuanting's household soldiers, the discipline they followed came from Gao Family Village and ultimately from Dao Xuan Tianzun.

The two guards stepped forward and blocked the path.

"Military camp. Unauthorized entry is forbidden."

One of Gao Qiqian's attendants burst into laughter.

"Open your eyes and look carefully. Do you know whose sedan chair that is?"

The two guards glanced over briefly.

"Gao?" one said.

"Gao Qiqian?"

"Impudent!" the attendant shouted angrily. "How dare you say the name of Lord Gao directly! Anyone below a provincial inspector must salute him with full military courtesy. And you two dare to speak his name like that?"

One of the guards shrugged.

"If we don't say the full name, how are we supposed to confirm his identity?"

"There are many officials in the court. What if there's another eunuch named Gao? If we just shout 'Lord Gao' and it turns out to be the wrong person, that would be a problem."

He nodded seriously.

"It's proper procedure to confirm the full name."

The attendant nearly choked with rage.

"Impudent!"

The other guard calmly asked again.

"So it really is Gao Qiqian?"

The attendant snapped back angrily.

"Yes! Now get out of the way!"

The guards nodded.

"Understood. Supervising Eunuch Gao Qiqian is requesting entry."

"However," one added calmly, "you do not have an appointment. Therefore we cannot allow you inside."

"Please wait here while we report to the commander. If the commander grants permission, you may enter."

That was the final straw.

Gao Qiqian's attendants exploded with anger.

"When have we ever waited outside a military gate for permission?"

One of the guards replied calmly.

"Rules are rules."

"If officials can enter military camps whenever they want just because of their rank, the entire system would collapse."

He gestured around the camp.

"This is a military camp, not a sightseeing attraction."

"So any high official can just walk in and take a tour?"

One of Gao Qiqian's attendants could no longer endure the humiliation.

He stepped forward and swung a heavy slap at the guard's face.

This man had long been accustomed to bullying others.

But today he had chosen the wrong target.

The guard tilted his head slightly and easily avoided the slap. In the same motion he returned a slap of his own.

Smack!

The eunuch spun in place twice like a top.

The fake beard glued to his face flew off, revealing his pale, beardless chin.

A young eunuch.

"You dare hit me!" he screamed.

Inside the sedan chair, Gao Qiqian's anger finally ignited.

Refusing to give face to his subordinates was the same as refusing to give face to him.

This new Minister of War was clearly too arrogant.

If he did not establish authority now, how would he supervise the army in the future?

Gao Qiqian's voice emerged coldly from the sedan.

"Seize those two insolent soldiers."

Around the sedan chair stood numerous imperial bodyguards. At the command they immediately rushed forward.

The two guards did not hesitate.

They pulled out bamboo whistles and blew them.

A shrill piercing sound shot into the sky.

They were calling for reinforcements.

Even before the echoes faded, one of the imperial guards had already thrown a punch.

The frontier soldier sidestepped easily and struck back with a punch to the man's ribs.

The guard doubled over like a shrimp.

Several more attackers rushed in from the side.

The two frontier soldiers fought while retreating.

Behind them stood the camp gate.

Just inside the gate was a small guard room where five more soldiers had been resting. They immediately rushed out to assist.

Eight frontier soldiers now defended the entrance.

They faced several dozen imperial bodyguards.

The battle became lively.

Punches flew in both directions.

Although they were outnumbered, the soldiers from Gao Family Village possessed extraordinary physical strength and years of coordinated training.

They held the line.

The gate remained firmly sealed.

No matter how hard Gao Qiqian's men tried, they could not force their way inside.

Time passed.

The whistle had done its job.

A large group of soldiers suddenly rushed out from inside the camp.

At their head marched a man whose appearance alone could frighten small children.

His face looked ferocious enough to deserve the phrase "vicious and savage."

It was Chen Qianhu.

He did not ask who was right or wrong.

His men were fighting.

That was all he needed to know.

They could sort out the details later.

Chen Qianhu raised a fist the size of a bowl and smashed it toward an imperial bodyguard.

The bodyguard sneered inwardly.

As if I'm afraid of you.

Then he looked up.

A terrifying face suddenly loomed in front of him. The expression was so savage it looked like the man might peel his skin off alive.

The bodyguard shuddered in fright.

That tiny moment of hesitation ruined his chance to dodge.

Chen Qianhu's fist landed.

Boom!

The bodyguard's face exploded with blood.

More frontier soldiers poured out of the camp.

The balance of numbers instantly reversed.

Moments ago the Guyuan soldiers had been fighting while outnumbered.

Now they were the ones with superior numbers.

The imperial guards collapsed quickly.

Cries of pain filled the air.

Within moments, the ground outside the camp gate was littered with groaning imperial bodyguards.