

Great Ming 1271

Chapter 1271 Then, What About Me?

Gao Qiqian never stepped out of the sedan chair from beginning to end.

Scenes of subordinates brawling in the mud were not something a man of his status should be personally involved in. A high eunuch of the imperial court had dignity to maintain. If he jumped in himself every time fists started flying, what kind of grand authority would that be?

Still, he quietly lifted the corner of the curtain and peeked outside.

He had been watching the entire situation unfold.

At first, when the palace experts from the Inner Court had the upper hand, Gao Qiqian said nothing. He simply sat there calmly, waiting for his men to smash their way inside the camp.

But now things had changed.

Every single one of his men had been knocked flat on the ground.

That made things awkward.

Under circumstances like this, even if he wanted to stay hidden inside the sedan chair, he could not do so anymore. Someone of rank had to step forward and restore order.

Gao Qiqian lifted the curtain and prepared to jump out to display his official authority.

But at exactly the same moment, Chen Qianhu had just run up to the sedan chair. The first thing he did was grab the curtain and pull it open. He wanted to drag Gao Qiqian out and force him to talk face to face.

Inside the sedan chair, Gao Qiqian had only just placed his hand on the curtain.

Before he could lift it himself, the curtain was suddenly pulled open from the outside.

Inside the chair it was dim and shadowy.

Outside the chair the morning sun blazed brilliantly.

Gao Qiqian was sitting.

Chen Qianhu was standing.

So Gao Qiqian found himself looking up at Chen Qianhu.

This was the very first time Gao Qiqian had ever laid eyes on him.

The sun burned brightly behind Chen Qianhu, casting his face in shadow. The light created an eerie half dark silhouette.

A huge protruding chin.

Terrifying triangular eyes filled with killing intent.

A twisted grin exposing a mouthful of cold white teeth.

A large nose dotted with several blackheads.

And the hand gripping the curtain revealed fingernails that reflected a vicious gleam under the sunlight.

Gao Qiqian had originally intended to show off his authority.

But after just one glance.

Just that single glance.

All of his official arrogance collapsed and slid straight down into his stomach.

He swallowed with enormous difficulty and shouted in panic.

"W... who are you, villain? Don't kill me!"

He surrendered instantly.

Chen Qianhu had no intention of killing him in the first place.

Now that the fight had reached this stage, even Chen Qianhu understood he needed to think carefully. The other side had broken the rules first, yes, but after his own side had already subdued everyone, continuing to beat people would only make things worse.

Especially since Gao Qiqian was such a high ranking court official. If he were actually beaten, the Emperor would lose face, and that would interfere with Gao Family Village's long term infiltration plans within the court.

So Chen Qianhu decided to smooth things over.

He grinned widely.

"Aiya, Eunuch Gao, this is all just a misunderstanding. A big misunderstanding."

That grin.

Those crooked lips twisting upward.

The moment Gao Qiqian saw that smile, he immediately understood something.

This man was definitely speaking in reverse.

Absolutely speaking in reverse.

A villain who could swallow two children in a single bite loved speaking in that kind of sinister tone.

Gao Qiqian sucked in a cold breath of bean juice.

"Don't come any closer!"

Chen Qianhu tried his best to sound gentle.

"My subordinates are rough people. Not very flexible in how they handle things. If they offended Eunuch Gao, then I apologize on their behalf."

When he said the final word, his mouth opened wide.

His lips stretched apart, revealing a mouthful of uneven sharp teeth.

Those teeth looked exactly like the kind that could bite into a chunk of flesh and rip it sideways.

Gao Qiqian felt his soul flying wildly through the sky.

"This is the capital! Under the Son of Heaven! You must not act recklessly!"

Chen Qianhu nodded seriously.

"Eunuch Gao, please wait here for a moment. Our Commander will arrive shortly."

Again he pronounced the final syllable with a wide open mouth.

Again those sharp teeth were exposed.

At that moment Gao Qiqian finally understood.

This man intended to eat him.

He was absolutely certain of it.

Those teeth kept opening and closing in front of him, as if preparing to bite down at any moment.

Gao Qiqian suddenly threw his body backward.

Behind the sedan chair there was unexpectedly a hidden mechanism.

It opened.

And he flipped straight out through the back.

Chen Qianhu blinked.

"Huh?"

Gao Qiqian tumbled out of the chair, rolled several times on the ground, then sprang to his feet in one swift motion.

Without even looking back, he ran.

Chen Qianhu stared in confusion.

"Eh? Eunuch Gao? You're leaving already? Weren't you here to discuss something with our Commander?"

But Gao Qiqian was already sprinting forward while screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Help! Rebellion! Murder!"

Even the Crown Princess Zhu Youjian's famous movement technique called Shenxing Baibian would not have allowed her to run as fast as Gao Qiqian at that moment.

In the blink of an eye he had already disappeared without a trace.

Just then Sun Chuanting finally arrived at the camp gate.

He looked at the palace experts groaning all over the ground and asked curiously,

"What happened here?"

The two frontier soldiers who had first blocked the entrance immediately reported.

"Eunuch Gao Qiqian came here and tried to force his way into the camp without announcing himself. When we stopped him, he ordered his men to attack us. Then everything turned into this."

Sun Chuanting burst out laughing.

"So that's what happened. A trivial matter."

He waved his hand.

"You did nothing wrong. Gao Qiqian is the one at fault. He's too used to throwing around his authority, thinking that because he holds a high position he can ignore rules."

He paused slightly and smiled.

"That is a common problem within every old bureaucratic system. This time I came to the capital under the divine mandate of Dao Xuan Tianzun to teach the court officials some new rules. Today can count as a small lesson for Gao Qiqian."

Chen Qianhu scratched his head.

"What if he complains to the Emperor and speaks ill of us? Would that harm Headmaster Sun?"

Sun Chuanting chuckled.

"No need to worry. We simply won't give him the chance."

He continued calmly.

"A scout report has just arrived. The bandit army has been spotted near Jinan in Shandong. We will soon march there."

Chen Qianhu suddenly understood.

"The Emperor needs us to suppress the rebels. At a time like this, he won't be able to do anything to us. Gao Qiqian has no way to deal with us."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"Exactly."

Meanwhile Gao Qiqian was running like thunder itself.

Sparks and lightning seemed to follow him as he rushed all the way into the Imperial Study.

He threw himself to the ground before Zhu Youjian and burst into loud wailing.

"Your Majesty must uphold justice for me! As supervising eunuch I went to inspect Sun Chuanting's military camp. But that Sun Chuanting was extremely rude and refused to allow me to enter!"

"How could anyone know what shameful things he is hiding inside that camp if he refuses inspection?"

Zhu Youjian frowned.

"Such a thing happened?"

Gao Qiqian continued crying.

"He even allowed his subordinates to attack us! Every man I brought with me was beaten badly. If I hadn't run fast enough, I wouldn't be standing here speaking to Your Majesty today."

Zhu Youjian grew angry.

Supervising eunuchs were the imperial court's tool to restrain military generals.

They represented the authority and dignity of the imperial family.

Without eunuchs watching them, what if the armies rebelled?

So Sun Chuanting's act of driving away a supervising eunuch could be considered disrespect toward the imperial house at best.

At worst, it could be interpreted as rebellion.

Zhu Youjian could not help thinking bitterly.

These ministers were truly unreliable.

Every Minister of War caused him headaches.

Zhang Fengyi was useless and had not even dared pursue the Qing army.

Yang Sichang secretly mobilized massive forces to encircle the rebels without informing the throne.

And now this new arrival Sun Chuanting had beaten a supervising eunuch.

This was outrageous.

"Such men must be punished. Severely punished!"

But just as he finished speaking those words, a eunuch rushed into the room in panic.

"Disaster! Scouts report that the rebel leader Chuang Wang is probing the defenses around Jinan in Shandong. Minister of War Sun Chuanting requests permission to lead the Capital Army to reinforce the city."

Zhu Youjian froze.

"Ah..."

He let out a long sigh.

"It seems now is not the time to deal with Sun Chuanting."

Gao Qiqian blinked in disbelief.

"Then... what about me?"

Zhu Youjian waved his hand.

"The grievance you suffered will be discussed after he returns from suppressing the rebels."

Chapter 1272 The Baladen City

The Ushin Tribe.

Zhebu had already led his army away on campaign, marching deep toward the territories of the Khalkha and Khorchin tribes.

But even though their young khan had departed for war, the development of the Ushin tribe did not stop.

Because help from Gao Family Village had arrived.

A large number of Blue Hats and Yellow Hats from the village came riding across the grasslands and entered the newly established "small city" of the tribe.

Its name was Baladen.

In the Mongolian language, the word meant "full of vitality."

It was supposed to be a city full of life.

Of course, in the eyes of people from Gao Family Village, it could barely be called a city at all.

It looked more like a random collection of tents.

The Ushin tribe lacked reliable construction skills, and they certainly lacked building materials. Their so-called city was nothing more than tents arranged in clusters.

When strong winds swept across the grassland, the entire "city" swayed and twisted in the gusts like drunken goats.

The scene looked rather miserable.

One of the entrepreneurs from Gao Family Village, Teng Yifeng, stared at the tent city and could not help scratching his head awkwardly.

"Aiya. I heard things were bad here before I came, but this is even worse than I imagined."

Another entrepreneur standing beside him burst out laughing.

"Stop complaining. Old Teng, I guess you won't be building a cement factory here after all."

Teng Yifeng nodded seriously.

"Looks difficult indeed. Still, I should at least send someone to check whether there's any stone around here that could be used for cement."

He waved his hand.

Several geological survey technicians immediately stepped forward.

Teng Yifeng gave his instructions.

"Take a look around the nearby area. See if there's any material suitable for cement production."

The men mounted their horses and rode off into the grassland.

Meanwhile the other entrepreneur had come for a completely different kind of business.

He dealt in everyday consumer goods.

For him, opportunities here were practically endless.

From a distance he saw the horn product factory Zhebu had established. It stood in the center of Baladen as an enormous tent.

The entrepreneur chuckled quietly.

"Zhebu has learned a few things, but his knowledge is still shallow. If I were the one running things here, the business opportunities would be countless."

He rubbed his chin and began listing them in his mind.

"Cowhide can be turned into all kinds of crafts. Sword scabbards, knife sheaths, saddles. It can also be made into shoes. Sheep leather works the same way. Then there's cow milk and sheep milk which can be processed into various dairy products."

The more he thought about it, the brighter his eyes became.

"I have ten thousand possible businesses here. Which one should I start first to make a fortune?"

He paused for half a second.

Then shrugged.

"Forget it. I'll do all of them. When it comes to making money, there's no such thing as earning too little."

Immediately he hung up a recruitment banner.

"Hiring workers! Hiring workers!"

The labor cost on the grassland shocked him.

He barely made the announcement before a huge crowd gathered. People were willing to work like oxen for extremely low wages.

He waved his hand.

"Take them all."

This was not considered labor exploitation.

In fact, the young tribal leader Zhebu was eager for Gao Family Village people to "exploit" his tribesmen.

Because only when factories appeared and provided stable jobs could people settle down in Baladen.

Otherwise they would continue wandering across the grassland, chasing water and pasture.

If the population could not gather in one place, the Mongols would never become prosperous.

Soon the entrepreneur recruited a large group of workers.

He began happily calculating how much silver he would earn in the future.

At the same time the newly hired Mongolian workers were also dreaming happily.

They imagined a stable life in Baladen.

No more wandering across the dangerous grassland.

No more chasing grass for their herds.

Right then the entrepreneur noticed Teng Yifeng returning.

But Teng Yifeng's face looked rather embarrassed.

"This is bad," Teng Yifeng sighed. "I couldn't find any suitable material for making cement."

The entrepreneur burst into laughter.

"Well then, you came here for nothing. Looks like I'll be the one making money here. Hahaha!"

He had barely finished laughing when one of the survey technicians galloped back on horseback.

The man was shouting excitedly.

"Boss! I found something good! Something very good!"

Teng Yifeng raised his eyebrows.

"Oh? Limestone? Or some other useful rock?"

"Coal!"

The technician shouted with wild excitement.

"A coal mine! A huge coal mine! And it's very close to the surface, almost like an open pit mine!"

Teng Yifeng froze for a moment.

Then his expression exploded with joy.

"We're going to get rich!"

Mining coal inside the territory of the Ming Empire was extremely troublesome.

The Ming Empire was a mature and fully organized state. Even a remote hill or empty mountain usually belonged to someone.

You could not simply dig wherever you wanted.

But the Mongolian grasslands were different.

Who owned the land here?

Technically the Ushin tribe.

But the tribe had never divided land among feudal nobles the way the Ming Empire did.

If you wanted to dig, you simply dug.

No need to worry about some prince suddenly appearing to claim the land.

Teng Yifeng threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"Quick! Recruit workers! We need coal miners!"

The other entrepreneur stared in disbelief.

"Damn it!"

Compared with mining coal, his small handicraft businesses suddenly seemed tiny.

He also understood something very clearly.

Small scale handicrafts alone could not easily support the growth of an entire city.

But a coal mine could.

Once Teng Yifeng's mine started operating, Baladen would stabilize immediately.

Large numbers of miners and their families would settle here.

The rising population would support trade, markets, and countless supporting industries.

Then the city would truly stand firm.

The entrepreneur punched Teng Yifeng lightly on the shoulder.

"You lucky bastard. You're going to make a fortune this time. I'm already jealous."

Teng Yifeng laughed.

"Making money is secondary. The important thing is completing the strategic mission entrusted to us by Dao Xuan Tianzun. Even if I earn mountains of silver, it still wouldn't be as satisfying as hearing Tianzun praise me once."

Those words lifted the entrepreneur's spirits as well.

Teng Yifeng continued.

"Even a coal mine alone is not enough to support a healthy city. Your small factories will diversify the economy. That's the real strength."

He gestured around the tent city.

"If we develop this place properly, Baladen will become a model city on the grassland. Not only the Ushin tribe, but many other tribes will follow their example."

At that point the greater strategic goal would be achieved.

Helping the Mongols build cities.

Helping them stabilize their population.

And once Mongols and Han Chinese became closer to each other, the natural outcome would follow.

Unification between the two peoples would face far less resistance.

"Alright."

The entrepreneur grinned.

"Let's work hard."

His small factories could begin immediately.

After all, the "factory buildings" were simply tents.

Gather some workers and start producing.

But Teng Yifeng's coal mine was another matter entirely.

He quickly sent riders back to Gao Family Village requesting support.

Soon the Blue Hats and Yellow Hats arrived.

Massive iron vehicles rolled across the grassland carrying all kinds of equipment and materials.

Money was provided.

Workers were provided.

Strange machines and unfamiliar tools appeared everywhere.

The Ushin tribesmen had never seen anything like it.

They stared in stunned silence.

Before long, the most impressive people in Baladen were the miners working at the coal mine.

They became the coolest and most fashionable workers in the entire city.

They earned generous wages.

They operated gigantic machines.

They performed work that nobody else could even understand.

When they walked through the streets, their backs were straight and proud.

They looked incredibly impressive.

Many herdsmen made a bold decision.

They sold their cattle and sheep.

No more herding.

Working in the mines was better.

Whether their descendants would regret that decision several hundred years later was another question entirely.

Chapter 1273 Do I Look That Easy To Cheat?"

Jinan Prefecture City.

The army of Chuang Wang had been roaming outside the city for several days already. Many small villages and towns around the region had fallen under the control of the rebel forces.

Yet Jinan City itself still refused to open its gates and surrender.

The little rhyme that once spread everywhere inside the city,

"Chuang Wang has arrived, no more taxes to pay,"

was now heard less and less.

Occasionally someone would still sing a line of it, but the people nearby would immediately stare at him as if he were an idiot.

"You still believe that? Chuang's bandits are obviously lying."

The one who sang the rhyme would turn red in the face and argue stubbornly.

"Chuang Wang isn't lying. He really won't collect taxes."

The people around him would burst out laughing.

"Someone could sell you and you would still help count the money."

After the laughter died down, they would patiently start explaining things to him.

They repeated the arguments that people from Gao Family Village had been spreading.

The man listened with a dark expression.

At first he refused to believe a word of it.

But after hearing it several times, he slowly began to work through the logic in his head.

Even a fool understood one basic thing.

Government officials had to be paid.

Where did their salaries come from?

Taxes, of course.

If there were no taxes, there would be no officials.

And without officials, who would deal with criminals?

If nobody dealt with criminals, the entire world would fall into chaos.

Then there were the bridges and roads that had to be repaired.

Dikes that had to be built.

Rivers that had to be controlled.

Which of these things did not cost money?

If the government did not collect taxes, who was going to pay for all that?

Once the logic clicked into place, a strange anger rose in the man's chest.

It felt as if someone had insulted his intelligence.

Turning from supporter to enemy only took a single moment.

The man suddenly cursed loudly.

"Those Chuang bandits tricked me!"

Someone beside him laughed.

"Just a moment ago you were still calling him Chuang Wang."

"Damn it! Chuang bandit! He's just a thief," the man shouted angrily. "Trying to fool me like that. Do I look that easy to cheat?"

Similar conversations were happening everywhere inside Jinan City.

And not only in Jinan.

Across Shandong, every city with even a modest population was spreading the same line of thought.

Only in remote villages, where news traveled slowly, were the peasants still being deceived.

Once the majority of people stopped believing the promise of "no taxes," a new question quietly began spreading among the common folk.

"So what does that mean? Are we doomed to pay taxes forever?"

"Does that mean we'll always live miserable lives?"

"The court collects heavy taxes. Chuang Wang lies and tricks people into becoming cannon fodder. Either way we're fish on the chopping board."

The mood among the people grew gloomy.

Just then, in the middle of this atmosphere of frustration and confusion, a man appeared at the execution ground of Jinan City.

His name was Liu Maopao.

He carefully straightened his scholar's robe, making sure every fold looked proper and dignified.

When he finished, he looked exactly like the sort of learned scholar people instinctively respected.

Then he picked up a tin megaphone, stepped onto a temporary wooden platform in the center of the market square, and cleared his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please listen to a few words from me."

The shout immediately attracted a crowd.

In this era, scholars still commanded great respect among ordinary people. All a man had to do was put on a scholar's robe, stand somewhere visible, and start speaking loudly. Before long a group of listeners would gather.

Liu Maopao looked around the crowd and nodded politely.

"Recently, the issue of taxes has become the most frequently discussed topic during people's free time. I have a few humble thoughts I would like to share."

"First of all, taxes must exist. That is something I believe everyone has already understood after these past days of discussion."

"But how taxes should be collected, and who should pay them, is a question worth thinking about carefully."

The common people began muttering.

Isn't that obvious?

Of course we pay them.

Would the officials pay taxes themselves?

Liu Maopao continued calmly.

"It is unreasonable for the poor to pay taxes that support the wealthy."

The moment those words were spoken, the crowd burst into applause.

"Well said!"

"Exactly!"

Liu Maopao raised a hand modestly.

"My suggestion is simple. The court should carry out reforms. The wealthy should pay taxes, while the poor should be exempt."

The applause grew louder.

From inside the crowd, a man arranged there by Gao Family Village suddenly stepped forward to play the role of heckler.

"Sir, what you say sounds reasonable. But I am a foolish man and do not understand something. How do we decide who is rich and who is poor? If we cannot define that clearly, your words are just empty talk."

Liu Maopao immediately pointed at the man.

"An excellent question!"

"What counts as rich and what counts as poor must indeed be clarified."

He paused briefly, then continued.

"Allow me to offer a simple idea."

"Our Ming Empire is primarily an agricultural nation," Liu Maopao said. "Therefore the simplest method is to collect taxes according to the amount of farmland a person owns."

"The more land you have, the more taxes you pay."

"The less land you have, the less you pay."

"And those who own no land at all should naturally pay nothing."

"What do you think of that proposal?"

The planted heckler immediately shouted again.

"Isn't that already how taxes are collected now? Based on farmland!"

Liu Maopao shook his head.

"No. That is not how things actually work."

He raised his hand and pointed toward a large, luxurious mansion in the distance.

"That family owns a huge amount of land. Yet they pay no taxes."

The crowd followed his finger.

Then the atmosphere turned awkward.

That mansion belonged to one of the most powerful local gentry families in Jinan.

Three members of the clan held official positions in the imperial court. They were among the most influential families in the entire prefecture.

The people murmured nervously.

"They're officials..."

"How could officials collect taxes from other officials?"

"Exactly. We should be grateful they don't increase our taxes. And you want to tax them?"

Liu Maopao raised his hand again and pointed toward the most magnificent residence in all of Jinan City.

"That family also owns vast lands. Almost half of Jinan belongs to them. Yet they also pay no taxes."

The crowd turned their heads to look.

Then they collectively sucked in a breath.

That residence was the Prince De Mansion, home of Zhu Youzhu, the Prince of De.

A member of the imperial family.

Royal blood.

And this scholar was suggesting that the prince should pay taxes?

He might be beaten to death for saying such things.

The crowd suddenly felt uneasy.

It seemed they were listening to a rebel's speech.

But Liu Maopao continued without hesitation.

"If those people who currently pay no taxes began paying them, the nation's tax revenue would increase enormously."

"If that happened, the tax rate on each mu of farmland could be lowered."

"The country would still have enough revenue to operate."

"And poor people would pay less tax."

He spread his hands and concluded.

"In simple terms, the wealthy would pay more taxes so the poor could pay less."

The crowd stared at him nervously.

"Your words are dangerous."

Liu Maopao laughed.

"Do not worry. I am merely a scholar. What I am doing now is called 'criticizing current affairs.' Discussing these matters is allowed."

"Let us simply chat about it."

But nobody dared chat with him.

The crowd scattered instantly like frightened birds.

In the blink of an eye, the platform was empty.

Liu Maopao did not seem upset at all. He simply smiled cheerfully and prepared to step down.

Just then, someone pushed through the crowd.

It was Li Yan, the strategist of Chuang Wang.

He reached out and grabbed Liu Maopao's arm firmly.

Chapter 1274 You Are Rebel

Liu Maopao looked carefully at the man who had grabbed him.

Ah. It was that same scholar who had debated with him last time about the slogan "When Chuang Wang arrives, there will be no taxes."

Of course Liu Maopao had no idea that the person standing in front of him was actually Li Yan, the chief strategist of Chuang Wang.

Recently Li Yan had been entering the city frequently.

One reason was to investigate public opinion among the common people.

The other reason was to listen to Liu Maopao's speeches criticizing current affairs.

Unlike ordinary listeners, Li Yan did not simply hear the speech and walk away.

Every time Liu Maopao spoke, Li Yan gained new insights.

Combined with his own thinking afterward, he always felt that he had learned a great deal.

Today's speech had been especially enlightening.

He had not yet had his fill of the discussion, so he could not resist stepping forward to stop Liu Maopao.

Liu Maopao smiled.

"Brother, I remember you. You were the one arguing about Chuang Wang's 'no taxes' slogan last time."

Li Yan cupped his hands politely.

"Thank you for remembering me. My views last time were immature and probably made you laugh."

"Today, after hearing your brilliant analysis, I feel as if my mind has suddenly been cleared. I have a few questions that I sincerely wish to ask. Would you be willing to discuss them?"

Liu Maopao laughed.

"Come. Let's talk in the teahouse."

The two entered a nearby teahouse and sat down. They ordered a pot of plain tea and began their discussion.

Li Yan spoke first.

"Your proposal earlier was truly excellent. Take Jinan City as an example."

"The Prince De Mansion alone owns nearly half the farmland around the city, and all that land is exempt from taxation."

"Add to that the local gentry and scholar families, who also pay no taxes at all."

He sighed deeply.

"In the end, the people who actually pay taxes control less than twenty percent of the total farmland."

"To use that twenty percent of land to pay one hundred percent of the taxes. How could the common people not suffer?"

"According to your suggestion, if the remaining eighty percent of farmland also paid taxes, then the tax burden would be spread across the full hundred percent."

"Even if the tax rate per mu were cut in half, the total tax revenue would still increase."

"And the people would only need to pay half the taxes they do now."

Liu Maopao nodded with a smile.

"Yes. That is exactly the idea."

Li Yan continued.

"I understand the agricultural part now. But what about commerce?"

"Merchants may not own farmland. They only conduct business. How do you make merchants who earn more pay more taxes, and merchants who earn less pay less?"

Liu Maopao chuckled.

"That involves commercial taxation. A very complicated subject."

He reached into his robe and pulled out a piece of paper.

It was an invoice.

This invention came from Wang Tang, the chief administrator of Gao Family Village's Xi'an office.

Whenever someone bought goods, the merchant issued an invoice. This system had already been widely implemented inside the territories governed by Dao Xuan Tianzun, but outside those areas almost nobody had seen such a thing.

Li Yan accepted the paper and examined it carefully.

"What is this?"

"An invoice," Liu Maopao explained.

"When a customer buys something, the merchant must give them this document. It records the price and quantity of the goods."

"Two copies are made. One stays with the merchant, and one goes to the customer."

Li Yan looked puzzled.

"What is the purpose of this?"

Liu Maopao smiled.

"For collecting taxes."

"If you gather all the invoices issued by a merchant and calculate them together, you can estimate how much money the merchant has earned."

"The more he earns, the more tax he pays."

Li Yan immediately understood.

"But... what if merchants cheat?"

"Very difficult problem," Liu Maopao admitted, spreading his hands helplessly.

"Extremely difficult."

"A merchant could falsify accounts, create fake invoices, or hide some invoices entirely. It would be very hard to detect."

"So the invoice system is still in a trial stage. It cannot fully solve the problem yet."

"To deal with that issue, we also developed another method."

"We directly include the merchant's tax inside the price of goods."

"But honestly, that method has not produced perfect results either."

Li Yan stared blankly.

"..."

Liu Maopao laughed.

"I can tell at a glance that you are not a merchant. You do not need to understand all the details."

"You only need to remember one thing."

"Every system is created by people. That means every system will have flaws."

"Finding problems is not scary."

"You simply correct them."

"What is truly frightening is lacking the courage to correct those flaws."

Li Yan sat in silence for a moment.

Then he spoke slowly.

"Your words have benefited me greatly."

"The true problem of the Ming court is not that bad policies exist."

"The real problem is that the court lacks both the courage and the ability to fix them."

"That is why things have deteriorated to this point."

When Liu Maopao heard him say this, he sensed a particular emotion hidden within Li Yan's voice.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Brother, the way you speak makes it sound like you personally possess both the courage and the ability to change the country."

Li Yan quickly waved his hands.

"No, no. I am not capable of such things."

Liu Maopao laughed softly.

"You are being modest."

"Judging by your eyes alone, I can tell that you are someone who wishes to change the world."

"Allow me to ask boldly. Do you have relatives serving as high officials in the court? Is that why you hope to push for reforms?"

Li Yan shook his head hurriedly.

"No. Not at all."

Liu Maopao chuckled.

"Let me say something bold."

"Even if you did have relatives in high positions, reforming the country would still be nearly impossible."

"You seem like a perceptive man. You must understand that the current imperial court cannot be changed by just a few officials."

Li Yan froze.

"..."

Liu Maopao carefully observed his reaction.

When he mentioned "relatives serving in the court," Li Yan's expression had not changed at all.

But when he said "a few officials cannot change the situation," Li Yan had subtly nodded in agreement.

Combining these clues together...

A bold guess formed in Liu Maopao's mind.

He grinned.

"You wish to reform the nation, yet you have no relatives in official positions."

"You are just an ordinary man, yet you seem confident you could carry out reforms."

"Heh..."

Suddenly Liu Maopao lunged forward and grabbed Li Yan by the collar.

"Got you!"

"So you are secretly plotting rebellion!"

"If my guess is correct, you must be an important figure among the rebels."

"Come with me to the government office."

Li Yan was terrified.

He immediately struggled backward.

Rip!

The front of his robe tore open.

His clothes were nowhere near the quality produced by Gao Family Village.

Liu Maopao froze for a moment.

Wait a minute.

He had only meant it as a joke.

But this fellow reacted far too strongly.

That meant he probably really was an important rebel.

Liu Maopao quickly tried to grab him again.

But Li Yan jumped backward.

His foot caught the leg of a stool.

Thud!

He crashed onto the floor and rolled twice.

Liu Maopao stepped forward clumsily to grab him again.

Unfortunately, both of them were scholars.

Their combat ability was practically nonexistent.

Their movements were slow and awkward. The scene looked ridiculous.

Liu Maopao flailed his arms like a powerless scholar trying to catch a chicken.

Li Yan was not doing any better.

The two of them rolled and stumbled across the floor of the teahouse before tumbling out into the street.

At that moment two men suddenly rushed out from the roadside.

They immediately moved to shield Li Yan.

At the same time one of them threw a punch straight toward Liu Maopao's face.

They were members of the Old Eight Team, the fierce bandits who had escorted Li Yan into the city.

These were trained fighters.

If that punch landed, Liu Maopao's face would probably explode into a bloody mess.

But just as the fist was about to strike, another fist appeared from the side and blocked it.

Bang!

The attack was stopped.

The special operations soldiers from Gao Family Village, assigned to protect Liu Maopao, had arrived.

Chapter 1275 I Was Too Naive

The two Old Eight Team bandits and the Gao Family Village special operations soldier exchanged blows instantly.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

In the blink of an eye they had already traded three moves.

The bandit immediately sensed something was wrong the moment their fists met.

He shouted at once, "Take the gentleman away!"

He deliberately avoided saying "strategist."

If he shouted that word, it would practically be admitting they were rebels.

Calling him "gentleman" still left room for explanation.

The other bandit quickly moved to escort Li Yan away.

Right now their greatest fear was that Liu Maopao might shout for the authorities.

If yamen runners arrived, escape would become impossible.

But then something strange happened.

Liu Maopao did not shout.

He did not call for the authorities.

He did not even raise his voice.

He simply stood there smiling calmly while watching Li Yan.

A strange feeling rose in Li Yan's heart.

At that moment the bandit threw another punch toward the special operations soldier.

The soldier twisted his body aside and avoided it.

The bandit seized the opening and swept a kick toward the soldier's waist.

Bang!

The kick landed.

But the feeling was wrong.

It felt like he had kicked something long and hard.

With a small clatter, something fell out from inside the soldier's inner clothing.

A short firearm dropped onto the ground.

The moment it landed, both Old Eight Team bandits froze.

At the same time they cried out in shock.

"That strange firearm!"

Li Yan blinked in surprise.

"Oh?"

One of the bandits exclaimed, "It's them!"

The other immediately understood.

"No wonder they didn't call the authorities. They're rebels too."

Liu Maopao laughed.

"Hey now, watch your words. How did we become rebels?"

"We are pioneers creating a new world. Reformers."

"Bullshit," the bandit cursed. "You people just like to dress things up with pretty words."

One bandit protected Li Yan while running away at full speed.

The other threw two more punches to force the special operations soldier back, then quickly turned and fled as well.

The soldier wanted to chase them.

But Liu Maopao raised a hand.

"Don't chase them."

"Put the firearm away quickly. This is Shandong, not our liberated territory. Keep a low profile."

The special operations soldier stepped back.

He whispered, "Manager Liu, those men must be important figures among Chuang's rebels. Capturing them could bring us great merit."

Liu Maopao smiled and shook his head.

"Back in Mingyue Gorge, we nearly wiped out Chuang's forces. Only a small group escaped."

"Yet they quickly raised another huge army in Shandong."

"This shows that capturing his subordinates is useless."

"To suppress the rebel bands, you must eliminate Chuang Wang himself."

"Letting those few escape does not matter."

After saying that, he looked in the direction Li Yan had fled and sighed softly.

"That man seems to genuinely want to reform the country's corrupt policies."

"If he remains among Chuang's army, perhaps the rebels will harm the common people a little less."

"I only wonder whether someone like him can survive among a group of brutal bandits."

East of Jinan City, Panlong Mountain.

The army of Chuang Wang, one hundred thousand strong, was currently stationed on the mountain.

No government troops dared provoke them.

In fact, many government soldiers surrendered the moment they heard the rebels approaching.

After all, most government troops were poor military households.

They also farmed land to survive.

The promise of "no taxes" held enormous appeal for them as well.

For now, loyalty toward Chuang Wang remained strong.

Morale throughout the army was high.

This made Chuang Wang very pleased.

However, that good fortune had reached its limit when the army arrived at Jinan.

The city stubbornly refused to open its gates.

The cheerful children's rhyme that had worked everywhere else,

"Open the gates and welcome Chuang Wang,"

had completely failed here.

Strategist Li Yan had infiltrated the city multiple times to investigate the situation.

But despite all his efforts, he had not discovered the reason.

Chuang Wang was growing dissatisfied.

Just then a subordinate hurried over.

"The strategist has returned."

Chuang Wang smiled.

"Bring him in quickly."

Soon Li Yan entered the tent accompanied by two Old Eight Team bandits.

He cupped his fists.

"My lord, I gained some information during this trip into the city."

Chuang Wang brightened.

"Have you found a way to break Jinan?"

Li Yan shook his head.

"I have not yet discovered a method to capture the city."

"But I have learned why Jinan refuses to surrender."

Chuang Wang frowned.

"Oh?"

Li Yan said slowly, "People from that strange firearm army have already entered Jinan."

"Their main force has not arrived yet."

"They only sent a few individuals into the city in disguise, just as I did."

Those words startled Chuang Wang.

"The firearm soldiers are here?"

For him, that was terrible news.

Li Yan continued.

"I have some matters I wish to discuss privately with you."

He then glanced at the two other strategists beside Chuang Wang.

One was Niu Jinxing, also a scholar, who had originally been introduced to the rebel army by Li Yan himself.

The other was Song Xiance, who had been brought in by Niu Jinxing.

Both were educated men.

Li Yan believed they could participate in serious discussion.

"Brother Niu, Brother Song, please join us."

Chuang Wang noticed Li Yan's serious expression and nodded.

"Very well. Let us hear what Mister Li has to say."

The four men entered a small tent and sat down.

Only then did Li Yan speak.

"Members of that strange firearm army are already in Jinan."

Chuang Wang nodded with a dark expression.

But he quickly realized something.

Li Yan had said people from the firearm army, not the firearm army itself.

That subtle difference meant the main force had not arrived yet.

Chuang Wang said grimly, "Explain."

Li Yan sighed.

"The rhyme we spread, 'When Chuang Wang arrives, no taxes will be collected,' has completely lost its effect in Jinan."

"A group of scholars even more knowledgeable than myself have appeared inside the city."

"They completely dismantled the slogan of 'no taxes.'"

Li Yan then began telling the story.

He described how he had repeatedly sneaked into the city and listened to Liu Maopao's speeches criticizing current policies.

He explained how Liu Maopao questioned the feasibility of eliminating taxes entirely.

How he argued that abolishing taxes might actually make life worse for common people.

Li Yan recounted every discussion.

Even the scuffle in the teahouse.

When he finished, his expression turned gloomy.

"After hearing his arguments, I finally realized that eliminating taxes entirely is impossible."

"The realization was a heavy blow to me."

"My earlier ideas were far too naive."

Chuang Wang blinked in confusion.

"Wasn't that rhyme just a temporary strategy?"

"I assumed you created it simply to deceive the people."

"You mean you actually intended to implement it?"

Li Yan looked stunned.

"What?"

"I never said it was just a temporary trick."

"I have never served as an official or managed real administrative affairs."

"So my thinking was rather naive."

"But at the time, I genuinely hoped that all common people could live without paying taxes."

Chuang Wang fell silent.

"..."

Across the table, Niu Jinxing and Song Xiance exchanged glances.

A strange look passed between them.

Back then, Li Yan had advised Chuang Wang to "practice benevolence and righteousness."

But Chuang Wang had interpreted it as "pretend to practice benevolence and righteousness."

Only one extra word.

Yet the meaning became completely different.

Inside the tent, the atmosphere suddenly turned rather awkward.

Chapter 1276 This Man Must Be Killed

Chuang Wang reacted extremely quickly.

The moment of surprise on his face lasted no longer than the blink of an eye. Almost immediately, a warm smile spread across his face as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Mr. Li is a man of great learning," he said pleasantly. "When you first proposed the idea of not collecting grain taxes, the common people flocked to our banner as soon as they heard of it. The morale of our army improved greatly as well."

He nodded as if reaffirming his own belief.

"I am certain your idea must be correct. There must be a way to make it work. Those firelock rebels must simply be talking nonsense."

Li Yan almost choked on the praise.

He quickly shook his head, looking rather gloomy.

"After speaking with those people from the firelock faction, I feel that my own ideas are unrealistic. Their ideas, however, seem very reasonable."

The moment those words left his mouth, Chuang Wang's eyes narrowed slightly.

Niu Jinxing and Song Xiance also showed thoughtful expressions.

None of the three men spoke.

Yet the atmosphere between them suddenly turned strange.

Li Yan continued, unaware.

"Big Brother, on my way back just now, I thought about this again and again. The more I considered it, the more I felt those firelock rebels seem to be doing quite well."

"Their strength is formidable, and their influence is expanding. They can fight effectively, but their ideas about governing are also impressive."

He spoke slowly, as if thinking out loud.

"Their method of taxing the wealthy more while reducing the burden on the poor is actually an excellent solution to the people's livelihood. It is far more reliable than our idea of abolishing grain taxes altogether."

Li Yan hesitated for a moment before saying the words that had been circling in his mind.

"Perhaps we should consider learning from them... or even joining forces with them."

The smile on Chuang Wang's face widened even further.

"Mr. Li speaks very wisely," he replied calmly. "Let me think about this carefully."

"You infiltrated Jinan Prefecture and even fought with their people. You must be exhausted. Go and rest first."

Li Yan nodded.

"Yes, I should organize my thoughts as well."

He then clasped his fists toward Niu Jinxing and Song Xiance.

"Both of you are learned men with great ambition and wisdom. Please think about this matter as well."

Niu Jinxing and Song Xiance returned the salute.

"Brother Li, rest assured. We will consider it carefully."

Only then did Li Yan leave.

As he walked back to his tent, he kept knocking lightly on his own head, as if trying to shake loose the thoughts inside it. Once inside, he lay down with his head propped up, carefully replaying Liu Maopao's arguments in his mind.

After he left...

Song Xiance also stood up.

"I should also take some time to think about what Brother Li said," he murmured. "Perhaps I must calculate once more where Heaven's Mandate truly lies."

He clasped his fists politely and walked out of the tent.

The moment he disappeared outside, Chuang Wang's expression darkened instantly.

Niu Jinxing's face did not look any better.

"That man actually wants us to learn from those firelock rebels," Niu Jinxing said coldly.

Chuang Wang snorted.

"He did say one correct thing. He truly is naive."

Niu Jinxing leaned closer.

"Brother Chuang Wang, what those firelock rebels said must be nothing but pretty words. Tax the rich more? Who are they trying to fool?"

He sneered.

"Anyone who rises in rebellion does so to seize the world. Once the world falls into their hands, they themselves will become the wealthy. Why would they willingly give up the fat meat already in their grasp?"

"What a joke."

Chuang Wang's face grew even darker.

"But Li Yan actually believed that joke."

He shook his head.

"When he told me to show benevolence and righteousness before, I assumed he meant pretending to show benevolence. Yet he never said the word pretend."

Niu Jinxing slowly made a throat-cutting gesture with his hand.

"This man must be killed."

Chuang Wang's voice became low.

"He once helped me."

"If he is not killed," Niu Jinxing replied calmly, "our army's morale will collapse."

"Think about it. He will certainly tell our soldiers that abolishing grain taxes will not work. The soldiers admire him greatly. They will believe his words."

"Once that happens, they will begin to doubt you."

He paused.

"Our army barely gathered one hundred thousand men. With morale shaken, it could fall apart overnight."

Chuang Wang remained silent.

Niu Jinxing pressed on.

"Look at Song Xiance just now. He was already confused by Li Yan's words. He even said he must calculate Heaven's Mandate again."

"What if he calculates and concludes that Heaven favors those firelock rebels?"

"That would only create even more chaos."

Chuang Wang's eyes widened slightly.

That possibility genuinely startled him.

Niu Jinxing added quietly,

"And what if Song Xiance eventually sides with Li Yan?"

"In that case, Li Yan might replace you and become the new Chuang Wang himself."

That sentence finally broke Chuang Wang's patience.

His eyes turned cold.

"That man must die."

He lowered his voice.

"Think of a way to kill him and blame it on the firelock rebels. No one must know it was us."

"Otherwise the army's morale will still collapse."

Niu Jinxing smiled faintly.

"Leave it to me."

"I will invite him out for a walk. We will travel far from the main camp, find a quiet place, and drink together."

"Then I will kill him when the opportunity appears."

"As long as we are far enough away from camp, no one will know it was my doing."

"Afterward, I will return and say we encountered firelock rebels. Li Yan was shot dead by their firearms."

He spread his hands.

"No one will know the truth."

Chuang Wang nodded slowly.

"Good."

Meanwhile, Sun Chuanting arrived at Jinan with six hundred veteran frontier soldiers from Guyuan and more than four thousand newly recruited troops.

The Prefect of Jinan burst into tears the moment he saw the Minister of War personally leading reinforcements.

Recently, the forces of Chuang Wang had been active around Jinan Prefecture, frightening the poor prefect nearly out of his wits. For days he had waited anxiously for help.

Now that the Minister of War had finally arrived, the trembling heart lodged in his throat could finally settle down.

Sun Chuanting, however, had no time for emotional greetings.

The moment he entered the city, he immediately sent someone to summon Liu Maopao and the other men from Gao Family Village who had entered Jinan earlier to conduct operations.

Sun Chuanting got straight to the point.

"Gentlemen, what is the situation around Jinan?"

Liu Maopao smiled slightly.

"Everything is under control."

"Chuang Wang's little song is no longer popular inside Jinan city. We have mostly stabilized the larger towns nearby as well."

"But the surrounding countryside is another matter."

He sighed.

"The words no grain tax are simply too powerful among poor farmers. We cannot change their minds so easily."

"We try to reason with them, but they refuse to listen. In their eyes, the only good government is one that collects no taxes at all."

Sun Chuanting sighed softly and shook his head.

"In that case, there is no choice."

"We must defeat Chuang Wang first. After that, we can slowly reason with the farmers."

"Oh right," Liu Maopao suddenly said, remembering something.

He then recounted his entire conversation with Li Yan.

At the end, he laughed.

"That scholar must hold an important position in Chuang Wang's army..."

Before he could continue, the small golden statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun hanging on Sun Chuanting's chest suddenly spoke.

"Oh?"

"Liu Maopao, you said that man was a scholar who discussed the no grain tax policy with you?"

"Does he truly want to reform the system?"

Liu Maopao immediately bowed respectfully.

"Greetings, Tianzun!"

"He is a reasonable man. After our discussion, he even seemed to agree with our taxation system. He believes it is better than Chuang Wang's policy of abolishing taxes."

Li Dao Xuan spoke calmly.

"That man... should be Li Yan."

The moment Sun Chuanting heard the name Li Yan, he remembered something.

Before leaving the capital to assume his post as Minister of War, Tianzun had told him that Chuang Wang had recently obtained a new strategist named Li Yan. Tianzun had also predicted that Li Yan would not truly fit within the rebel army and would eventually meet a tragic end.

He had even said that this man might still be saved.

Thinking of this, Sun Chuanting could not help but sigh.

"Liu Maopao... you told Li Yan these ideas a little too early."

Liu Maopao blinked.

"Too early?"

"Yes."

Sun Chuanting sighed again.

"If he carries your words back into Chuang Wang's army and keeps them to himself, perhaps nothing will happen."

"But if he speaks them openly..."

Sun Chuanting paused.

"It may bring him a fatal disaster."

Chapter 1277 What Must Change Is People

Liu Maopao was no fool.

In fact, the man was sharp as a needle.

Earlier he had not paid much attention to Li Yan, so he had not thought deeply about the matter. But now that Dao Xuan Tianzun seemed to value this person, and Sun Chuanting had spoken the same way, Liu Maopao's brain immediately began spinning like a well-oiled wheel.

It took him less than ten blinks to figure things out.

Suddenly he slapped his thigh.

"You are right. I told him too early."

"At this moment Chuang Wang has not yet been beaten down. He still commands a hundred thousand troops and is at the height of his arrogance."

"If that strategist returns and repeats our ideas aloud, he will surely be killed."

Liu Maopao sighed loudly.

"If only I had told him after Chuang Wang had already been defeated. Then he would have been safe."

He looked at Sun Chuanting.

"So... we cannot save this man, can we?"

Sun Chuanting let out a long sigh.

"We do not have the ability to leave the city to rescue him."

"The main forces of the militia are currently focused on a large scale campaign in Liaodong. Nearly all manpower and resources are being sent there."

"Here I only have Chen Qianhu and six hundred Guyuan frontier soldiers. The other four thousand men are newly recruited militia with almost no combat ability."

Liu Maopao nodded grimly.

"Then merely defending Jinan city will already take everything we have."

"There is truly no way to deal with Chuang Wang's army. We cannot save him."

At that moment, Li Dao Xuan spoke calmly.

"In that case... I will go take a walk."

Sun Chuanting and Liu Maopao immediately bowed.

"Tianzun is truly benevolent!"

Li Dao Xuan himself was not even sure whether he would find the man.

He would simply wander around a bit.

If Li Yan's fate was not meant to end, then perhaps he would run into him.

If he could not find him, then there was nothing more to be done.

Among the supplies carried by the Guyuan frontier troops was a mass-produced Tianzun body. Suddenly that figure sat upright on the transport cart.

After asking a few questions from the special soldier who had previously fought the bandits of the Old Eight Squad, Li Dao Xuan quickly confirmed something.

Chuang Wang's army was definitely not far from Jinan.

Li Yan had exited the city through the east gate.

If so, the rebel army must be somewhere outside that gate.

There was only one likely place.

Panlong Mountain.

The mountain itself was not very large. With one hundred thousand rebels gathered there, finding them would actually be quite easy.

Unlike places such as Huanglong Mountain or the Shu Mountains. In those kinds of terrain you could throw half a million men inside and still struggle to locate them.

Once he left Jinan and reached a deserted stretch of land, two small wheels flipped out from the bottom of Li Dao Xuan's feet.

He began gliding toward Panlong Mountain.

Morning sunlight slowly spread across Panlong Mountain.

Li Yan had risen early.

In truth, he had barely slept at all.

Dark circles hung under his eyes as he stared at the dawn sky, his mind tangled with complicated thoughts.

For years he had believed that his goal was to create a world where common people paid no grain tax.

Now he suddenly realized he had been completely wrong.

If he wished to change course now, was it already too late?

Just as he was lost in thought, Niu Jinxing walked over with a smile.

"Brother Li, you are up quite early."

Li Yan sighed.

"I could not sleep."

"Because of what we discussed yesterday?"

"Yes."

Li Yan nodded.

"I thought about it all night. The proposal from those firelock rebels truly seems more practical."

"Perhaps we really should learn from them. If possible, we might even reconcile our past grievances and form an alliance."

"Together we could overthrow this wicked dynasty."

Niu Jinxing smiled warmly.

"I share the same thought."

"Why not discuss it in greater detail?"

Li Yan's eyes brightened.

"Brother Niu thinks the same way? That is wonderful!"

"I was worried everyone would oppose the idea."

Niu Jinxing lowered his voice.

"There will certainly be opposition in the army. Discussing such matters here might damage the brotherhood among our men."

"Let us leave the camp. At the foot of the mountain we can find a quiet place and speak freely."

Li Yan nodded immediately.

"Excellent idea."

He mounted a horse in one smooth motion.

Niu Jinxing also climbed onto his own horse.

Two scholars on horseback rode out of the rebel camp and disappeared along the mountain path.

Not long after they left, a group of Niu Jinxing's men slipped out of the camp and followed them from afar.

Early that morning, Li Dao Xuan woke up, washed his face casually, brushed his teeth, and sat beside the box.

While ordering breakfast on his phone, he casually switched viewpoints and randomly checked on several cities within the Tianzun Liberation Zone.

Now that his field of vision had expanded so widely, it was no longer possible for him to visit every city every day.

At best he could randomly show concern for a few of them each day.

That meant every city could only receive Tianzun's attention by chance.

Who knew how many days it would take before each city got noticed once.

Li Dao Xuan understood that this was simply the natural consequence of growth.

It could not be helped.

After finishing his random inspections, his consciousness suddenly jumped.

In the next instant he was inside the mass-produced Tianzun body on Panlong Mountain.

Last night he had reached the mountain's base, walked around for a while without finding anything, and eventually it became time to sleep. So he had simply laid the body down inside a patch of grass.

Now, returning to that body, he instantly jumped from a modern city into the middle of a remote mountain wilderness.

The smog in modern Chongqing was terrible.

But the moment he arrived in Ming dynasty Panlong Mountain, he felt nothing but fresh air.

The morning forest was cool and crisp. Tiny droplets of dew clung to the grass. Everything felt clean and alive.

The sensation of escaping the modern city like this was something he could experience a hundred million times and never grow tired of.

He was just about to sit up when he heard the sound of hooves.

Two riders.

Moving slowly.

He pushed aside the grass and looked out.

Two scholars were riding down the mountain path at an unhurried pace.

Their horses looked rather lazy, as if still annoyed about being awake so early.

The two riders chatted casually.

One addressed the other as "Brother Li."

The other replied with "Brother Niu."

Li Dao Xuan felt his heart skip.

What a coincidence.

If his guess was correct, those two must be Li Yan and Niu Jinxing.

Looks like Li Yan's fate had not yet run out.

The two riders passed the patch of grass.

Soon afterward another group appeared on the road behind them.

This second group was clearly following from a distance.

Each man carried a blade. Their expressions were dark and full of killing intent.

Li Dao Xuan clicked his tongue twice.

He waited for the second group to pass before climbing out of the grass.

The silicone body itself would not get wet, but the Daoist robe worn over it had absorbed some morning dew.

As he brushed grass and dirt from the robe, he quietly followed behind.

Li Yan and Niu Jinxing rode while chatting.

Ahead of them lay a small valley.

It was quiet and secluded.

A small bamboo grove stood inside the valley.

Strangely, within the grove there was an old stone table and four stone chairs.

Niu Jinxing smiled.

"Brother Li, I wonder who placed this stone table and chairs here. Quite elegant, is it not?"

"Why not sit here and talk?"

Li Yan nodded.

"Excellent."

They brushed dust from the chairs with their sleeves and sat down.

Niu Jinxing glanced casually toward the path they had taken.

In the distance he could see his men approaching quietly, slipping into the bamboo grove and slowly closing in.

A strange smile crept across his face.

"Brother Li," he said slowly.

"Regarding the matter you mentioned... my opinion is this."

Chapter 1278 I Am Not Even Human

Niu Jinxing forced a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Brother Li, do you not think your taxation idea is a little foolish?"

Li Yan blinked in surprise.

Just a moment ago Niu Jinxing had said he agreed with him. Now suddenly he was calling the idea foolish. The shift in attitude was so abrupt that Li Yan could not help but feel confused.

Niu Jinxing continued calmly.

"Let us imagine the future for a moment. Suppose our Chuang army successfully marches into Beijing and kills that old emperor. At that time Brother Chuang Wang will ascend the throne as emperor."

He grinned.

"You will naturally become the Grand Secretary. As for me, Niu Jinxing, I should at least manage to secure the post of a minister."

He leaned slightly closer.

"And yet you propose that the wealthy should pay taxes."

Niu Jinxing's grin widened.

"Would that not mean we ourselves would have to pay taxes?"

Li Yan was stunned.

"But if we truly become such important figures, then of course we will be wealthy. Paying a little tax for the sake of the people, what would be wrong with that?"

Niu Jinxing sneered.

"You may enjoy paying taxes. That does not mean others do."

"You even suggested collecting taxes from princes. Tell me honestly. If Chuang Wang's nephews heard that idea, do you think they would be pleased?"

Li Yan froze.

Niu Jinxing did not stop.

"Would General Liu Zongmin be pleased? Would Hao Yaoqi be pleased?"

"What about the veterans of the Old Eight Squad who followed Chuang Wang through life and death for years? The men who risked everything because they dreamed of becoming officials someday, of bringing honor and prosperity to their descendants?"

"Would they be pleased?"

Li Yan's heart sank.

The truth in those questions struck him like a hammer.

Niu Jinxing had already said enough.

Now it was time to kill.

He was about to shout for the hidden men to come out.

Suddenly laughter sounded from outside the bamboo grove.

A figure appeared beyond the trees.

A young man walked in slowly.

He wore a Daoist robe of fine quality. Though a few spots had been dampened by morning dew, it did nothing to diminish the calm and otherworldly aura surrounding him.

The golden threads forming a Taiji diagram on his robe reflected the morning sunlight, glimmering brilliantly.

Niu Jinxing frowned slightly.

He suppressed the urge to summon his men for the moment. It would be better to see who this Daoist was first.

The newcomer was of course Li Dao Xuan.

He waved cheerfully at the two men.

"Greetings, gentlemen."

Li Yan politely returned the greeting.

"Daozhang."

Niu Jinxing only stared at him suspiciously.

Li Dao Xuan flicked his sleeve, then pretended to pinch his fingers together as if performing a calculation.

"If my divination is correct," he said with a grin, "the two of you are currently arguing about the matter of abolishing grain taxes."

Both Li Yan and Niu Jinxing were shocked.

How did this man know that?

Li Dao Xuan walked to the stone table and casually sat down.

"Li Yan, you already know that abolishing grain taxes will not work. That is why you returned to persuade Chuang Wang to change strategies."

Li Yan stared at him in astonishment.

How did this Daoist even know his name?

Li Dao Xuan turned to Niu Jinxing.

"As for you..."

He deliberately stretched the last word.

From the expression on the Daoist's face, Niu Jinxing sensed a deep and mocking amusement.

Yet Li Dao Xuan ignored him and turned back to Li Yan.

"Li Yan," he said gently, "have you discovered what must truly change if you wish to change the world?"

Li Yan hesitated.

"The court? The laws? The system?"

Li Dao Xuan shook his head.

"People."

Li Yan felt as if lightning had struck his mind.

Li Dao Xuan continued calmly.

"The greatest resistance to change always comes from people. Whether you wish to change the government, reform the laws, or redesign the system, everything must begin with people."

Li Yan's eyes widened.

Li Dao Xuan smiled.

"If you follow the right people, you can accomplish the right things. If you follow the wrong people, nothing will succeed."

Then he turned toward Niu Jinxing with a playful grin.

"Would you not agree, Niu Jinxing?"

Niu Jinxing's eyes narrowed.

This Daoist knew his name too.

He could no longer stay silent.

"You Daoist," he said coldly, "what exactly are you here for?"

"Daoist?" Li Dao Xuan chuckled.

"I am not really a Daoist."

"I am merely a charlatan who acts on a whim."

He spread his hands.

"As for why I came here... well, I suppose you could say I felt like saving the world today."

Niu Jinxing's face darkened.

"Utter nonsense!"

He no longer wished to delay.

The longer this dragged on, the greater the risk.

Niu Jinxing suddenly leaped backward several steps, preparing to shout for his men.

But before he could open his mouth, Li Dao Xuan spoke first.

"Niu Jinxing, I will give you one chance to live."

"If you abandon your plan now, I will not kill you."

Niu Jinxing froze briefly.

At that moment he realized something.

This man knew everything.

That realization only made his killing intent surge even stronger.

He roared angrily.

"Men! Come out and attack!"

Figures burst out from the bamboo grove.

The ambushers who had been hiding for a long time rushed forward one after another.

In the blink of an eye the stone table was surrounded by Niu Jinxing's men.

Even Li Yan, naive as he was, finally understood.

His mouth hung open in shock.

"You... you planned to kill me?"

"Why are you so vicious? If Brother Chuang Wang learns of this he will never forgive you!"

Niu Jinxing snorted.

"You are still this naive?"

"If Brother Chuang Wang had not agreed, would I dare to kill you?"

Li Yan inhaled sharply.

Li Dao Xuan sighed softly.

"I offered you a chance to live, yet you refused."

He shook his head.

"Ah well. Everyone dies eventually. Some people merely need a little assistance."

As he spoke, two small pistols slid out from his sleeves.

"Firelocks!"

Niu Jinxing's men were startled and instinctively stepped back half a pace.

At close range these weapons could kill with a single shot.

Even Niu Jinxing quietly retreated two steps, though his mouth remained stubborn.

"So you are one of those firelock rebels."

Li Dao Xuan smiled.

"Calling me one of them is not quite accurate."

"I would say... their leader."

Everyone present was shocked.

The leader?

So the firelock rebels were led by a Daoist?

They had heard rumors that the firelock rebels belonged to a sect similar to the White Lotus, a group called the Dao Xuan Tianzun Sect, which promoted a so called deity to deceive the masses.

Niu Jinxing sneered.

"So you are the cult leader of that Dao Xuan Tianzun sect."

"Cult leader?" Li Dao Xuan laughed.

"Who told you the leader had to be the cult leader?"

Niu Jinxing frowned.

"If not the cult leader, then what?"

Li Dao Xuan grinned.

"Something slightly higher."

"Think carefully."

Niu Jinxing blinked.

In a religious organization, who could be higher than the cult leader?

Impossible.

Unless...

Wait.

If he reversed that logic...

Niu Jinxing suddenly shouted angrily.

"Enough with your tricks! Men, do not fear him!"

"He only has two pistols. That means only two shots. Once he fires, the rest of you can rush forward and beat him to death."

"He would not dare fire. He is only bluffing."

"Is that so?"

Li Dao Xuan chuckled.

"The truly frightening things have not even appeared yet."

The moment he finished speaking, both hands pulled their triggers.

Bang.

Bang.

Two gunshots echoed through the bamboo grove.

Two bandits clutched their chests and collapsed to the ground at the same time.

Chapter 1279 The Escape Begins

Two bandits were shot and collapsed to the ground.

The others froze for a moment before suddenly lunging forward together, refusing to give Li Daoxuan any chance to reload his firearm.

Li Yan was startled. He wanted to help, but he was only a scholar who could barely tie up a chicken. He had no idea how to assist and could only stand there in panic.

Amid the chaos, Li Daoxuan actually turned his head and smiled at Li Yan.

"Step aside. Don't worry about me."

Li Yan rubbed his eyes, feeling that something was off.

That man's head... had it just rotated halfway around to talk to him?

His body didn't seem to move at all.

When he focused again, Li Daoxuan's head had already turned back, leaving only the back of his head visible. Li Yan wasn't even sure whether the man's body had moved at all.

At the same time, two bandits had already rushed up to Li Daoxuan and slashed their blades down.

Slash! Slash!

Both strikes landed.

One blade sank into his left shoulder, the other into his right.

Originally both attacks were aimed at his head, but Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly left and right like a "focus test dummy," causing the blades to miss his skull and hit his shoulders instead.

For an ordinary person, taking two cuts like that would already be enough to cripple them.

But Li Daoxuan simply grinned.

Both fists shot forward simultaneously.

Bang! Bang!

The two bandits were struck and sent flying backward.

Niu Jinxing was stunned.

His subordinates were even more stunned.

But the situation had already reached this point. No matter how strange their opponent was, they had no choice but to attack.

The group rushed forward again.

With a metallic clang, blades suddenly sprang out from Li Daoxuan's left and right elbows.

With his left hand, he stabbed one bandit in the stomach.

With his right hand, he sliced off another bandit's arm.

He continued using the same old fighting style.

He didn't dodge or evade the incoming attacks at all.

After all, he couldn't dodge them anyway.

So he simply endured them head-on.

That way, it was easier for him to counterattack.

In the blink of an eye, Li Daoxuan's body had been struck by who knew how many blades.

But it didn't matter.

To him, it was nothing more than a splash of water.

Meanwhile, the blades in his hands cut down several more enemies.

Blood sprayed everywhere.

In less than half a minute...

All of Niu Jinxing's men were lying on the ground.

Li Yan stared blankly, completely stunned.

But Niu Jinxing was terrified, his entire body trembling.

"Y-you... what kind of monster are you?!"

"I already told you earlier."

"Higher than... the Cult Leader..."

Only now did Niu Jinxing truly feel the terror behind those words.

Impossible. Absolutely impossible!

He must have been lying to me.

Just as Niu Jinxing was panicking, one of the wounded bandits suddenly sprang up and fled into the distance.

Li Daoxuan's attention instantly shifted toward the fleeing bandit.

Niu Jinxing was overjoyed.

Heaven is helping me!

He immediately ran in the opposite direction.

One to the left, one to the right.

They split up completely.

After all, Li Daoxuan was only one person—there was no way he could chase both at once.

Li Daoxuan chuckled.

"Trying tricks like that."

He clasped both hands together with interlocked fingers, then suddenly pulled them apart.

Crack! Crack!

Both of his hands were torn off.

From the wrists, dark cannon barrels were revealed.

Behind him, Li Yan nearly screamed in shock.

Li Daoxuan raised his left arm and aimed at the fleeing Niu Jinxing.

Then he raised his right arm and aimed at the escaping bandit.

Both arms pointed in opposite directions like the shape of a cross.

Li Yan was drenched in sweat.

"What... what are you doing?"

Li Daoxuan grinned.

"Don't just stand there. Help me light the fuse. Both my hands are busy."

Still dazed, Li Yan walked over, took out a fire striker, and lit the fuses protruding from Li Daoxuan's arms.

Throughout the entire process, his mind remained blank.

Boom! Boom!

Two cannon blasts rang out, one after another.

Two small cannon shells shot out simultaneously.

Then came the second explosions.

BOOM! BOOM!

Although the shots were slightly off target, the shrapnel flying in all directions easily engulfed both Niu Jinxing and the fleeing bandit.

Several fragments struck their bodies.

They screamed twice before collapsing to the ground, motionless.

Only then did Li Daoxuan retract the cannon barrels.

He waved his armless wrists and said to Li Yan,

"What are you staring at? Pick up the hands on the ground and help me attach them back."

"Ah? O-okay!"

Li Yan hurriedly crouched down and picked up the pair of hands from the ground.

They were still locked together with interlaced fingers.

When he picked them up, he realized that although they looked like human flesh, they were actually made of some strange rubber-like material, with steel bones inside.

They were surprisingly heavy.

Li Yan cautiously asked,

"What... exactly are you?"

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"As you can see. Anyway, I'm not human."

Li Yan inhaled sharply.

"Let's go," Li Daoxuan said. "We can't stay here long. We just fired cannons. The sound will reach the mountain, and Li Zicheng will send people to investigate soon."

"Li Zicheng?" Li Yan asked in surprise. "Who?"

"The Chuang Wang," Li Daoxuan replied with a grin. "Li Zicheng is his real name."

Li Yan was shocked.

"You even know the Chuang Wang real name? No one knows that."

Li Daoxuan said calmly,

"I just told you. I'm not human."

Li Yan: "..."

The two left the bamboo forest and walked onto the official road at the foot of Panlong Mountain, hiring a carriage and heading toward Jinan Prefecture.

Li Yan now knew that Li Daoxuan was the leader of the Firearm Rebels. He had many questions he wanted to ask, but since they had only just met—and since the man might not even be human—he didn't dare ask too much.

The journey passed in silence.

Before long, they arrived at Jinan Prefecture City.

As soon as they reached the city gate, Li Yan noticed that many more soldiers had appeared there, all wearing bright armor.

He was startled.

"Reinforcements from the court have arrived."

Li Daoxuan nodded.

"Yes. The Minister of War, Sun Chuanting, has arrived in Jinan."

Upon hearing the name Sun Chuanting, Li Yan paused.

"The man who killed the previous Chuang Wang."

"Yes."

"If he's in Jinan, how can we enter the city?" Li Yan asked. "Your people should be avoiding him. If he discovers you, a battle will surely break out."

"Don't worry."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"He's one of ours."

Li Yan gasped.

The Minister of War... actually working with the Firearm Rebels?

Wouldn't that mean the entire Ming court—

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"In terms of military strength, we could storm the capital and overthrow the Ming at any time."

"But if everything is destroyed through force alone, what meaning would that have?"

"If everything is smashed to pieces, what good would it do for the common people?"

Li Yan fell silent.

Li Daoxuan brought him straight into the military camp.

Liu Maopao spotted Li Yan immediately and smiled slightly.

Then he bowed deeply toward Li Daoxuan.

"Tianzun, you've rescued him."

Li Daoxuan replied,

"I'll leave the rest to you."

Liu Maopao said respectfully,

"As you command."

When Li Yan heard the words "as you command", he felt even more shocked.

Li Daoxuan walked over to a transport wagon, lay down on it, and stopped moving.

Li Yan stared in astonishment.

Liu Maopao walked over and smiled.

"When we met last time, I had no idea you were actually Li Yan, the strategist of the Chuang Wang. Please forgive my earlier disrespect."

"Tianzun has gone to attend to other matters."

"From here on, I'll be the one showing you around."

"Anything you want to know..."

"I will tell you everything."

Chapter 1280 Charge Through

Liaodong. Shengjing.

Inside the Great Iron Cart Manufacturing Workshop, in the section reserved for the Korean craftsmen.

Today was the day the Korean royal hostages, Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim, were scheduled to come and "inspect the work."

Ever since Hong Taiji adopted Binsheng's suggestion and ordered the two Korean princes to supervise the workshop, the Korean slaves working there had clearly become more efficient.

Under Binsheng's guidance, the Korean craftsmen had finally forged a beautifully made bearing shaft.

Hong Taiji was extremely pleased.

In his mind he could already see the future: a fleet of Great Iron Carts rolling across the battlefield, clashing head-on with the Ming Empire's own iron machines.

But of course, a single bearing shaft was far from enough.

Hong Taiji immediately ordered Binsheng to speed up production even further. At the same time, he instructed Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim to supervise the Korean craftsmen more closely so that none of them would dare slack off.

So Binsheng picked an "auspicious day" and arranged for the two princes to visit the workshop together with their wives.

Binsheng walked in front, acting as their guide.

Behind him followed the two royal couples.

And trailing behind them were the Qing soldiers responsible for guarding the hostages.

The group wandered through the workshop, drifting from one room to another.

Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim occasionally called over a craftsman, praising him a few words or scolding him lightly to keep up appearances.

The Qing guards behind them were bored stiff.

Guarding hostages was already the dullest assignment imaginable. Guarding hostages who were merely inspecting workshops was dullness beyond dullness.

Besides, this was Shengjing, the capital of the Qing.

What could possibly happen here?

There was absolutely zero pressure.

Eventually the group followed Binsheng into a room containing a huge furnace.

The furnace was used for smelting iron.

The heat pouring out of the room was intense and suffocating.

Even before reaching the doorway, several of the Qing soldiers grimaced in disgust.

Binsheng turned and smiled at them.

"Gentlemen, it's unbearably hot inside. You'd better stay outside the door instead of suffering in there. Just keep watch from here. The room only has one entrance anyway. Besides," he added with a casual laugh, "with me inside, what could these two useless princes possibly do?"

The soldiers thought about it.

The reasoning sounded perfectly reasonable.

After all, Binsheng was one of the elite fighters of the Ujen Coohari corps. His blade skills were excellent and he was known for being clever.

Even if Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim attacked him together, ten of them wouldn't be enough to defeat him.

If Binsheng was watching them inside, what was there to worry about?

So the guards really did remain outside the door.

Inside the room, Binsheng quickly led the four royal hostages to the far corner where an unused furnace stood cold and dark.

Without hesitation he crouched down and crawled inside.

He swept aside the coal ash and slag on the ground, then tugged hard at a hidden iron plate.

The plate lifted open.

Underneath it appeared a narrow underground passage.

Inside the tunnel was another man.

One of Binsheng's ten trusted subordinates.

One of the Top Ten Model Workers of Chang'an Factory.

One of the Ten Outstanding Young Workers.

Currently the director of the armored vehicle workshop.

His face was filthy black from hiding in the tunnel for so long.

When he saw Binsheng he grinned and gave a confident thumbs-up.

Everything was ready.

Binsheng turned back to the princes.

"Quick. Get in."

The two women frowned slightly.

But the two princes immediately urged them.

"Don't worry about appearances. Our lives are at stake."

The women nodded.

Then all four of them crawled into the furnace.

Coal dust smeared all over their clothes.

But none of them cared.

They dropped to their hands and knees and began crawling desperately through the tunnel.

The worker guided them forward through the cramped passage.

Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim had lived sheltered lives since childhood. They had never suffered like this before.

But now they gritted their teeth and endured.

They had already crawled quite far when Binsheng was still standing outside the furnace, loudly calling out:

"Your Highness the Crown Prince, please take a look at this furnace. This is where we smelt the iron."

Then he immediately changed his voice and imitated Crown Prince Sohyeon.

"Mm."

The guards outside heard the voices and remained relaxed.

They had no intention of entering the furnace room.

Binsheng chuckled softly.

Only then did he finally jump down into the tunnel and close the iron plate behind him.

The group crawled forward through the darkness.

And crawled.

And crawled.

No one knew how long they had been moving before light finally appeared ahead.

The tunnel ended at the inner wall of a water well, the exit positioned slightly above the waterline.

A ladder had already been placed inside the well by another of Binsheng's men.

One by one they climbed up.

When they emerged, they found themselves inside a small private courtyard.

The courtyard was located not far from Shengjing's city gate.

Clean clothes were immediately brought to them.

No explanation was needed.

The princes instantly understood.

They rushed into separate rooms and quickly changed.

Moments later they emerged looking like four ragged peasants.

Their faces were already smeared with mud from crawling through the tunnel. All they had to do was mess up their hair a little.

One of Binsheng's subordinates approached them dressed as a merchant.

He handed each of them a carrying pole.

The baskets hanging from the poles looked heavy, but they were actually filled with light, fluffy materials.

Even spoiled nobles like the princes and their wives could carry them easily.

"Lift the poles and follow me," the disguised merchant said quietly.

"Don't speak along the way. Just bend your backs as if the load is crushing you."

He stepped out of the courtyard first.

Behind him walked Binsheng and the worker from the tunnel, now disguised as bodyguards carrying swords.

Behind them came the two royal couples, each carrying a pole across their shoulders.

They reached the city gate.

The merchant calmly handed the gate guards a large silver ingot.

"I've got some local goods to sell in a nearby village. Hired a few porters to carry them for me. Please make it convenient, officers."

The guards barely glanced at them.

Caravans like this passed through the gate every day.

Nothing suspicious.

One wave of the hand.

"Move along."

And just like that...

They walked straight out of Shengjing.

After traveling two or three li from the city gate, Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim could barely continue.

Even though their loads were light, their shoulders were aching terribly.

They dropped the poles and rubbed their shoulders.

"Finally..."

But Binsheng shook his head.

"Don't celebrate too early."

He pointed behind them.

"The real escape is only beginning."

The hostages turned around.

From the direction of Shengjing came the sound of alarm bells ringing loudly.

The city gates were being slammed shut.

Large numbers of soldiers were flooding toward the gates, searching everyone entering or leaving the city.

Binsheng grinned.

"The Qing soldiers guarding you have realized you're gone. They'll send pursuers soon."

"They'll chase south first."

"After a while, when they realize they've gone the wrong way, they'll spread out east, west, and north."

He clapped his hands.

"We're betting on that time difference."

Then he waved forward.

"Quick."

"We need to start running."