

Great Ming 1281

Chapter 1281 Feeling Respected

Although they said they needed to run, it was obvious that Crown Prince Sohyeon, Prince Bongrim, and their wives simply couldn't manage it.

These four pampered nobles had been raised in comfort all their lives. Forget running—even walking quickly was already difficult for them.

Fortunately, Binsheng had prepared in advance.

From the forest beside the road, one of his subordinates suddenly appeared. He brought several sets of replacement clothes, a few horses, and even a carriage.

Crown Prince Sohyeon couldn't help but feel impressed.

"You really thought of everything. You even arranged someone here to receive us."

Binsheng grinned.

"This kind of operation is my specialty."

Everyone quickly changed clothes again, disguising themselves as a wealthy family traveling with their relatives.

The two women got into the carriage, while the men mounted horses. Then they galloped northward.

At this moment, the Qing pursuers were still focused on the south, so there were no defenses to the north at all. Their journey went extremely smoothly, and they easily passed several checkpoints.

At first, Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim felt nervous whenever they saw a checkpoint.

But they soon noticed something astonishing.

Every time they reached a checkpoint, Binsheng would casually produce a different kind of travel document.

Merchant permits.

Official passes.

Civilian identification.

He seemed to have every kind of document imaginable.

Crown Prince Sohyeon couldn't help asking,

"Just what kind of person are you?"

Binsheng chuckled.

"Deputy Director of Chang'an Factory."

Crown Prince Sohyeon blinked in confusion.

"???"

The title sounded completely absurd. He had no idea what it meant.

Prince Bongrim couldn't help asking another question.

"Mr. Binsheng... when the Qing captured us as hostages, they also took five hundred thousand Korean civilians. If we escape like this, will it cause harm to those ordinary people?"

Binsheng shook his head.

"Don't worry. It should be fine."

"The Qing captured the two of you for political purposes. But those five hundred thousand civilians were captured for their labor. They need them as slaves to work."

"Your escape doesn't affect their labor. If the Qing killed those civilians, it would only weaken themselves and serve no purpose."

Prince Bongrim nodded slowly.

"That makes sense. Then I can escape with peace of mind."

They continued riding forward.

After some time, everyone grew hungry.

But Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim didn't dare say they were starving. They were in the middle of an escape after all—no matter how hungry they were, they could only endure it.

Yet unexpectedly, ahead on the roadside another of Binsheng's subordinates suddenly appeared again.

He had already prepared food.

Not only that—he also brought another set of clothes.

In the blink of an eye, the group transformed once again, this time into a party of government officials traveling with their families.

Crown Prince Sohyeon sighed with admiration.

"The Ming Empire is truly impressive. To rescue just the two of us, they arranged everything so carefully."

Binsheng smiled.

"The more impressive part is still ahead."

They continued traveling north.

Soon, however, the scenery ahead started to look very strange.

The road passed between two mountains. Clearly, it must have been extremely difficult to build such a road.

Yet the Qing soldiers were organizing huge numbers of laborers to destroy it.

Large pits had been dug across the road.

Earthen walls were piled up everywhere.

Stones had been pushed onto the path.

The once smooth official road had been turned into a completely uneven mess.

Apparently heavy rain had fallen a few days earlier. Many of the pits had filled with water, leaving muddy puddles everywhere.

No one could even tell how deep the pits were.

The carriage could no longer pass through.

The two women had to get out and mount horses instead.

Even the warhorses had to move carefully across the uneven ground. A single misstep could easily cause them to stumble.

Crown Prince Sohyeon looked puzzled.

"What are they doing?"

Binsheng chuckled.

"They're preparing defenses against our Ming Empire's Great Iron Carts."

Crown Prince Sohyeon was surprised.

"What are Great Iron Carts?"

Binsheng replied casually,

"The Korean craftsmen you supervised were actually building those Great Iron Carts."

"But the blueprints I gave them were fake. The final machine will be missing its 'heart' and won't be able to move at all."

"Oh..."

Crown Prince Sohyeon nodded.

"So those Great Iron Carts are powerful enough to force the Qing to destroy their own roads?"

Binsheng just smiled without answering.

The group continued northward using their fake travel documents.

The farther north they went, the more tense the Qing soldiers became.

At every important checkpoint, soldiers were digging up the roads.

Nearly every proper highway had been destroyed.

Even on relatively flat plains, thousands of laborers were digging pits everywhere.

The four hostages were stunned.

They had never seen a country ruin its own land so thoroughly just to defend against an enemy.

Crown Prince Sohyeon muttered,

"If they do this, the Eight Banner army won't even be able to deploy their battle formations."

Binsheng shrugged.

"The era has changed. Military formations don't work anymore."

"From now on, every nation that becomes our enemy will be forced to follow the same path as the Qing."

Crown Prince Sohyeon looked confused.

"???"

Prince Bongrim looked equally puzzled.

"???"

But before long, they finally understood.

Binsheng's last group of support personnel was waiting near the border.

They replaced everyone's horses with the finest mounts available.

Then Binsheng said,

"Beyond this point is the border."

"The Qing army has stationed heavy troops there to defend against the Mongolian Ushin tribe."

"Needless to say, the entire border area has been dug up as well. They've practically tried to build a Great Wall there."

"All our fake documents will be useless."

The four hostages immediately understood.

"We have to break through?"

"Yes," Binsheng said. "We charge through."

"But let me make this clear first."

"Whether you succeed depends entirely on your own abilities."

"If you fall off your horse or fall behind, my men will not turn back to rescue you."

"Because if you are captured, the Qing will simply take you back to Shengjing and imprison you again. You won't die."

"But if my men are captured trying to save you... they will definitely die horribly."

The four hostages understood and nodded solemnly.

The two women were extremely nervous.

Their riding skills were terrible.

Binsheng laughed.

"Don't worry too much."

"The horses we just gave you are the best Mongolian horses. They run like the wind."

"Women are lighter than men, so the horses carry less weight. You'll actually run faster."

"Just hug the horse's neck tightly."

Then Binsheng raised his voice.

"Alright."

"Get ready to break through the checkpoint!"

He burst into laughter.

"Brothers! Let's charge!"

His ten veteran subordinates, the Top Ten Model Workers of Chang'an Factory, the Ten Outstanding Young Workers—all laughed loudly.

"Once we break through, we can go back to the factory and collect our rewards!"

"This mission will definitely earn a huge prize!"

"Gao Family Village never neglects those who earn merit!"

"This time we'll upgrade from Chang'an Factory model workers to Gao Family Village model workers!"

"Charge!"

More than a dozen horses suddenly surged forward toward the border.

The ground was filled with pits and holes, making it extremely difficult to ride.

The warhorses had to jump and weave constantly, the ride incredibly rough.

Binsheng and his men handled it easily.

But Crown Prince Sohyeon, Prince Bongrim, and their wives were having a miserable time.

Their riding skills were poor.

All they could do was cling tightly to the horses' necks and pray they wouldn't fall off.

Chapter 1282 Everything Depends on Father

The moment they began their charge, the sentry in the watchtower shouted loudly.

"Strange people are trying to break through the checkpoint!"

The Qing soldiers all turned to look, confused.

If someone charged from the grasslands into Qing territory, they would immediately prepare for battle.

But this group was charging from Qing territory out toward the grasslands, which was much harder to understand.

"Are they criminals trying to escape?" someone finally reacted. "Stop them!"

From the fortress beside the watchtower, a group of Qing soldiers quickly mounted their horses and rushed forward to intercept.

Binsheng shouted,

"Accelerate! Run! Ignore them!"

The group charged forward desperately.

The Qing soldiers cursed.

"Damn it! They're forcing their way through. Fire arrows!"

But before they could act, Binsheng and his men moved first.

They raised their hand crossbows. The humming vibration of bowstrings filled the air as more than a dozen bolts shot forward.

They didn't aim at the riders.

They aimed at the horses.

Several Qing riders were thrown down instantly.

Before the Qing soldiers could recover, Binsheng's group pulled out short cavalry muskets.

These guns had short barrels, short range, and poor accuracy. They were only suitable for cavalry during a charge.

In simple terms: ride straight into the enemy's face and fire.

Binsheng and his men rushed close to the Qing troops.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

A chaotic volley erupted.

Those Qing soldiers were terribly unlucky. They had thought they were intercepting a few fugitives trying to escape across the border.

Who could have imagined these people were armed to the teeth, even carrying cavalry muskets?

In a moment they were beaten so badly they could hardly tell east from west.

Binsheng's group rushed past them in a flash and burst through the border line.

Behind them the Qing soldiers roared.

"Chase them!"

Binsheng shouted,

"Run!"

Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim, along with their wives, had never experienced anything like this before.

They were terrified out of their wits.

Clutching their horses' necks tightly, they didn't dare raise their heads. They simply ran forward blindly.

Behind them they could hear the Qing soldiers shouting as they gave chase.

The four hostages were extremely nervous.

The more nervous they became, the closer the Qing soldiers seemed to get.

Their horses were the best horses of the Mongolian grasslands. In theory they should easily outrun ordinary Qing cavalry.

But there was a problem.

Their riders had absolutely no riding skill.

It was extremely embarrassing.

The Qing soldiers had horses with 5 points of strength and 5 points of riding skill, giving them a speed coefficient of 10.

The four hostages had horses with 8 points of strength but 0 riding skill, giving them a speed coefficient of 8.

They simply could not outrun them.

Not even close.

Crown Prince Sohyeon suddenly remembered what Binsheng had said earlier:

"We will not turn back to rescue you."

Just remembering that sentence nearly made him cry.

Beside him, the Crown Princess burst into tears.

"Husband, we can't escape!"

Prince Bongrim wailed,

"Waaah, we're going back to being hostages again!"

"I don't want that!"

Just as the four of them were crying in despair, a strange sound suddenly came from ahead.

"Wooooo!"

A steam whistle echoed through the air.

The moment that sound appeared, the Qing soldiers behind them panicked.

Not just a little panic.

Complete panic.

When people panic, their riding skill drops.

Instantly minus three points.

Their speed slowed at once.

The four hostages were overjoyed and confused.

"Eh? What's coming?"

They had been hugging their horses' necks with their heads down, but now they finally dared to lift their heads slightly.

And what they saw terrified them.

Several huge iron box-like vehicles were charging straight toward them.

Running at the front, Binsheng waved and shouted toward the iron vehicles.

"Friendly forces! Chang'an Factory Deputy Director Binsheng!"

From the iron vehicle a woman's head popped out.

No, not just a woman's head.

A female gorilla's head.

She burst out laughing.

"I recognize you! I saw you in the Gao Family News! Hahaha! A top model worker!"

Binsheng laughed as well.

"Instructor Zao, I've seen you in the Gao Family News too."

Once greetings were exchanged, the rest became simple.

Zao Ying pointed toward the Qing cavalry chasing behind and shouted loudly:

"Enemy forces will contact our army in thirty seconds."

"Crush them!"

The Great Iron Carts accelerated and charged toward the Qing soldiers.

When the Qing cavalry saw this formation, they immediately lost the will to fight.

Charge what you want.

But never charge a Great Iron Cart.

They weren't about to sacrifice themselves just to capture a few fugitives crossing the border.

"Retreat! Fall back to the defensive works!"

"Retreat! Retreat!"

The Qing soldiers collectively turned around and fled.

Meanwhile Crown Prince Sohyeon, Prince Bongrim, and their wives continued riding forward in confusion.

Even their horses were frightened by the massive iron vehicles and refused to collide with them directly, instead running past them from the side.

Up ahead, Binsheng and his group had already stopped.

The hostages' horses also slowed to a halt, snorting heavily.

They were exhausted after the long run.

More importantly, each horse had been carrying a useless rider hugging its neck the entire time.

The horses probably wanted nothing more than to kick those riders off.

The Great Iron Carts chased away the Qing soldiers and returned to Binsheng's group.

Zao Ying waved cheerfully.

"Director Binsheng, it seems your mission has been completed successfully."

Her gaze then landed on the four hostages.

Binsheng laughed loudly.

"Fortunately I did not fail my mission!"

"These four are Crown Prince Sohyeon, Prince Bongrim, and their wives."

"Next we still need to escort them back to Korea and deliver them to the King of Joseon."

Zao Ying nodded.

"I already received Dao Xuan Tianzun's orders earlier. We will cooperate fully."

"The transport vehicle is ready."

Soon the transport arrived.

It was a Great Iron Cart pulling a large trailer behind it.

In other words, the prototype of a tractor-trailer truck.

Crown Prince Sohyeon, Prince Bongrim, and their wives all climbed into the large trailer.

In modern times, transporting people in cargo trailers would be called mixing passengers with freight.

If the traffic police caught you doing that, you would receive a ticket big enough to make you cry.

But in the late Ming era, that obviously wasn't an issue.

Here, you could haul anyone however you wanted.

Of course, in modern times, carrying honored guests in a cargo trailer would be considered extremely disrespectful.

But in this era...

The four hostages looked at the enormous trailer with great curiosity.

They touched everything on it excitedly.

Their expressions were exactly like country bumpkins visiting the city, or Grandmother Liu entering the Grand View Garden, staring at foreign wonders.

"This Great Iron Cart is incredible!"

"It doesn't need oxen or horses to pull it!"

"It can carry all four of us so easily!"

"With such a big cargo bed, how much goods can it transport?"

"Being on this vehicle feels very safe. Much safer than a wooden carriage."

"The Ming Empire sent such an amazing Great Iron Cart to carry us. They must value us very highly."

"It feels wonderful to be respected."

"The Ming is truly superior to the Qing! Those Manchu barbarians are so rude."

"Exactly. Even their guards shout at us all the time. They don't know the meaning of respect."

The four hostages not only did not feel that riding in the trailer was low-class.

They actually thought it was extremely prestigious, and felt completely satisfied.

Binsheng couldn't bear to tell them the truth.

This cargo trailer was usually used to transport coal, supplying fuel for the Great Iron Carts used in battle.

Better to let them keep enjoying their illusion for a while.

Chapter 1283 My Promise

The trailer truck carried Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim along with their wives to Zao Ying's temporary camp.

The place was packed with troops.

Large groups of Mongolian cavalry had gathered there, coming from many different tribes across the steppe.

That alone was already enough to shock the four hostages.

But what frightened them even more was the sight of one hundred Great Iron Carts lined up together, forming a luxurious "Armored Cavalry Battalion."

Although the four of them didn't really understand warfare, it only took one glance at the formation of those one hundred iron vehicles to realize something terrifying:

If they charged forward together, they would become a torrent of steel, something that human strength simply could not stop.

Only now did they understand why the Qing army had been digging pits everywhere, piling up earth walls, and stacking stones.

Aside from such crude obstacles, they could not imagine any other method capable of stopping the advance of the Great Iron Carts.

Fortunately, the Ming Empire being strong was good news for them.

At this point in history, Joseon had not yet developed the strange habit of recognizing some distant foreign power as its "daddy."

Deep in their hearts, Joseon still regarded Ming as its father state.

So when Ming became powerful, they did not feel fear.

They felt awe—and happiness.

Having a powerful father protecting them—what could be better?

From now on, all they needed to do was fully rely on Father.

Returning to Joseon from their current location was not easy.

They had to take a large detour, avoiding the territories controlled by the Qing.

Thus Binsheng and his men mounted their warhorses again, while the Great Iron Carts carried the four hostages across the vast Mongolian grasslands, heading toward Beizhili of the Ming Empire.

Since the Minister of War was now a member of Gao Family Village, Binsheng's group encountered no difficulties entering the Ming interior.

They smoothly crossed from the Mongolian grasslands into Beizhili.

The Great Iron Carts rolled across the region and even passed outside the walls of the capital city.

Merchants traveling along the official road and nobles who had gone out of the city for leisure were all shocked out of their wits.

Before they could even figure out what those iron monsters were, the convoy had already bypassed the capital and continued southward.

Sun Chuanting had even arranged a coal resupply station near the capital.

The Great Iron Carts replenished their coal there before continuing their journey.

After traveling for quite some time, they finally reached Tianjin.

The four hostages disembarked from the Great Iron Cart at the Tianjin harbor.

Out on the sea, a magnificent fleet appeared.

Coastal Commander Cao Wenzhao personally led the naval forces to receive them.

The moment the enormous Wanli Sunshine appeared before their eyes, the four hostages once again realized the greatness of Father Ming.

Fully rely on Father!

From now on, they must fully rely on Father!

Meanwhile, in Joseon — Hanseong.

King Yi Jong of Joseon was anxiously pacing back and forth.

He could not sit still at all.

A few days earlier, a spy he had planted in Shengjing had sent back shocking news.

While inspecting a workshop, Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim had mysteriously disappeared—as if they had suddenly grown wings and flown away.

The moment Yi Jong heard the news, he knew immediately:

The Ming Empire had taken action.

Even he had not expected Ming to become so strong now.

In the past, Ming had often been beaten badly by the Qing.

But ever since the Battle of Pi Island, Ming had become frighteningly powerful.

Not only had they easily captured Andong, eliminated the Three Shun Kings, and subdued the Mongols, they were now threatening Qing's northern frontier.

And now they had gone even further.

They were actually stirring up chaos inside Shengjing itself, abducting people whenever they pleased.

So arrogant.

Completely disregarding Qing authority.

Not afraid of Qing retaliation at all.

However, Yi Jong couldn't help worrying about his two sons.

Even if they had escaped Shengjing successfully, the Qing would surely seal off every route into Joseon and send large numbers of cavalry to pursue them.

His sons and daughters-in-law had been pampered nobles since childhood.

How could they possibly endure such hardships?

The journey home would surely be full of thorns and dangers.

Soon he received further reports.

Qing cavalry had been deployed everywhere, almost completely sealing every road leading to Joseon.

Especially near the Willow Palisade, where large numbers of soldiers had been stationed to strictly monitor anyone attempting to cross the border illegally.

Under such circumstances, it seemed impossible for his children to return.

Day after day passed.

Yi Jong sent countless people to wait at the border to receive them.

But it was useless.

His children seemed to have vanished from the world.

Each passing day tightened the grip on his heart.

His face aged half a year with every day that passed.

In only a few dozen days, he looked like a seventy-year-old man.

"Report!"

Someone rushed in, shouting loudly.

"Good news! Good news! Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim have returned!"

Yi Jong was overjoyed.

"Is it true?"

The messenger replied,

"They just landed on the coast closest to Hanseong. Mr. Bai Yuan personally received them there. Now the two princes are on their way to Hanseong with him."

Yi Jong was ecstatic.

"Quick! Tell the cooks to prepare good food!"

"When my sons return home, they must have a proper meal first. They must have suffered terribly in Shengjing."

In an instant, Yi Jong's face seemed to regain the vigor of a man in his forties.

Soon, Crown Prince Sohyeon and Prince Bongrim arrived.

Along with them came Bai Yuan and Binsheng's squad.

Yi Jong rushed forward and grabbed his sons' hands, tears streaming down his face.

But Crown Prince Sohyeon was not particularly emotional.

He was still immersed in the excitement of all the strange things he had seen along the way.

Grabbing his father's hand, he excitedly said:

"Father King! After escaping Shengjing, we fled north into Mongolian territory. We saw so many amazing Great Iron Carts!"

He began talking nonstop.

Yi Jong initially didn't pay much attention.

But after listening for a while, he became increasingly shocked.

The Ming Empire had become this powerful?

They had forced the Qing army to dig pits and hide defensively?

He already knew Ming possessed gigantic warships that had severely punished the Qing at Pi Island.

But he had never imagined that Ming could also suppress the Qing on land.

If that was true, the entire situation had completely changed.

Yi Jong turned toward Bai Yuan, his expression sincere.

"Lord Bai, thank you to the Ming Empire for rescuing my two sons."

"I have only one request."

Bai Yuan smiled.

"I understand."

"That request is: if the Qing attack Joseon again, the Ming Empire must send troops to assist. Correct?"

Yi Jong nodded slowly.

"When the Qing invaded before, I begged Ming for aid. But for some reason Ming did not send troops."

"Helpless, I was forced to submit to the Qing. The humiliation of that moment... I truly cannot describe it."

He sighed deeply.

Bai Yuan smiled.

"Times have changed."

"I swear in the name of a gentleman: from now on, whether it is Qing, Japan, or Westerners—no matter who bullies Joseon—the Ming Empire will send troops to help."

"But Ming has only one small request."

Yi Jong immediately replied:

"I understand that request."

"I promise that Joseon will forever remain a vassal of the Ming Empire."

Chapter 1284 Mo Li New Invention

Gao Family Village, main village.

Mo Family Electric Fan Factory.

The Mo Family Electric Fan Factory was founded by the graduate student Mo Li. After a period of early development, the business gradually stabilized. Production, management, and operations had all entered a stable and orderly stage.

Technically, the factory director should have been Mo Li.

However, after the company stabilized, Mo Li rarely appeared in public anymore.

Instead, his wife Hou Lan appeared frequently, personally handling both financial management and the duties of factory director. The workload exhausted her greatly.

Naturally, this situation sparked a great deal of speculation.

Recently, Hou Lan's former coworkers—female workers from the textile factory—had started gossiping about her again.

"Have you heard? Mo Li is sick. He hasn't been able to show up to run the factory lately. Big matters, small matters, everything is handled by Hou Lan now."

"I heard Mo Li isn't sick at all. Someone saw him going out shopping a few days ago. He looked perfectly healthy. Maybe Hou Lan is greedy—she's controlling her husband and seized his authority."

"What the hell? Why would she seize her husband's authority? Aren't husband and wife the same family?"

"She might be planning to divorce him and take the factory for herself."

"Why would she dump such a good husband? He invented the electric fan—he's a great scientist!"

"What's the point of a good husband? No matter how good he is, she's still only the wife of the factory director. She's not the director herself. Only by kicking her husband out can she become the real director. That must feel great."

"I also heard the electric fan factory earns a lot of money, but there isn't much money on the books. Apparently Hou Lan, who manages the finances, has been transferring funds somewhere. Nobody knows where the money went."

"It's a private factory anyway. It belongs to their family. If she moves money around, the village committee can't interfere. Only her husband Mo Li could stop her—but Mo Li seems completely unaware."

"Wow... she can do that?"

"Shared marital property is fine, but having it all for yourself is better, right? Hou Lan is quite a formidable woman."

A place full of women could be terrifying when gossip started spreading.

Sooner or later, some of those rumors reached Hou Lan's ears.

After hearing them, she simply smiled and shook her head. She didn't even bother explaining.

After finishing her financial duties at the factory, she also completed the work that should have been her husband's responsibility.

Only then did she drag her exhausted body back home.

By then it was already evening.

The sun had set.

Hou Lan's stomach growled with hunger, but when she returned home there was no meal waiting for her.

She still had to light the stove and cook herself.

Yet she showed no resentment.

She simply leaned her head out from the kitchen and glanced toward her husband's study.

The study was brightly lit.

Mo Li sat at his desk, drawing and writing something intently.

A gentle smile appeared at the corner of her lips.

"Husband, you must be starving, right?"

Mo Li's voice came from the study.

"Huh? Wife, you're back? I didn't even notice the time. It's already this late? Oh no... now that you mention it, I really am a bit hungry. If you hadn't reminded me, I would've forgotten to eat."

Hou Lan smiled softly.

"Look at you, working so hard you forget food and sleep. I'll cook right away. Just wait a moment."

"Thank you, wife."

They only exchanged two sentences.

Then Mo Li returned to his drawing.

Hou Lan continued cooking.

Night had already fallen.

Every household had long finished dinner.

Only their home lit a fire at this late hour.

The rising smoke blended into the night, hiding Hou Lan's efforts and hard work from the world.

After a while, she placed two simple dishes on the table.

"Husband, come eat."

"Can't right now... ah! Just one more moment. I'm almost finished drawing. Just a little more."

Hou Lan shook her head with a smile.

Then she carried the food into the study and placed it beside Mo Li.

Mo Li held a spoon in his left hand while still drawing with a pen in his right.

Hou Lan glanced at the drawing on the desk.

She couldn't understand it at all.

With a sigh she said,

"Husband, it's my fault for being uneducated. I never studied at Gao Family Village's schools. I can't help you with any of this."

Mo Li replied,

"You taking care of all the mundane matters is the greatest help you can give me."

Then he made a final stroke with his pen.

Several lines connected together.

He quickly added a few numbers beside the lines.

Then he grabbed the paper and shook it open with a loud flutter.

The large sheet spread out.

On it was drawn a massive hot-air balloon.

And behind the balloon's tail was something strange—

a giant electric fan.

Mo Li burst into laughter.

"It's done! Hahaha! My design is finally finished!"

"This time we won't just succeed in the civilian market."

"We'll also make a huge contribution to Gao Family Village in the military field."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun will definitely praise our husband-and-wife team."

Hou Lan's eyes widened with excitement.

"It's finished? I can't understand any of it."

"It's finished!" Mo Li laughed.

"Our previous hot-air balloons in Gao Family Village could only rise into the air and hover. They couldn't be controlled."

"They couldn't move forward or backward, and they couldn't turn."

"So every time the militia launched a hot-air balloon for reconnaissance, they had to attach a long rope to it and drag it forward from the ground to prevent it from drifting randomly."

"But now," Mo Li said excitedly, "while studying fans, I discovered something."

"When a fan blows a strong wind forward, it produces a reverse force."

"So I designed several jet vents on the hot-air balloon."

"In the future, the pilot will control these vents to release hot gas in specific directions."

"When the gas sprays in one direction, the balloon will move in the opposite direction."

Mo Li was as happy as a child.

"From now on, our hot-air balloons won't need ropes anymore."

"They can move freely in the sky, following the army."

"They can even float directly above the enemy's heads and drop hand grenades down on them."

"Hahaha!"

He grabbed Hou Lan's hands.

"The materials I asked you to buy using the factory's profits—are they ready?"

Hou Lan nodded.

"They're ready."

"I transferred quite a lot of money to prepare everything."

"People outside are spreading rumors saying I used my position in finance to embezzle our shared marital property for myself."

She giggled.

Mo Li laughed loudly.

"Those gossiping fools can be ignored."

"This time, husband and wife will strike together."

"A great aeronautical invention!"

"It will leave everyone speechless."

Then he began eating quickly.

"Hurry up and finish dinner. Tonight we'll start building it."

Hou Lan nodded.

"Alright!"

She had been busy all day and was already exhausted.

But now she was filled with energy again.

The couple quickly finished their meal.

Carrying a thick stack of blueprints, they rushed out of the house and headed toward a warehouse that Hou Lan had prepared earlier.

Inside were piles of materials,

all intended for building the self-propelled flying balloon.

Hou Lan had even submitted an application to the Gao Family Village Committee in advance and received their approval and support.

Now they only needed to notify the committee.

Soon afterward, Chief Engineer Li Da arrived with the core technical team.

That very night, they began rushing to manufacture the Flying Balloon.

Chapter 1285 Flying Balloon

Several days later...

Inside the warehouse of the Mo Electric Fan Factory in Gao Family Village, a gigantic hot air balloon suddenly began to rise.

Hot air balloons were nothing unusual here.

The villagers of Gao Family Village had long grown used to them. People saw them often. Some had even spent money to ride one and look down over the entire village from the sky. For a while it had been very popular. Later, after everyone had tried it and lost interest, the novelty gradually faded.

But today's balloon was rising from a rather strange place.

It was coming from the electric fan factory.

Shouldn't balloons normally launch from the research building in front of No. 32 Middle School?

While people watched with puzzled expressions, the balloon continued to inflate, growing larger and larger. Soon it became an enormous balloon, far bigger than anyone had imagined. It was more than twice the size of the ones the researchers had previously built.

Below the balloon hung an even larger basket.

This time there were actually two people inside the basket.

One of them was Mo Li, the rarely seen director of the electric fan factory. According to rumors, he had lost control of the factory to his wife and had been kicked out of management, leaving him on the verge of losing both wealth and status.

The other person was his wife, Hou Lan.

The balloon slowly floated higher into the sky. A thick rope still connected it to the ground. Below, the voices of top technicians such as Li Da shouted upward.

"Be careful with safety!"

Mo Li burst into laughter.

"Back then, when I first served as the test pilot of a hot air balloon, I ended up crashing straight into Hou Lan's house. That accident gave me a wonderful marriage. What do I have to fear now? Teacher Li, you can release the rope."

Li Da shouted toward the sky.

"Once the rope is released, the balloon will be completely free. I feel a bit nervous about this."

Mo Li laughed loudly.

"My wife is up here with me. If the test fails and the balloon is destroyed, I will go to the underworld with her beside me. I have no regrets."

Hou Lan also laughed.

"Release it. As long as I'm with my husband, I'm not afraid of anything."

Li Da took a deep breath.

Although he had led the team that built the balloon and was confident in its quality, he still felt anxious. Releasing it felt frightening.

Just then, the Tianzun embroidery on Li Da's chest suddenly spoke with a chuckle.

"Release it. I'm watching."

Li Da was instantly overjoyed.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun has arrived! Then we can release it."

All hesitation vanished.

"Let go! Everyone release the rope!"

A large group of people on the ground released the ropes at the same time.

The hot air balloon soared upward.

The enormous balloon rose high into the sky.

Hou Lan felt slightly nervous. This was the first time she had flown this high.

Mo Li, however, had experience. He remained completely calm.

He had carefully chosen the weather for today's test flight. There were no turbulent air currents in the sky, and the balloon was extremely stable.

He took a deep breath.

"Wife, I'm going to start testing the air release system and control the direction of flight."

Hou Lan smiled.

"Alright."

Mo Li reached out and pulled a small switch.

On the eastern side of the balloon, several panels opened, revealing small vents.

The hot air trapped inside immediately rushed out through the vents.

The massive balloon slowly drifted westward.

"Hahaha! It works! It really works!"

Mo Li excitedly closed the eastern vents and opened the southern ones.

The balloon shifted again and began drifting northward.

"It worked! This definitely worked! Hahahaha!"

Mo Li laughed loudly toward the sky.

"Good. Now let's test flying directly above the textile factory and then hovering there steadily."

Hou Lan nodded.

"Alright! I think I understand how to control it now."

She took over the controls from her husband and pulled a switch. The balloon slowly drifted in the direction she wanted.

"Husband, this thing can only be used when there is no strong wind, right? The air it releases doesn't provide enough power to fight against strong winds."

"That's correct," Mo Li replied. "This is something we still need to test. Step by step we must determine how strong a wind it can withstand and identify the climate limits for safe use."

"This is also a form of science."

Hou Lan looked up at the sky.

"Wow, we're so close to the clouds. If lightning strikes, we would die, right?"

"Of course. Using a hot air balloon during thunderstorms is absolutely forbidden."

"Wow. That means the limitations are quite large."

"The progress of technology always requires breaking through various limits."

While the couple chatted, they arrived above the textile factory.

Hou Lan leaned out of the basket and waved enthusiastically toward the ground.

"Workers of the textile factory! Do you still remember me? It's Hou Lan! I've come to see you!"

The female workers in the factory looked up in shock.

The very Hou Lan they had just been gossiping about was now floating directly above them with her scientist husband.

Their mouths hung open in disbelief.

Hou Lan waved excitedly.

"This is my husband's newest invention! My husband is amazing! I like my husband the most!"

This sudden aerial publicity stunt instantly allowed everyone in the factory to hear her declaration.

The happiness and satisfaction on her face shattered every rumor in an instant.

"What the hell? So her husband has been secretly working on a new invention?"

"No wonder he hasn't shown his face for so long."

"That's why he handed the factory operations over to Hou Lan."

"The money she transferred must have been used for this research."

"This is incredible!"

"I don't fully understand it, but I know something that can fly wherever you want is definitely extraordinary."

"Their family is going to become rich again."

"Why does she have such good fortune? Why can't I marry a husband like that?"

"Because you're not kind enough."

Before long, the Flying Balloon received the highest level Scientific Invention Award from Dao Xuan Tianzun.

A gigantic silver sphere prize fully reimbursed all of Mo Li's research expenses.

But it was far more than simple reimbursement.

The Gao Family Village Council purchased the complete blueprints and core technology of the Flying Balloon from Mo Li at a very high price. They even built a specialized military factory to mass-produce the balloon.

Once the village council took action, a large number of technicians naturally joined the project.

Various ideas for improving the Flying Balloon quickly emerged. Continuous improvements and optimizations began to push the technology forward.

However, no matter how much future engineers improved the design, Mo Li's name would forever remain in history as the inventor of the Flying Balloon.

Meanwhile...

Hou Lan looked at her husband.

"Husband, our family has earned so much money. We have more than we could ever spend. What should we do with it?"

Mo Li smiled.

"How about using it to gain fifty pounds?"

Hou Lan burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! Husband, you're so bad. I refuse to get fat!"

Chapter 1286 I Despise You

As evening fell, the execution market of Xi'an was already packed with people.

It was time once again for Gao Family News.

Xi'an was buzzing with excitement.

In the front row, several familiar figures were seated together.

Zhu Cunji, Hong Chengchou, and Mi Qingli sat in a neat row, looking very much like schoolchildren waiting for class to begin.

Today they truly were "sitting in rows and eating fruit".

Not for the sake of rhyming jokes this time.

They were actually eating fruit.

On the small table before them was a ridiculous pile of exotic fruits from Taiwan.

Sugar apples, betel nuts, wax apples, mangoes. The more unusual the better.

Naturally, transporting these delicacies had cost a small fortune.

Since the news had not officially begun yet, the large screen was still showing advertisements. Nobody needed to stare at it seriously.

Seeing the opportunity, Hong Chengchou decided to sample one of the rare fruits.

He carefully picked up a mango.

He held it as though it were a priceless porcelain artifact, moving slowly and cautiously to peel its skin. He was so careful that not a single drop of juice splashed onto his robe.

Every motion was elegant.

Every gesture refined.

The crown princess sitting nearby could not help staring in disbelief.

"How is this man even more elegant than me?"

Zhu Cunji laughed.

"Lord Hong, Lord Mi, have you two thought about surrendering yet?"

Mi Qingli was still tightly bound with ropes.

Before him lay piles of rare and expensive fruit that he could not eat.

The sight alone was torture.

For a brief moment he was tempted.

But as a hereditary Jinyiwei Thousand-Household officer, his loyalty to the emperor could not be defeated by fruit.

He clenched his teeth.

"I will never surrender. Even in death I remain a loyal subject of the Great Ming!"

Zhu Cunji turned to Hong Chengchou.

"Lord Hong, if you surrender, you can immediately take over the position of Shaanxi Governor."

Hong Chengchou did not grit his teeth.

He did not shout slogans.

Instead he calmly continued peeling his mango with graceful composure.

"Surrender?"

"Impossible."

"You might as well execute me now."

Zhu Cunji smiled faintly and looked away.

At that moment the broadcast finally began.

Two young news hosts appeared on the screen.

"We begin with international news."

"A few days ago, a special operations team dispatched by the Gao Family Village Council successfully infiltrated Shengjing and rescued the Korean Crown Prince Sohyeon and Grand Prince Bongrim, who had been under house arrest by the Qing."

The screen shifted to footage of the Korean royal palace.

Shengjing

Bin Sheng and his team appeared in the footage.

However, every single member of the rescue squad had their faces covered with mosaic blocks.

After completing the mission they would return to work at Chang'an Factory as model laborers.

Their identities absolutely could not be exposed.

Hong Chengchou froze mid-motion while peeling his mango.

He slowly raised his head and stared at the screen.

On the screen appeared the King of Korea.

Yi Jong

He looked radiant, energetic, almost like a man in his early thirties.

With his left hand he held Crown Prince Sohyeon.

With his right hand he held Grand Prince Bongrim.

Facing the camera, he spoke with excitement.

"From today onward, Joseon will no longer serve the Qing."

"From this day forward, Joseon will forever remain a vassal state of the Great Ming."

Hong Chengchou blurted out:

"Impossible!"

Zhu Cunji chuckled.

"And why would that be impossible?"

Hong Chengchou frowned.

"Korea is weak and borders the Manchus."

"How could he dare to say such a thing? The Manchus could invade and beat him again at any moment."

Zhu Cunji grinned.

"Relax. The news will explain."

Right on cue, the second host continued.

"Although Korea borders the Qing and has long faced military threats, our village militia captured the city of Dandong several days ago and eliminated the Three Shun Kings."

Dandong

"As long as Dandong remains under the control of our militia, the Qing will not dare cross the Yalu River easily to attack Korea."

"And since our village also rescued his two sons, King Yi Jong naturally made this decision."

The crowd at the execution market burst into laughter.

"Our village militia is incredible!"

"Hahaha, those three traitors are finished!"

Someone shouted loudly.

"Why did the news hold this information so long before broadcasting it?"

Another man slapped his head.

"Are you stupid?"

"Military news must be delayed before being released!"

"If the big screen broadcasts everything immediately across all liberated areas, that would leak military secrets."

"Oh! That makes sense."

"Right. If we broadcast too early, we might endanger our soldiers."

The common people chatted happily.

But inside Hong Chengchou's heart, a storm was raging.

These rebels had actually fought all the way to Dandong.

Because of "military secrecy", he still lacked many details.

But one fact was clear.

They captured Dandong.

They killed the Three Shun Kings.

That meant they had absolutely no fear of the Manchu military.

They beat them whenever they wished.

Like a father disciplining a child.

The Manchus could never ignore Dandong.

They must have reacted.

So why had nothing happened?

Then Hong Chengchou remembered a previous report.

Mongolia had mobilized troops.

In his mind a vast strategic map unfolded.

Mongols attacking from the north.

Village militia pressing from the south.

The Manchus were trapped between two fronts.

No wonder they could not spare forces for Dandong.

Terrifying.

Absolutely terrifying.

The host continued.

"Next is domestic news."

"Our Military Academy principal and current Minister of War, Sun Chuanting, is presently stationed in Jinan, confronting the rebel leader Chuang Wang and his one hundred thousand troops."

Sun Chuanting

Chuang Wang

Jinan

"Although Chuang Wang possesses larger numbers, he does not dare launch an attack."

"His forces have been spreading a song called 'When Chuang Wang comes, there will be no taxes', attempting to deceive the common people."

"But Governor Sun has dispatched administrative teams to cities and villages to expose the lies."

"In cities the people have already awakened."

"But in rural areas many still believe the song. More time is needed."

Someone in the crowd shouted loudly:

"Why not just beat them directly?"

"Why bother explaining?"

Another man glared at him.

"Are you an idiot?"

"If our style was to beat everyone without distinction, would people like us even be standing here watching the news?"

The man froze.

He had once been a civilian forced into a bandit army.

If the militia simply killed everyone without question, he would probably already be dead.

Instead he now lived a good life.

Meanwhile Hong Chengchou thought silently:

Mongolia.

Korea.

Even the Manchus.

These rebels now influenced everything.

Across the entire realm their forces were everywhere.

What remained in the emperor's hands?

Perhaps only a tiny region around Beizhili.

Beizhili

And the capital army stationed there was notoriously weak.

Their combat power was laughable.

Which meant something terrifying.

The imperial court had already lost.

Long ago.

Hong Chengchou slowly sighed.

"Alas."

Then he turned to Zhu Cunji.

"Your Highness."

Zhu Cunji blinked.

"Yes?"

Hong Chengchou asked calmly.

"If I surrender, will I truly take over the position of Shaanxi Governor?"

Zhu Cunji grinned.

"Of course."

"Dao Xuan Tianzun personally said so."

"And Dao Xuan Tianzun's will is absolute."

"No one would dare object."

Hong Chengchou nodded slightly.

"Very well."

"I surrender."

Zhu Cunji raised his eyebrows.

"Oh?"

"That was a quick change of heart."

Hong Chengchou merely spread his hands.

He said nothing.

But Zhu Cunji clearly heard the unspoken meaning.

A wise man adapts to circumstances.

Suddenly Mi Qingli exploded in rage.

"You shameless traitor!"

"How dare you betray the emperor!"

"I despise you!"

Chapter 1287 I Want Shot That Face

On the western coast of central Taiwan Island, near the area that in later generations would be called Taichung.

Yao Xingjuan was currently gesturing wildly while speaking with the indigenous people of the Kingdom of Dadu.

He waved his hands, drew shapes in the air, and even squatted down to draw pictures in the sand.

Everything was done to negotiate future cooperation.

However, it did not take long for him to discover something extremely frustrating.

The natives were grateful for the help he had provided. They were also willing to trade goods.

But that was where their goodwill ended.

They refused to allow Yao Xingjuan to establish a supply port on Taiwan.

They refused to allow Han settlers to farm on the island.

They even refused to learn the Chinese language or writing system.

The king of the Kingdom of Dadu, Ganza Xia Alami, had learned exactly one sentence.

"Fruit candy. Strawberry flavor."

After that, he refused to learn anything else.

The situation was awkward.

The mission given to Yao Xingjuan by Dao Xuan Tianzun was clear.

He was supposed to culturally integrate the natives so that both sides could eventually become one family.

But the other side clearly had no intention of cooperating.

They would not learn the language.

They would not learn the writing.

They did not want deeper contact.

How could two sides become one family like this?

Seeing Ganza Xia Alami sitting there with a smug expression that practically said I do not want to communicate with you, Yao Xingjuan felt his hand drifting toward the short pistol at his waist.

He really wanted to fire one shot directly into that smug face.

Just one shot.

Suddenly the embroidered figure of Dao Xuan Tianzun on his chest spoke.

"Do not resort to violence."

Yao Xingjuan jumped in shock.

Then his face lit up with joy.

"Tianzun! You are here! That is wonderful."

"You told me to approach the natives with the greatest goodwill. But this king refuses to cooperate with anything."

"He does not allow his people to believe in the Dao Xuan Tianzun faith."

"He refuses comic books."

"He refuses to learn our language."

"He even refuses to allow us to build a supply port here."

"It is infuriating."

"He only wants to trade goods."

A voice came calmly from the embroidery.

"So you want to kill him and install a more cooperative king?"

Yao Xingjuan scratched his head.

"Yes. I have been thinking about something like that."

The voice sighed softly.

"That idea will not work."

Yao Xingjuan blinked.

"Why not?"

"Throughout history every country has used this method. It works quite well."

"Yes," the voice replied.

"In history that trick has succeeded many times."

"But it will not work on the Kingdom of Dadu."

"They will fight to the death."

"They would rather face extermination than submit."

Yao Xingjuan froze.

Then realization dawned on him.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was revealing heavenly secrets again.

After all, Tianzun could see five hundred years into the past and five hundred years into the future.

Naturally he could foresee how the Kingdom of Dadu would react.

And in fact, Tianzun was not exaggerating.

In real history the Kingdom of Dadu refused to cooperate with the Dutch invaders.

They rejected Christianity.

They rejected Dutch language and writing.

They rejected translators.

They rejected everything.

Later when Zheng Chenggong arrived and drove away the Dutch, the Kingdom of Dadu still did not cooperate with the Zheng regime.

The Zheng forces seized land on the island for farming.

This angered the natives.

Eventually some indigenous groups attacked Zheng settlers and killed many of them.

The event became known as the Indigenous Uprising.

At that time the Zheng regime used exactly the same idea that Yao Xingjuan had just considered.

If they refuse to submit, then beat them until they do.

But the Kingdom of Dadu could not be beaten into submission.

Battle after battle followed.

In the end, only six survivors remained.

The kingdom was almost completely exterminated.

Was that submission?

Perhaps.

But even in modern times the anger had not disappeared.

Just a few years ago, indigenous activists threw red paint onto statues of Zheng Chenggong.

Clearly they had never truly accepted what had happened.

Li Dao Xuan did not come to save his compatriots by slaughtering them and stealing their land.

He certainly did not want people hundreds of years later throwing paint on his own statue.

He could not repeat the same mistakes.

"Yao Xingjuan," Li Dao Xuan said calmly.

"There is no need to rush."

"There are still many places on the mainland that we have not developed yet."

"Why hurry over a single island like Taiwan?"

"Take your time."

"Build friendships slowly."

"The human heart is made of flesh."

"As long as we do not arrive as invaders, one day they will understand our goodwill."

Yao Xingjuan immediately straightened.

"Understood!"

Just as they finished speaking, an alarm suddenly rang out from the ship anchored near the shore.

It was the Little Black No.1.

A sailor shouted toward the beach.

"Captain! The Dutch are coming!"

"What?"

Yao Xingjuan jumped to his feet.

"Everyone aboard!"

"All personnel return to the ship immediately!"

The people from Gao Family Village rushed toward the vessel.

Meanwhile Ganza Xia Alami and the natives fled toward the mountains and forests.

A naval battle was about to begin.

Five Dutch warships charged in from the sea and immediately opened fire on Little Black No.1.

Five ships against one.

In terms of artillery exchange, Little Black No.1 did not fall behind.

But Yao Xingjuan had no desire to engage in boarding combat.

So he fought while increasing the distance.

The Dutch had become furious.

Recently Yao Xingjuan had been extremely active along the central western coast of Taiwan.

The reason was simple.

Across the strait, a supply port had been completed in Jinjiang.

Jinjiang

Jinjiang produced coal locally.

Gao Family Village transported large amounts of gunpowder and artillery shells.

Local merchants supplied food and fresh water.

Yao Xingjuan's logistics had become incredibly convenient.

Every time he refueled and resupplied, he crossed the strait and appeared again along the central western coast of Taiwan.

Then he caused chaos for the Dutch.

Sometimes he attacked Dutch merchant ships.

Sometimes he attacked Dutch warships.

Sometimes he landed on shore and helped the natives of the Kingdom of Dadu fight the Dutch.

In short, whenever he saw the Dutch, he bit them.

After suffering this harassment for a long time, the Dutch finally lost their patience.

They temporarily stopped attacking the Kingdom of Dadu.

Instead they assembled fleets of five to seven warships and began patrolling constantly in this region.

Their goal was simple.

Kill Yao Xingjuan.

And right now their patrol fleet had found him.

The Dutch warships rushed forward aggressively.

"Fire!"

Artillery roared from both sides.

Cannonballs crossed between the fleets.

When a Dutch warship was hit, a massive hole would tear open in its wooden hull.

But when Little Black No.1 was struck, the result was only a loud metallic clang.

The aluminum alloy armor simply dented slightly.

Chapter 1288 Make New Friends

The Dutch quickly realized that the current artillery duel was pointless.

Their wooden ships were taking real damage, while the strange black ship of the enemy barely seemed to care.

The Dutch commander shouted desperately.

"Close the distance! Board them!"

But Yao Xingjuan had no intention of letting that happen.

The Little Black No.1 pushed its steam paddle wheels to full power and shot across the sea at frightening speed. Yao Xingjuan constantly adjusted the ship's angle, keeping just far enough away that the Dutch ships could not catch him.

The naval battle was becoming increasingly intense.

Then suddenly something strange happened.

Both sides felt that something was wrong.

In the distance, the land of Taiwan seemed to be shaking.

A deep rumbling sound rolled across the island.

Mountains trembled.

Moments later, massive rocks began crashing down the slopes, smashing into the forests below.

The wooden houses and grass huts built by the natives of the Kingdom of Dadu twisted and collapsed as the ground shook violently.

Ganza Xia Alami had just led his people away from the coast and into the mountains to hide.

Unfortunately the mountains themselves began collapsing.

Huge stones rolled down the slopes.

The natives screamed in terror as they fled in every direction, desperately trying to avoid being crushed.

Alami had no choice but to lead them down the mountain again, running toward the coastline.

Behind them the ground cracked open like spreading ripples, chasing the terrified crowd.

Yao Xingjuan suddenly understood what was happening.

"The Earth Dragon is turning!"

At the same moment the Dutch commander shouted in panic.

"Earthquake!"

Experienced sailors knew what often followed a powerful earthquake.

A tsunami.

And a tsunami could be even more destructive than the earthquake itself.

Yao Xingjuan grabbed a metal speaking horn and shouted toward the fleeing natives.

"Run back to the mountains!"

"Even being crushed by rocks is safer than standing on the coast!"

"Go! Go back up the mountain!"

Unfortunately the natives could not understand his language.

But he shouted while waving his arms and pointing frantically toward the mountains.

Eventually someone understood the meaning.

Ganza Xia Alami quickly turned around again and led his people back toward the mountains.

Meanwhile the artillery battle at sea had stopped.

Both fleets instinctively spread apart and began sailing away from the coastline toward deeper waters.

There was usually a short delay between an earthquake and the arrival of a tsunami.

Experienced sailors knew that the farther they were from shore, the safer they would be.

Both sides were veteran sea raiders.

Their reaction was fast.

Just moments after they reached deeper waters, the tsunami arrived.

A towering wall of water several meters high crashed onto the coast.

With a thunderous roar it flattened trees near the shoreline.

Fortunately Ganza Xia Alami had just led his people back up the mountain.

Standing halfway up the slope, they watched the terrifying waves swallow a village that had stood near the coast.

Several natives who had failed to escape in time disappeared instantly beneath the water.

They did not even have time to scream.

The returning current dragged their bodies into the sea.

Not even a corpse remained.

No one had the power to save them.

Ganza Xia Alami's face turned pale.

Behind them the mountains were collapsing.

Before them the sea was devouring everything.

Caught between these forces of heaven and earth, the people of the Kingdom of Dadu could do nothing but tremble in terror.

Even the Dutch were frightened out of their wits.

They completely lost interest in fighting.

The five Dutch warships turned north and fled as quickly as possible.

Yao Xingjuan looked toward the still-shaking island.

Aftershocks continued.

The sea was still roaring with waves.

It was impossible to approach the coast right now.

He gritted his teeth.

"We're leaving."

"Return to the supply port at Jinjiang."

Several days later, the aftershocks finally stopped.

The sea gradually calmed.

But the double disaster of earthquake and tsunami had devastated Taiwan.

Several villages had been destroyed.

Many people had died.

The Kingdom of Dadu originally had a population of about nine thousand people.

After this catastrophe nearly one tenth of them were gone.

Almost nine hundred people had died.

It was a terrible loss.

And the damage was not limited to human lives.

Villages had been destroyed.

Huge waves had swept away food supplies and valuables.

Many families had lost everything.

They survived with nothing but the clothes on their bodies.

Even a simple straw mat had been taken by the sea.

Ganza Xia Alami had survived the disaster.

He slid down from the mountain slope with his people and stood by the shore, looking at the devastated land.

His people cried and wailed around him.

Their voices were full of despair.

"Sun King, what should we do now?"

Ganza Xia Alami forced himself to stay calm.

"We rebuild the villages."

"But before we rebuild, we will starve."

"Please give us food, Your Majesty."

The king suddenly looked extremely awkward.

The Kingdom of Dadu consisted of five tribes.

The Pazeh, Babuza, Papora, Hoanya, and Taokas peoples.

Among them the Pazeh were the largest with about five thousand members.

Each of the other tribes had roughly one thousand people.

In total there had been nine thousand people.

Even after losing nine hundred, there were still about eight thousand survivors.

And there was no way their king could feed that many people.

His personal wealth was enough to buy only a few hundred jin of grain from the Han traders.

Feeding eight thousand people was impossible.

Even feeding eight hundred would already be difficult.

"What should we do now..." Alami muttered.

Just then, ships appeared again on the horizon.

The massive Little Black No.1 had returned.

"Sun King! The mainland Han people are back!"

Alami was surprised.

"They still dare to come?"

Such a terrible disaster had just happened.

Most sailors would avoid this sea for a long time.

Yet these people had returned after only a few days.

Their courage was remarkable.

Soon Yao Xingjuan appeared on the deck.

He gave an order.

Sailors began carrying large baskets from the ship.

Basket after basket.

Soon the beach was covered with bamboo containers.

Inside them was grain.

"Food!"

"Something we can eat!"

The disaster-stricken natives erupted into cheers.

But Ganza Xia Alami remained cautious.

"We have nothing left to trade."

"The fruits, deer hides, and antlers we stored at home were buried by landslides or swallowed by the sea."

The cheering natives suddenly fell silent.

That was true.

Even if the Han people had food, they had nothing to exchange for it.

At that moment Yao Xingjuan spoke while gesturing energetically.

"For you!"

"No trade!"

"For you!"

"During disaster relief there is no need for equal exchange."

"This is humanitarian aid."

Of course the natives could not understand the exact words.

But they understood the kindness behind them.

The firmness in Alami's heart began to soften.

He suddenly realized something.

These mainland people were not bandits.

They were different from the Dutch.

They were different from the Spanish.

Why had he insisted on refusing them?

Why forbid them from building a supply port?

Why refuse to learn their language?

Why refuse their faith of Dao Xuan Tianzun?

Perhaps...

Perhaps it was finally time to try becoming real friends.

Alami slowly spoke.

"For you."

He had just learned a new Chinese phrase.

Yao Xingjuan's face lit up with joy.

He quickly gestured again.

"No money!"

"No money!"

Alami repeated.

"No money!"

Yao Xingjuan pointed to himself, then to Alami.

"Friends."

Alami repeated the phrase carefully.

"Friends."

The two men looked at each other.

And they both smiled.

Chapter 1289 Liang Shixian Gets Promoted

A lone horse galloped into the county town of Chengcheng County.

The rider rushed straight toward the magistrate's yamen. He jumped off the horse before it had fully stopped and ran inside while shouting excitedly.

"My lord! Great news! Wonderful news!"

The county magistrate, Liang Shixian, who had already held this position for eleven years, stepped out with a smile.

"What is it? Why are you shouting like that?"

The rider was one of his household servants. His face was full of excitement.

"My lord, you have been promoted!"

Liang Shixian was shocked.

"What kind of good news is that?"

"When the court tried to transfer me before, I went through great effort to stay here. I even asked people in the Donglin faction to help me plead my case so I could remain in this county."

"I have no desire to leave the territory liberated by Dao Xuan Tianzun."

The servant scratched his head.

"Times have changed, my lord."

"Officials under Dao Xuan Tianzun are now constantly being sent out to different regions to help bring more land under Tianzun's control."

"You were one of the earliest officials to join the Dao Xuan Tianzun faith. It makes sense that you should contribute more now."

Liang Shixian nodded slowly.

That did make sense.

"Chengcheng is already very stable. Even if I leave and the court sends another magistrate, they will not be able to harm the place anymore."

"It might indeed be time for me to go out and manage another region for Tianzun."

He rubbed his chin.

"So where have I been promoted to?"

"Which prefecture? Which province?"

"Sichuan or Huguang?"

"Prefect or governor?"

The servant replied proudly.

"Assistant Prefect of Shuntian Prefecture."

Liang Shixian froze.

"What? Assistant Prefect of Shuntian?"

The well read Liang Shixian immediately activated the massive archive of knowledge inside his brain.

All the official positions of the Ming bureaucracy.

Their responsibilities.

Their promotion paths.

All of it flashed through his mind like a spinning lantern.

Then the information settled.

Assistant Prefect of Shuntian.

Fourth rank official.

Deputy to the Prefect.

Also responsible for overseeing education.

The position did not look particularly powerful on the surface.

But it was famous for one reason.

This post was usually used as a stepping stone for future provincial governors or viceroys.

As long as the official spent some time there without causing problems, promotion to a position like provincial governor was very likely.

Liang Shixian looked baffled.

"What exactly did I do that the court would consider promoting me to governor someday?"

The servant laughed.

"You did nothing."

"But one of your old friends has recently risen in the political world."

"He wants to help you."

Liang Shixian blinked.

"My old friend?"

"Who?"

The servant answered.

"He Fengsheng."

Liang Shixian once again began mentally reviewing all the people he had known throughout his life.

Friends.

Scholars.

Fellow students from his time attending lectures at the famous Donglin Academy.

Faces flashed past in his mind.

Then suddenly the memory locked onto one.

He Fengsheng.

Courtesy name Keyao.

A native of Jiangxia, in what is now Wuchang.

He had passed the imperial examination in 1616 during the Wanli era and served as a Hanlin editor.

During the Tianqi period he served as a palace attendant but was dismissed because he refused to flatter the powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian.

At the beginning of the Chongzhen reign he was restored to office.

He was gradually promoted to Minister of Rites and Grand Secretary of the Wen Yuan Pavilion, eventually entering the imperial cabinet.

Liang Shixian rubbed his forehead.

Their relationship had never been extremely close.

They had simply drunk wine together at an academy gathering many years ago and gotten along well.

And now, after so many years, that man had suddenly promoted him to such an important position.

The whole situation felt strange.

Liang Shixian asked.

"Ever since Dao Xuan Tianzun manifested miracles, I have not paid much attention to court politics."

"What exactly has been happening recently?"

The servant quickly explained.

"Not long ago, Wen Tiren and Qian Qianyi were fighting each other politically."

"Wen Tiren resigned due to illness."

"Qian Qianyi was stripped of office and sent home."

"So the position of Chief Grand Secretary became vacant."

"The emperor hates factional struggles. He believed He Fengsheng belonged to no faction at all."

"So he appointed him as the new Chief Grand Secretary."

Liang Shixian burst out laughing.

"So that is how it happened?"

"The emperor made a mistake."

"He Fengsheng actually leans toward the Donglin faction."

Years ago Liang Shixian himself would never have admitted that the Donglin group was a political faction.

He used to believe that honorable men formed friendships but not factions.

He once thought he was simply a scholar who had friends at the Donglin Academy.

But after years of learning inside the territory of Dao Xuan Tianzun, his perspective had changed.

Now he clearly understood what the Donglin faction really was.

And he even felt somewhat embarrassed that he had once been part of it.

Unfortunately people outside did not know this.

His old acquaintances still believed he was one of them.

Liang Shixian sighed.

"The emperor could not find a suitable candidate for Chief Grand Secretary."

"So he chose someone who seemed politically neutral."

"But He Fengsheng is actually connected to the Donglin faction."

"So now he is promoting his own people."

"And I happened to come to mind."

"He plans to place me in the position of Assistant Prefect of Shuntian for a while."

"After that he can send me out as a provincial governor and gain a loyal ally."

Liang Shixian let out a long sigh.

"The imperial court truly is beyond saving."

The servant asked cautiously.

"My lord... will you accept this post?"

"Or decline it?"

Liang Shixian suddenly winked mischievously.

"Of course I will go."

"We will head to the capital, build a few factories, and establish a school."

"Let us scare the emperor a little for fun."

The servant burst out laughing.

Liang Shixian informed the village committee of Gao Family Village about the situation and asked them to handle any problems with the new magistrate who would replace him.

He then selected several administrative staff assigned by Gao Family Village.

Along with them came more than a dozen special security soldiers, all disguised as clerks and household servants.

With this group he set out for the capital.

It was now November of the eleventh year of the reign of Chongzhen Emperor.

The year was 1638.

Historically this period should have been a time of disaster for the Ming Empire.

Internal rebellions were tearing the country apart.

Bandit forces led by figures like Li Zicheng, also known as Chuang Wang, ravaged the land.

Outside the borders, the Manchu armies repeatedly invaded.

The empire should have been in chaos.

But because of the intervention of Li Dao Xuan, the situation had changed dramatically.

As Liang Shixian traveled through the Central Plains, he saw wide roads and prosperous villages.

The people lived peacefully.

The scenery of the homeland looked vibrant and hopeful.

His mood improved as he traveled.

However, once he left the Central Plains and entered the region of Beizhili, everything changed abruptly.

This region was not part of the territory controlled by Dao Xuan Tianzun.

It had also been repeatedly raided by Manchu forces.

Several invasions had carried off hundreds of thousands of captives.

Both commerce and agriculture had suffered enormous damage.

At one small town Liang Shixian encountered tightly shut gates.

When he tried to enter, someone shouted from above the gate.

"Are you a subject of the Ming?"

"Or a follower of Chuang Wang?"

Liang Shixian laughed.

"I belong to the Dao Xuan Tianzun faith."

The town gate immediately opened.

"Oh! Dao Xuan Tianzun!"

It turned out the illustrated booklet Dao Xuan Tianzun Subdues Demons had already reached this region.

The townspeople welcomed him warmly and treated him to a generous meal before he continued his journey.

Eventually he reached the capital.

At the city gate he saw someone waiting.

His old friend.

He Fengsheng.

The last time they met ten years ago, He Fengsheng had been a thin and refined middle aged scholar.

Now he looked completely different.

He had gained weight.

His figure had gone out of shape.

His belly stuck out proudly.

And his hairline had retreated into a perfect scholar's peninsula.

As soon as he saw Liang Shixian, He Fengsheng broke into a greasy smile.

"Brother Liang."

"It has been a long time."

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Liang Shixian sighed inwardly.

Back then, He Fengsheng had looked like such a spirited and upright man. Now the fellow had somehow turned greasy. His figure had gone soft, his belly bulging forward, and the sharp, scholarly air he once carried had long since vanished.

Before Liang Shixian could say anything, He Fengsheng enthusiastically grabbed his arm.

"Brother Liang! Come, come. Let us walk and talk."

The two men entered the capital together on foot. Guards surrounded them, gently pushing back the crowd and creating a small moving corridor so the two officials could speak privately.

Lowering his voice, He Fengsheng said, "Bringing you into Shuntian Prefecture this time was something I did out of sheer desperation."

Liang Shixian raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? What sort of trouble has Brother He run into?"

He Fengsheng let out a long sigh.

"To be honest, I never wanted to sit in the position of Grand Secretary in the first place. Serving beside the emperor is like sleeping beside a tiger. And our current emperor... well... his temper is rather impatient."

Calling the emperor "impatient" was already a very polite way to phrase it. If he spoke more bluntly, it would sound closer to: the emperor is constantly messing things up.

He Fengsheng continued in a whisper.

"Being Grand Secretary under such an emperor is dangerous. I am genuinely afraid I might not survive long enough to retire. So these past few days, whenever the emperor asks me about state affairs, I pretend that I know nothing."

Liang Shixian blinked.

"You pretend you know nothing?"

"Exactly." He Fengsheng nodded seriously. "Since taking office, I have made absolutely no policy suggestions."

Liang Shixian stopped walking for a moment.

"What? You have offered no advice at all? Is that really how one serves as Grand Secretary?"

He Fengsheng shrugged helplessly.

"It may not be ideal. But it is better than losing my head. If I do nothing, I cannot make mistakes. Even if I am dismissed from office, at least I will still have my head attached to my neck."

Liang Shixian stared at him, speechless.

Completely speechless.

After a moment he finally said, "Then why exactly did you pull me into the position of Deputy Prefect of Shuntian?"

He Fengsheng lowered his voice even further.

"Brother Liang, I heard that during your ten years as County Magistrate in Chengcheng, you never once delivered the full amount of tax revenue to the court. Because of that, the Ministry of Personnel has always given you terrible evaluations."

Liang Shixian nodded calmly.

"That is correct."

He Fengsheng suddenly brightened.

"Then I chose the right person!"

Liang Shixian stared at him.

"?"

He Fengsheng continued enthusiastically.

"You served as magistrate for ten years without ever causing a peasant uprising. Chengcheng County remained peaceful the entire time and suffered no war disasters. That alone proves your ability."

"Even more impressive is this: despite failing to deliver full tax revenue year after year, no one ever impeached you. Neither the Shaanxi Provincial Governor nor the Provincial Inspector ever submitted a memorial accusing you. You handled your superiors with ease while keeping the common people under control."

He clasped Liang Shixian's hands.

"Your ability to quietly drift through officialdom without attracting trouble is unparalleled in the entire empire."

Liang Shixian's face twitched.

He Fengsheng bowed deeply.

"Brother Liang, please teach me how to drift through my position as Grand Secretary. I must avoid angering the emperor above while also preventing chaos below. I need to remain invisible in official circles so no one will impeach me."

He lowered his head further.

"My life depends on your guidance."

Liang Shixian almost burst out laughing.

So that was it.

He had assumed He Fengsheng promoted him in order to build a political faction.

Instead, the man had dragged him to the capital just to learn how to slack off.

Slack off.

The Grand Secretary of the entire Ming Empire wanted lessons on slacking off.

The country was truly finished.

Liang Shixian waved a hand impatiently.

"To hell with slacking off. Listen to me. Build schools. Build factories. Get things moving."

He Fengsheng froze.

"What?"

"Collect commercial taxes!" Liang Shixian said boldly. "Raise the blade against the merchants. What are you afraid of?"

He Fengsheng blinked.

"What?"

"Stop limiting foreign trade to Macau, Quanzhou, and Fujian. Open the entire coastline. Lift the maritime ban completely!"

He Fengsheng stared at him.

"What?"

"Re-measure all farmland. Investigate hidden estates. No more tax exemptions for nobles and princes. Everyone pays taxes. Just do it!"

He Fengsheng finally panicked.

"WHAT?!"

He lunged forward and clamped both hands over Liang Shixian's mouth.

"Brother Liang! Brother Liang! You must not say such things!"

Any one of those policies, if implemented, would shake the entire empire.

If they pushed several of them together, the two of them might end up executed by dismemberment.

Liang Shixian struggled.

"Mmmph! Mmmph!"

He Fengsheng whispered nervously, "I will let go, but you must promise not to say such things again."

Liang Shixian nodded repeatedly.

"Mmmph."

Only then did He Fengsheng cautiously release him.

Liang Shixian took a deep breath.

"Look at you, trembling like this. What is there to fear? Just do it."

He Fengsheng shook his head violently.

"None of those policies can be implemented. If we try, officials across the entire empire will impeach us. Anyone who attempts it is courting death."

Liang Shixian smiled slightly.

"I do not think so."

He Fengsheng frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"In my opinion, the number of people who would oppose those reforms is actually quite small. At most, officials in the capital, those in Beizhili, and a portion of the Jiangnan region would object. The rest would obey."

He Fengsheng looked horrified.

"I do not believe you. Oh no. Did I accidentally release a giant catfish into the fishpond by summoning you to the capital?"

Liang Shixian chuckled.

"Fine, fine. I was only joking earlier. Slacking off cannot be done like that. That would get us killed immediately."

He Fengsheng exhaled with relief.

"Yes, yes. Please teach me the real method."

Liang Shixian nodded.

"If you want neither your superiors nor your subordinates to trouble you, there is only one method."

"Money."

"Wealth moves people's hearts. If you keep everyone's stomach full, no one will oppose you. In Chengcheng County, I served ten years without paying full taxes yet never faced impeachment. The secret was simple. I greased the wheels above and below with money."

He Fengsheng frowned.

"But where does the money come from?"

Liang Shixian answered casually.

"From the common people, of course."

"I possess something called fertilizer. Once applied to farmland, next year's harvest will double."

"If crop yields double, the people will not starve and will not rebel. They will obediently pay taxes. Then instead of handing all that money to the court, we quietly use part of it to grease our superiors."

He Fengsheng leaned closer.

"You mean..."

"You are the Grand Secretary," Liang Shixian said. "Your only superior is the emperor. Give him some extra silver for his private treasury. Once the emperor benefits personally, he will protect you."

"When that happens, who will still care whether the tax quota was fully met?"

Liang Shixian knew that the bold reforms he mentioned earlier were far too radical to present all at once. He Fengsheng would never dare.

So he chose the safest entry point.

Agriculture.

For five thousand years, China had always been an agrarian society. Even the most conservative officials were willing to experiment with anything that improved farming.

Compared with building factories, agricultural reforms were far easier to push forward.

Sure enough, He Fengsheng's eyes lit up.

"Brother Liang actually possesses such a miraculous thing? How do we produce this fertilizer?"

Liang Shixian grinned.

"My advisor understands the method. I will have him take charge."

"You are the Grand Secretary. As long as you give the order, every bureaucratic obstacle can be cleared easily. We will find a plot of land in Beizhili and conduct trials for a few months."

He Fengsheng nodded eagerly.

"Good. Let us try it."

The two men laughed together.

What He Fengsheng did not realize was that although he had firmly decided to slack off in office, he had already been dragged into the opening movement of a massive reform.

History would remember him as the first Grand Secretary who attempted to slack off so thoroughly that he accidentally transformed the entire nation.