

Great Ming 1381

Chapter 1381 Help Has Its Limits

The moment Ganza Xia Malu stepped into the school grounds, he felt as if he had entered a completely different world, one that quietly overturned everything he thought he understood about how people should live, grow, and exist.

On the wide open field ahead of him, a group of children were moving together in synchronized patterns, their arms stretching outward, their bodies bending and rising in rhythm, their steps landing almost at the same time as if guided by some invisible force that held them together.

They were not fighting, they were not hunting, and they were certainly not working.

They were exercising.

Malu slowed down unconsciously, his gaze lingering on them longer than he intended, because the scene in front of him simply refused to make sense within the logic of his upbringing.

Every single child there was younger than him, some so small that they could barely be five or six years old, while he himself was already fourteen, already considered someone who should be carrying responsibilities rather than standing around observing others.

Yet what truly struck him was not their age, but their appearance.

Their clothes were clean, well-fitted, properly stitched, and made of fabric that looked both durable and comfortable, and more importantly, every single one of them wore shoes, proper cloth shoes that covered their feet completely, something that in Dadu Kingdom would already be considered a luxury.

Malu instinctively looked down at himself.

He was wearing the Jianghu-style outfit given to him by Zheng Chenggong, made of pure cotton, soft to the touch and sturdy enough to endure travel, and in his homeland, such clothing would already place someone above ordinary people in terms of status and comfort.

He had always assumed that this kind of attire belonged only to important figures, to commanders, to people who stood above others in both power and responsibility.

And yet here, children wore the same level of quality as if it were nothing special.

That realization alone was enough to shake him.

Malu could no longer hold back his confusion as he spoke, his voice carrying a mix of disbelief and genuine curiosity.

"Are all these children really dressed like this, with proper clothes and shoes for every single one of them, as if this were something completely normal?"

Zheng Chenggong barely even glanced at the scene, as if it were too ordinary to deserve attention, and simply nodded with a calmness that made the answer feel even heavier.

"That is considered basic here."

That single word lingered in Malu's mind, echoing far louder than it should have.

Basic.

Something that his people would struggle to provide even for a few was here treated as the lowest standard.

His attention returned to the children's movements, still unable to fully process what he was seeing, and he asked again, trying to understand the purpose behind something that looked so unnecessary.

"What exactly are they doing, moving like that without any weapons or tools in their hands?"

Zheng Chenggong finally gave a more complete explanation, his tone relaxed yet matter-of-fact, as if explaining something that required no justification.

"They are doing broadcast exercises, a routine designed to keep their bodies active, because children here spend most of their time studying, sitting still for long hours, and that lack of movement is not good for their health, so Dao Xuan Tianzun made it a rule that after two lessons, they must come outside, move their bodies, and loosen their muscles."

The moment those words sank in, Malu's expression became almost comical in its intensity, because the idea itself directly contradicted everything he had ever known.

"Move their bodies... on purpose... because they are not moving enough?"

His voice faltered slightly as he tried to process the absurdity.

"In our homeland, children never stop moving from the moment they are old enough to walk, because they follow their elders into the forests, gathering mushrooms, picking wild vegetables, learning to hunt, carving wooden spears, shaping bows, and doing whatever is needed to survive, which means their bodies are constantly in motion from morning until night without any need for such... arrangements."

He shook his head slowly, as if trying to physically reject the logic in front of him.

"And here, you actually need to schedule time just to move your body, as if movement itself has become something rare."

The contrast was so extreme that it bordered on the ridiculous.

Zheng Chenggong smiled faintly, clearly aware of the cultural gap, yet completely unbothered by it.

"I understand why it sounds strange to you, but the situation here is fundamentally different, because children are not expected to work at all, since their parents earn enough through their jobs to support the entire family comfortably, which means any labor done by children would produce very little value compared to what adults can earn in factories."

He lowered his voice slightly, shifting from explanation into something closer to truth.

"So instead of letting children waste time on low-value labor, they are encouraged to study, to gain knowledge, and to become people who can contribute more in the future through their minds rather than their bodies."

Then he added, with a hint of irony.

"People like to praise workers openly, saying that workers are the backbone of everything, but deep down, almost no one wants their own child to remain a worker, because everyone hopes their child can become what they call 'office people', those who sit indoors and use their brains instead of exhausting their bodies."

Malu fell silent for a long moment, not because he disagreed, but because he understood too well.

He had worked.

Even as the son of Ganza Xia Alami, the ruler of Dadu Kingdom, his life had never been separated from labor, because survival in his homeland demanded participation from everyone, regardless of status.

And once a person truly understood how exhausting physical labor could be, the appeal of escaping it became undeniable.

After thinking for a while, he spoke again, his tone more serious than before.

"If I study here and learn everything that can be learned, then bring that knowledge back to my people, would it be possible for our children to live like this as well, without having to struggle from such a young age?"

Zheng Chenggong did not answer immediately, as if weighing the implications of the question rather than the question itself.

"In theory, it is possible," he finally said, but his expression grew more complicated as he continued, "however, there is something you need to understand, and it may not be easy to accept."

Malu looked at him directly, his gaze steady.

"Say it, because even if I do not understand it immediately, I can think about it later and figure it out."

Zheng Chenggong nodded slightly, then began to explain in a slow and deliberate manner.

"If Ming and Dadu Kingdom remain only as friendly nations, maintaining a relationship based on cooperation and trade, then no matter how much effort you put into development, there will always be a limit to how far you can go."

Malu frowned, sensing that something important was about to unfold.

"What kind of limit are you talking about?"

Instead of answering directly, Zheng Chenggong chose to guide him toward the answer.

"You belong to the Pazeh Tribe, which is the largest group within Dadu Kingdom, and there are also other tribes that exist under your rule, correct?"

Malu nodded.

"Then let me ask you this, if the Babuza Tribe were to face difficulties, would you help them?"

"Of course," Malu replied without hesitation, "because they are part of Dadu Kingdom."

Zheng Chenggong nodded again, then continued.

"What if the Siraya Tribe were to encounter the same situation, would you still help them with the same level of effort?"

This time, Malu hesitated, because the answer was no longer obvious.

"We would help to some extent, but not with full effort, because they are not part of our kingdom, and in our eyes, they are closer to outsiders than to our own people."

He stopped speaking midway, because the implication had already become clear in his mind.

If Ming and Dadu Kingdom were separate, then no matter how friendly they appeared on the surface, the relationship would never reach the level of full commitment.

At most, there would be trade.

There would be cooperation.

There might even be support.

But there would always be a boundary.

A limit that could not be crossed.

Malu's expression slowly changed as he processed this realization, because this was the first time he had truly begun to understand what it meant for two nations to remain separate entities.

And yet, for someone raised in a tribal system, this idea did not carry the same emotional resistance that it might have for others.

In his world, tribes constantly fought, merged, split, and reformed, with stronger groups absorbing weaker ones, and those who were defeated would eventually adapt to their new reality, because for them, changing rulers was not the end of the world.

Dadu Kingdom itself had been built through such processes, with the Pazeh Tribe expanding and incorporating other tribes over time.

To them, being absorbed or absorbing others was simply part of survival.

As long as the rule was not oppressive, it was acceptable.

Malu lowered his head slightly, his thoughts becoming deeper and more complex than ever before.

"If becoming one means removing that limit..."

His mind began to connect everything he had seen.

The solid houses that could withstand storms.

The powerful warships that ruled the sea.

The terrifying cannons that could decide battles in an instant.

The endless supply of food.

The structured education system.

And most importantly, children who no longer needed to exhaust themselves just to survive.

All of it could become part of his people's future.

Not through trade.

Not through borrowing.

But through integration.

He took a slow breath, his heart beating slightly faster.

At the age of fourteen, he did not fully grasp the political weight of what he was thinking, but instinctively, he understood its value.

Because in his world, this was not betrayal.

This was opportunity.

And deep within his mind, Ganza Xia Malu had already begun to accept a possibility that would change everything.

That becoming part of something greater might not mean losing one's identity.

It might mean gaining a future that would otherwise never be within reach.

Chapter 1382 You've Become a Rebel

Recently, the focus of Gao Village had shifted heavily toward the sea, as fleets moved, cannons roared, and influence expanded across waves that once belonged to foreign powers, leaving the mainland momentarily quieter but no less tense beneath the surface.

On land, however, the atmosphere was anything but calm.

Inside the imperial court, Zhu Youjian was in a state that could only be described as barely contained fury, pacing like a man who had lost control of a board game where every piece suddenly started moving on its own.

"Where is Cao Wenzhao?" he demanded, his voice sharp enough to cut through the air. "I ordered him to deal with Zheng Zhilong's fleet, so why has there been no report for so long? Did he vanish into the sea along with his ships?"

Beside him, Cao Huachun bowed slightly, his tone cautious yet steady, clearly experienced in navigating the emperor's temper.

"Your Majesty, the sea is vast and unpredictable, unlike land warfare where movements are easier to track. Once a naval force sets out, it is not unusual for months to pass without news."

Zhu Youjian clicked his tongue in frustration, clearly dissatisfied but lacking a better target for the moment, so his anger simply shifted direction like a storm changing course.

"Zheng Zhilong truly cannot change his bandit nature," he snapped, slamming his palm against the table. "Not only did he refuse to submit properly, he actually dared to support Zhu Yujian and openly rebel. Back then, we should never have accepted his surrender. Who was the one who vouched for him?"

Cao Huachun hesitated for a fraction of a second before answering.

"The Governor-General of Liangguang, Xiong Wencan."

"Strip him of his position immediately," Zhu Youjian ordered without hesitation, as if cutting off a diseased limb.

Cao Huachun quickly raised his head, this time speaking more firmly.

"Your Majesty, that would not be wise. Zheng Zhilong still has strongholds along the Fujian coast, and the Fujian administration alone cannot suppress him. We need coordination from Liangguang to gather sufficient military strength. Removing Xiong Wencan now may disrupt the entire campaign."

Zhu Youjian narrowed his eyes, suspicion flickering.

"And what if he is already colluding with Zheng Zhilong?"

Cao Huachun forced a small, awkward smile.

"A Governor-General of his standing would not go that far... most likely."

Before the conversation could settle, hurried footsteps echoed from outside, followed by the sudden appearance of Wang Cheng'en, the emperor's personal attendant, his face pale with urgency.

"Your Majesty, something terrible has happened!"

Zhu Youjian's heart sank slightly, though his expression remained tense.

"What now?"

Wang Cheng'en swallowed before speaking.

"The son of Prince Fu, Zhu Youzhong... has rebelled. He is using the same slogan as Zhu Yujian, accusing Your Majesty of ruining the country and even claiming that he could rule better himself."

For a brief moment, silence filled the room.

Then Zhu Youjian inhaled sharply, almost choking on his own breath.

"Prince Fu? That three-hundred-jin glutton?" he blurted out in disbelief. "He is terrified of death, yet his son dares to rebel? How does that even make sense?"

Wang Cheng'en looked just as helpless.

"Your servant... does not know either."

Zhu Youjian forced himself to think, though his thoughts were beginning to scatter.

"What about the Henan Governor, Fan Shangjing? Prince Fu only has five hundred guards. This should be crushed immediately."

Wang Cheng'en lowered his head further.

"Fan Shangjing... has declared his support for Zhu Youzhong."

That single sentence hit harder than any battlefield defeat.

Zhu Youjian staggered backward several steps, as if the ground beneath him had shifted.

Even Cao Huachun fell silent, because just moments ago he had confidently claimed that high officials would not betray the court, only for reality to slap that statement into irrelevance.

"Has he gone mad?" Zhu Youjian muttered, his voice trembling between anger and disbelief. "Calling me an incompetent ruler? If that fat pig's son sits on the throne, he will be even worse."

Cao Huachun carefully corrected him.

"Prince Fu may be... like that, but Zhu Youzhong is not the same."

"Mobilize the army," Zhu Youjian suddenly roared, his composure snapping. "Send troops immediately. What forces are available in Henan? Who opposes Fan Shangjing?"

Cao Huachun answered quickly.

"General Gao Jie of Henan has long been at odds with him."

"Where is Gao Jie now?"

"At Dalinghe, awaiting Your Majesty's command to attack Shenyang."

At that moment, something subtle shifted in the air.

Because everyone knew why Gao Jie had been waiting for so long.

The emperor himself had delayed the order.

No one said it out loud, yet Zhu Youjian felt as if the entire room was whispering it.

He glanced around.

Cao Huachun seemed to be saying it.

Wang Cheng'en seemed to be saying it.

Even the pillars, the walls, the roof, every tile above his head seemed to echo the same silent accusation.

"Incompetent ruler."

The words grew louder in his mind until they drowned everything else.

"Enough!"

Zhu Youjian shouted, his voice cracking.

"Get out. All of you, leave me. I need silence."

Cao Huachun immediately lowered his head and pulled Wang Cheng'en out with him, both retreating as quickly as possible.

The moment they stepped outside, the sound of something shattering echoed from within the room.

Meanwhile, in Luoyang, inside Prince Fu's residence, the atmosphere could not have been more different.

Zhu Changxun, the famously overweight prince, was happily eating without a single trace of concern, fully immersed in the simple joy of food.

Today's dish had an unusual name.

"Shrimp Balls."

The packaging even claimed it was a specialty from Chengdu, though the advisors from Chengdu present in the residence all insisted they had never heard of such a thing.

Zhu Changxun did not care in the slightest.

If it came from Dao Xuan Tianzun, then it must be heavenly food, and if it claimed to be from Chengdu, then it was surely from some celestial version of Chengdu far beyond mortal knowledge.

As he ate with great enthusiasm, Fan Shangjing walked in, smiling casually.

"Your Highness, still eating as always. Have you gained more weight recently?"

Zhu Changxun sighed dramatically, though his hands never stopped moving.

"Another twenty jin, unfortunately. I truly wish to lose weight, but these heavenly foods are simply too good. There is no end to them. Would you like to try one?"

Fan Shangjing shook his head.

"I am here to discuss something important."

Zhu Changxun paused slightly, finally looking up.

"Important? I have already sold all my land to the village committee at a low price, and now I only have this residence left. I was even considering investing in a private railway with Zhu Cunji. What more is there to discuss?"

Fan Shangjing smiled faintly.

"This is not a discussion. It is a notification."

Zhu Changxun blinked.

"A notification?"

Fan Shangjing spoke calmly.

"You are now a rebel."

Zhu Changxun froze.

Then he nearly choked.

"What do you mean I am a rebel?" he exclaimed, his voice rising sharply. "I have done nothing wrong. I have been obedient to Dao Xuan Tianzun, I have not harmed anyone, how could I suddenly become a rebel? Are you trying to frame me?"

Fan Shangjing waved his hand dismissively.

"Not against Dao Xuan Tianzun. Against the court."

A slow question mark seemed to appear above Zhu Changxun's head.

Fan Shangjing continued.

"Your son, Zhu Youzhong, has rebelled. You did not know?"

Zhu Changxun immediately spat out a piece of food in shock, forcing Fan Shangjing to step aside.

"Watch it," he said with a frown. "That is unpleasant."

Seeing Zhu Changxun's genuine confusion, Fan Shangjing chuckled.

"I suspected you had no idea, which is why I came personally. Your son studied at Gu Yanwu's school and became quite the radical reformer. A few days ago, he gathered a group of students and openly denounced the emperor, even declaring that he would govern better."

Fan Shangjing folded his hands behind his back, looking quite satisfied.

"Frankly, I found his argument rather convincing, so I decided to support him."

Zhu Changxun blinked several times, processing this information in his own unique way.

Then he suddenly relaxed.

"Oh, so he is rebelling against the court, not against Dao Xuan Tianzun," he said, patting his chest in relief. "You nearly scared me to death. If it is just the court, then let him rebel as he pleases. What does that have to do with me?"

He immediately pushed the plate forward again.

"Come, try one. This Shrimp Ball is excellent."

Chapter 1383 Come Back and Suppress the Rebellion for Me

Zhu Changxun leaned back with a completely unconcerned expression, the kind of relaxed indifference that only someone utterly detached from politics could maintain, because just moments ago he had been startled by the word "rebellion," yet now that he understood the nature of it, all tension had evaporated from his body as if it had never existed in the first place.

If his son had dared to rebel against Dao Xuan Tianzun, then Zhu Changxun would not hesitate for even a second before personally breaking the boy's legs and dragging him back into obedience, because that would be true madness and a direct path to destruction, but rebelling against the Ming Court was, in his mind, an entirely different matter, something so distant from his concerns that it barely qualified as rebellion at all, and so he waved it off internally with the ease of someone dismissing background noise, returning his focus to far more important matters such as food and comfort.

Speaking of food, the so-called Shrimp Balls in his hand were proving to be a rather complicated experience, because while they carried the prestige of being bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun and packaged as a delicacy from some mysterious version of Chengdu, the actual taste was, to put it politely, difficult to describe, hovering somewhere between intriguing and deeply confusing, forcing Zhu Changxun to confront the surprising reality that even heavenly cuisine could fail to align with mortal

preferences, which in itself felt like a small philosophical revelation that he was not entirely prepared to process.

As he shifted his enormous three-hundred-jin body slightly in his seat, still pondering the meaning of culinary disappointment, a sharp cracking sound suddenly echoed beneath him, followed immediately by the catastrophic collapse of the chair, sending his entire bulk crashing backward onto the ground with a thunderous impact that shook the room.

"Someone, help me up," he shouted, flailing awkwardly like an overturned ornament, his limbs struggling against gravity in a way that was both tragic and faintly absurd.

At the same time, out on the streets of Luoyang, the situation could not have been more different, because while Zhu Changxun lay helpless on the ground wrestling with furniture, his son, Zhu Youzhong, was leading a full-scale ideological movement that was beginning to reshape the political atmosphere of the region.

Dressed in clean and orderly scholar robes, Zhu Youzhong marched at the front of a large procession composed of students from Luoyang University, their formation disciplined and their expressions resolute, moving through the streets with a sense of purpose that drew the attention of every passerby, as voices rose in coordinated speeches directed toward the gathered crowd of ordinary citizens.

"Everyone," Zhu Youzhong called out, his voice carrying clearly over the noise of the street, "the Ming dynasty has reached a point where reform is no longer optional but absolutely necessary, because from the founding emperor to Zhu Youjian, sixteen emperors have ruled this land, and among them there have been capable rulers, incompetent rulers, benevolent rulers, and those who brought chaos through their own actions."

As he spoke, the students behind him echoed in rhythm, amplifying his message.

"Every time the throne changes hands, the governing style of the entire nation changes with it," Zhu Youzhong continued, his tone growing sharper, more deliberate. "The personal character of a single emperor determines the fate of millions. Is that not fundamentally unstable? Is that not a danger to the people themselves?"

"It is," the students shouted in unison. "It is deeply flawed."

Zhu Youzhong raised his hand slightly, signaling the next phase of the argument.

"What we need is stability, a system that does not drift with the personality of one ruler, a structure that cannot be thrown into chaos simply because one emperor makes poor decisions, because governance should not depend on the whims of a single individual."

The students responded instantly.

"We reject one-man rule. We demand collective governance."

Zhu Youzhong's eyes swept across the crowd, his confidence building with every response.

"We need capable individuals, people with knowledge and vision, to stand together and assist in governing the state, and when the emperor makes a flawed decision, there must exist a mechanism to correct it, to override it, and to replace it with something better."

"Power must not rest in one voice alone," the students roared back.

"We nominate Zhu Youzhong."

At that moment, the scene took on an even more unusual layer, because a female reporter pushed her way through the crowd, accompanied by a small unit of Sky Battalion personnel carrying a massive, door-sized camera, its presence drawing curious glances as it was carefully positioned to capture the unfolding moment.

Once everything was set, the reporter stepped forward, her tone professional yet probing.

"Mr. Zhu Youzhong, your speech suggests strong views on governance. Are you claiming that you personally have the ability to rule the country?"

Zhu Youzhong immediately shook his head, his expression unexpectedly humble.

"No, not at all. In fact, the more I have studied, the more I have realized how vast knowledge truly is, and how insignificant I am within it, because there are countless things I do not understand, and if I were to govern alone, I would undoubtedly make mistakes just as severe as any emperor before me."

He paused briefly, allowing that statement to settle.

"That is precisely why governance must be collective."

The reporter tilted her head slightly.

"But when too many voices are involved, does that not create confusion, like the saying about too many monks leaving no one to fetch water?"

Zhu Youzhong smiled faintly, clearly having anticipated the question.

"That is why not everyone speaks directly in governance. We select representatives, individuals who can carry the voices of the people. I volunteer myself as one such representative, not just for Luoyang, but for all of Henan. If the people have concerns, they bring them to me, and I bring them into discussion with the ruler."

The reporter continued.

"However, Governor Fan Shangjing has already declared support for you to ascend the throne. What is your stance on that?"

Zhu Youzhong laughed openly, showing no hesitation.

"If the people truly wish for me to take the throne, I will not refuse, but even if I become emperor, I will not rule alone. I will govern through collective decision-making, because that is the only way to ensure stability."

He turned toward the students behind him.

"Am I right?"

The students burst into laughter and shouted back.

"We will support you. You are our student council president. Even if you become emperor, you are still our president."

Zhu Youzhong turned back to the camera, his smile calm and confident.

"You see, we already practice this model. The student council at Luoyang University does not operate under single authority. Every decision is discussed collectively, and each member represents the voice of their respective group."

The reporter nodded slightly.

"Then we look forward to seeing how far this system can go."

At that exact moment, a shout erupted from the edge of the street.

"The Jinyiwei is here."

Zhu Youzhong laughed without hesitation.

"This is Luoyang. I am not afraid of them."

As the Jinyiwei advanced, they were suddenly intercepted by a formation of militia forces under Fan Shangjing, soldiers who had once been private troops but had since been reorganized under Gao Village doctrine, trained under discipline and guided by new principles that fundamentally changed their identity.

The confrontation ended almost instantly.

The Jinyiwei was surrounded and captured before they could even properly react.

Even while being restrained, their leader shouted angrily.

"You rebels have no fear of consequence."

The militia commander walked forward calmly.

"You can shout all you want now. Soon enough, you will stand with us."

"That is nonsense," the man snapped.

The commander pointed toward the center of Luoyang, where a towering, absurdly massive soy sauce bottle stood like a monument that defied logic itself.

"Standing beneath a miracle like that, and you still do not understand what kind of force you are facing?"

Only then did the captured agents truly look.

And for the first time, uncertainty crept into their expressions.

Back in the imperial study, Zhu Youjian slammed his hand against the table again, his patience long since exhausted.

"Issue my decree. Gao Jie is to return to Henan immediately and suppress Zhu Youzhong's rebellion without delay."

Chen Xinjia, the newly appointed Minister of War, spoke carefully.

"Your Majesty, Cao Wenzhao has already been redeployed, and now if Gao Jie is withdrawn as well, the forces at Dalinghe will weaken significantly. This could create an opportunity for the Jurchens to advance."

Zhu Youjian did not even hesitate.

"I do not care about them right now," he snapped, his voice sharp with urgency. "Zhu Yujian has already rebelled, and now Zhu Youzhong as well. Princes are rising one after another. That is far more dangerous than any external threat."

He leaned forward, his expression hardening.

"Recall Gao Jie. Bring him back. I want this rebellion crushed immediately."

Chapter 1384 The Fundamental Structure of Collective Governance

Dalinghe City had turned into a strange kind of war zone, one where nothing seemed urgent on the surface, yet everything was quietly moving with terrifying efficiency underneath.

The militia from Gao Village had been stationed here for months now, and unlike traditional armies, they showed no signs of strain, no anxiety over supply lines, no visible cracks in morale, because the entire system behind them was simply operating on a completely different level.

Every few days, massive transport ships would arrive along the southern coast near Jinzhou, unloading endless supplies like an industrial artery that never stopped pumping, and from there, steam-powered cargo trucks hauling heavy trailers, along with long caravans of ox carts and horse carts, would carry everything inland toward Dalinghe City without interruption.

No one dared interfere with that supply line.

At sea, no one could touch Gao Village's ships.

On land, the Qing forces had already been beaten into a defensive crouch, clinging to survival while desperately trying to figure out how those iron monsters even moved, all the while silently praying that the emperor would continue making disastrous decisions and buy them more time.

Meanwhile, the militia didn't waste a single day.

From dawn, the entire camp would come alive.

The core units trained with advanced weapons that made traditional soldiers feel like they were watching sorcery rather than warfare.

The Sky Battalion would take to the air whenever the wind allowed it, practicing bombing drills with terrifying precision, and even on days with unstable wind, they would still ascend, experimenting with control techniques that looked reckless but were clearly part of a calculated system.

Nearby, the armored cavalry units drilled relentlessly in combined tactics, coordinating movements between infantry and armored support with a level of discipline that felt mechanical rather than human.

Ma Shouying's heavy cavalry spent their days riding in wide arcs across the plains, not because there was an immediate threat, but because both riders and horses needed constant conditioning, and in this army, even the animals were treated as long-term strategic assets.

Then there were the firearm units.

They trained with live ammunition.

Real gunpowder.

Real bullets.

Every single day.

Lu Xiangsheng watched this with a tightening chest, his eyes practically bleeding from the sheer waste in his perspective, because to him, this was not training, this was burning money, this was throwing away resources that could sustain an army for months.

What kind of household burns through ammunition like this?

Do they really have a mine at home?

And yet, what truly defined Gao Village's militia was not their weapons, but their fundamentals.

Endurance.

Discipline.

Repetition.

Long-distance running in formation, chanting in rhythm, boots pounding the ground in perfect synchronization, lines stretching across the landscape like moving walls.

Lu Xiangsheng watched them day after day, and eventually, he couldn't take it anymore.

He turned to his own troops.

"Look at them," he snapped, voice sharp with frustration. "Look carefully. This is what a real army looks like. And then look at yourselves. You call yourselves soldiers? You're nothing but a bunch of lazy pigs. Move! Run like them!"

The Tianxiong Army obeyed immediately.

They always did.

That was never the problem.

But obedience alone wasn't enough.

After one full round of long-distance running, the difference became painfully obvious.

The militia soldiers returned, still upright, still breathing evenly, still capable of continuing training as if nothing had happened.

The Tianxiong Army, on the other hand, collapsed.

Completely.

The next morning, many of them couldn't even stand.

Lu Xiangsheng was furious, dragging men out of bed, shouting, demanding, pushing them beyond their limits, until suddenly a calm voice interrupted him.

"Governor Lu, you should let them rest for a couple of days."

He turned and saw Li Daoxuan walking over, smiling like he had just arrived for a casual visit rather than stepping into a military training ground.

Lu Xiangsheng frowned. "Perfect timing. Tell me this. Why are your soldiers like this, and mine are like that?"

Li Daoxuan didn't even hesitate.

"Nutrition."

Just one word.

Then he continued, voice relaxed, almost conversational.

"If you want a horse to run, you have to feed it properly. People are the same. Your soldiers have been underfed for a long time. Their bodies simply can't handle this level of training yet. If you force it, you won't strengthen them, you'll break them."

Lu Xiangsheng paused, his expression tightening.

"They are my personal troops. I already do everything I can to provide food and pay."

"It's not enough," Li Daoxuan replied, still smiling. "High-intensity training requires high calories, high protein, even high fat. Running burns fat. If they don't have reserves, what exactly are they supposed to burn?"

That word hit harder than expected.

Fat.

Lu Xiangsheng subconsciously touched his own waist.

Yes, he had some.

But his soldiers?

Not even close.

Li Daoxuan waved it off casually.

"Don't worry. Recently, your troops have been eating our supplies anyway. Give it some time. They'll build up what they need."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent.

He knew exactly what this meant.

He was accepting support from rebels.

From people he was supposed to fight.

The irony was suffocating.

Before he could respond, a rider came charging in from the distance, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Imperial decree! General Gao Jie is to return to Henan immediately and suppress the rebel Zhu Yousong and his faction!"

Lu Xiangsheng blinked.

Gao Jie, however, simply clicked his tongue.

"Damn. Haven't even gotten proper credit here and now I have to go back."

Lao Nanfeng beside him laughed and punched his shoulder.

"Don't forget how Gao Village counts merit. Killing enemies doesn't mean much. Completing strategic objectives does. You leaving Henan and creating that power vacuum? That's already a big contribution. Now go finish the job."

Gao Jie grinned, shaking his head.

"Fine, fine. I get it. Long-distance marching practice is done anyway. My unit is sharp now. Real sharp."

Despite everything, Gao Jie still respected the imperial structure in his own way.

Before leaving, he even went to Lu Xiangsheng and saluted.

"Governor Lu, I'm heading back to Henan to deal with Zhu Yousong. Came to say goodbye."

Lu Xiangsheng looked at him coldly.

"You're all in the same group anyway. Going back just means acting out your script together. What I really want to know is this. First Zhu Yujian, now Zhu Yousong. You're raising multiple claimants. Who are you actually planning to make emperor? Or are you going to have them fight each other in the end?"

Gao Jie laughed.

"I'm just a soldier. Politics? No idea. I just follow orders and collect achievements."

Lu Xiangsheng turned immediately to Li Daoxuan.

"You understand this, don't you?"

Li Daoxuan looked at him, calm as ever.

"Governor Lu, you're forgetting something again. I'm not trying to overthrow the emperor as a person. I'm trying to destroy a system where one person's word cannot be questioned."

He paused slightly, letting that sink in.

"If I only support Zhu Yujian, his personal authority becomes too strong. If I only support Zhu Yousong, the same thing happens. So instead, I raise multiple figures. Each with influence. Each with legitimacy. But none of them allowed to dominate the others through force."

Lu Xiangsheng's eyes widened slightly.

Understanding hit him like a blade.

"You're building a system," he said slowly, "where multiple leaders exist at the same time, each strong, each legitimate, but none able to eliminate the others. That forces them into cooperation. That creates... a shared governance structure."

Li Daoxuan smiled.

"As expected of Governor Lu. You see it clearly."

Then he added, almost casually.

"That's why I've always respected you. Even if we stand on opposite sides, my people will always treat you with respect."

Chapter 1385 You're All Useless

Beijing had fallen into a strange and uneasy silence, the kind of silence that did not come from peace but from people holding their breath, watching, waiting, and quietly wondering whether the sky above their heads was about to collapse.

When Zheng Zhilong had supported Zhu Yujian and pushed him forward as a claimant, the officials in the capital had not taken it too seriously, because in their eyes Zheng Zhilong had always been a man of the seas with the habits of a pirate, and for someone like that to rebel was not only unsurprising, it was almost expected, especially when Zhu Yujian himself had previously attempted that half-loyal, half-rebellious move of marching toward the capital under the banner of "protecting the emperor," which already blurred the line between loyalty and treason.

But when the Governor of Henan openly supported Zhu Yousong, everything changed, and the atmosphere in the capital shifted from casual dismissal to genuine alarm.

The Governor of Henan was not some wandering warlord or opportunistic bandit, but a proper imperial official, a man holding real authority over a province, someone who had climbed the bureaucratic ladder step by step, and yet now he had chosen to stand up and rebel, and not even for a strong or capable prince, but for the son of Zhu Changxun, a man so famously overweight and indulgent that calling him useless would almost count as flattery.

This made no sense on the surface, and that was exactly what made it terrifying.

If this were a rebellion destined to fail the moment imperial troops arrived, then what was the point of starting it in the first place, and why would a man like the Governor of Henan stake his life on something so obviously doomed?

The officials in Beijing might joke that the entire Fu Prince's household was full of fools, but they would never believe that a provincial governor was a fool, which meant there had to be a reason behind this decision, either a hidden chance of success, or a determination to shout one final truth before dying, that the emperor was leading the nation toward ruin.

And so rumors spread, whispers multiplied, and unease seeped into every corner of the capital like cold air through cracked windows.

A few days later, Gao Jie returned from Liaodong with his troops and passed beneath the walls of Beijing, and almost instantly, the heads of officials popped up along the battlements like a row of startled birds.

"General Gao, we have questions!"

"General Gao, you understand the situation in Henan, what exactly is going on there?"

They could not help themselves, and so they leaned over the walls, abandoning dignity just to extract some clarity from this man.

Gao Jie scratched his head and gave a simple answer that sounded both honest and completely useless.

"I don't know anything. I am just a soldier. The emperor tells me who to cut, and I cut. That is all."

Before the officials could even react, a figure rushed out from the city gate, and it was Zhu Youjian himself, who strode forward and grabbed Gao Jie's hand with visible emotion.

"Excellent, my loyal general. Words like yours are rare in this world. A man like you is exactly what this empire needs."

Gao Jie lowered his head respectfully, but inside his mind he could not help laughing at the irony, thinking that a double-dealing opportunist like himself truly was rare, just not in the way the emperor imagined.

Zhu Youjian continued speaking, his tone firm and decisive, as if trying to anchor himself to something solid in a world that was slowly slipping out of control.

"This campaign to suppress the rebels will not be easy. The Governor of Henan may attempt to pressure you with his rank, but you need not worry. I grant you an imperial sword, one that can execute traitors on sight. When you arrive, you may cut him down and bring the entire Fu Prince household back to Beijing for judgment."

Gao Jie clasped his fists and bowed deeply.

"Your servant obeys."

Then he turned and left, walking with a certain swagger that made him look far more confident than he actually felt.

Zhu Youjian watched the departing army, noting their discipline and formation, and for a brief moment, he felt reassured, believing that such a force would surely crush Zhu Yousong without difficulty.

But that fragile confidence lasted only a few breaths.

From the roadside outside the city, a group of women, clearly from the pleasure quarters, began waving enthusiastically at Gao Jie, their voices loud and unrestrained.

"General Gao, you are so handsome!"

More women joined in, their laughter and shrill cheers echoing across the road, turning the solemn departure of an army into something closer to a traveling performance.

Gao Jie turned his head, flashed a playful wink, struck a dramatic pose, and then made an exaggerated slashing motion with his hand.

"Wait for me, ladies. This handsome general will take care of those rebels."

The women screamed in delight, their voices rising into chaotic excitement.

"So cool!"

Zhu Youjian froze.

Just moments ago, he had felt that Gao Jie was reliable, but now that confidence collapsed instantly, replaced by a deep and uncomfortable doubt, as he watched this so-called pillar of the empire flirting with prostitutes like a street performer.

For a brief and dangerous moment, the emperor even considered grabbing a firearm and shooting Gao Jie on the spot, just to erase that ridiculous grin from his face, but reality quickly returned, and he knew he could not do that, because if Gao Jie fell, there would be no one left to send to Henan.

And so he could only watch as Gao Jie disappeared into the distance, carrying both the emperor's hopes and his doubts with him.

Zhu Youjian turned back toward the palace, his steps heavier than before, and before he had gone far, Wang Cheng'en came running toward him, panting heavily.

"Your Majesty, something terrible has happened."

Zhu Youjian frowned.

"What now?"

Wang Cheng'en swallowed and spoke carefully, as if choosing each word to avoid triggering another explosion of anger.

"The scholar Liu Maopao, who had been hiding, suddenly appeared at the marketplace and gave a speech to the common people. He said that Your Majesty has once again pulled elite troops away from Liaodong, weakening the chances of recovering the territory, and that if this continues, the enemy will return, retake Jinzhou, and bring disaster back to the Central Plains."

He hesitated briefly before adding in a lower voice.

"The people were influenced by his words. Some of them even... shouted certain phrases. Their dissatisfaction is growing."

Zhu Youjian's face darkened instantly.

"That man still dares to show himself? Where are the Jinyiwei? What are they doing?"

Wang Cheng'en quickly replied.

"Qianhu Mi Qingli has already taken men to pursue him, but Liu Maopao runs extremely fast and keeps slipping through alleys. They are still chasing him, and we do not yet know the result."

Zhu Youjian's anger flared again.

"A mere scholar, running faster than the Jinyiwei? What kind of useless fools are they?"

Wang Cheng'en lowered his head.

"It seems the common people are helping him. They deliberately block the streets and prevent the Jinyiwei from passing."

That single sentence struck harder than any insult.

Zhu Youjian froze, his mind racing, because the implication was far more serious than a failed arrest.

The people were no longer afraid.

Or perhaps more accurately, they were no longer afraid of him.

This realization crept into his thoughts like a shadow, and for the first time, he felt something he had never truly experienced before.

His authority was weakening.

The title of emperor, once unquestionable, was now being quietly challenged in the hearts of ordinary people, and the label of "foolish ruler" was spreading from mouth to mouth like an unstoppable tide.

What should he do?

For a brief moment, he had no answer.

Just then, a group of Jinyiwei rushed toward him, and their leader, Mi Qianhu, stumbled forward with one arm wrapped in blood-soaked cloth, his face pale with pain.

"Your Majesty, I have failed. I was caught in the enemy's trap and injured."

Zhu Youjian stared at him coldly.

"So he escaped again?"

Mi Qianhu lowered his head.

"Yes, he disappeared."

Silence hung in the air for a single heartbeat.

Then Zhu Youjian exploded.

"Useless! All of you are useless! Every single one of you!"

Chapter 1386 He Fengsheng's New Factory

Zhu Youjian was absolutely furious.

In his own mind, he was definitely not a foolish ruler. No, he was a wise emperor, a diligent one even. But what was the use of being wise if all the officials under him were complete trash? Not a single one could actually solve problems. Useless, every last one of them. Fat parasites living off the state treasury, eating rice and doing nothing.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got.

Then suddenly, a thought struck him.

If there was anyone in the entire court who should be solving problems for him, it had to be the Grand Secretary. Otherwise, what was the point of having a Grand Secretary at all?

He turned his head sharply.

"Where is He Fengsheng? What has he been doing? Why hasn't he helped me deal with this mess?"

Cao Huachun hurried forward, lowering his voice like a man reporting something delicate.

"Your Majesty... Lord He has been... earning money for you."

"Oh?" Zhu Youjian's anger eased just a tiny bit. "Making money, you say? That counts as doing real work. What exactly has he been up to?"

Cao Huachun scratched his head slightly.

"This servant isn't entirely sure... but I heard he's been working on some kind of new facility. Something like... a 'water factory'? They call it... zilai shui chang."

Zhu Youjian blinked.

"Zilai... shui?"

Those two words hit him like nonsense.

"What is that supposed to be? What does it even do?"

Cao Huachun spread his hands helplessly.

"This servant doesn't understand either. Perhaps Your Majesty would like to go see it personally?"

Zhu Youjian immediately shook his head.

"Zhu Yujian and Zhu Yousong are both in open rebellion. I have no mood to look at some 'water factory.' You go instead. Look carefully. Then come back and report everything in detail."

Cao Huachun bowed.

"This servant will make sure to see everything clearly."

Zhu Youjian waved him off and returned to the palace, his mood still foul.

These days, he barely ate or slept. His mind was stuck on two things only.

First, Gao Jie suppressing Zhu Yousong.

Second, Cao Wenzhao crushing Zheng Zhilong at sea and bringing back Zhu Yujian.

Until those two pieces of news came back, he had no interest in anything else.

Meanwhile, Cao Huachun set off toward the so-called "zilai shui factory."

The site was located on Wansui Hill, the imperial garden behind the palace, also known as Coal Hill.

Back in the early days of the dynasty, this hill had been used to store coal in case the capital was besieged and cut off from supplies. Over time, as the empire stabilized, the coal stockpiles were removed, and the place became a royal garden instead.

Cao Huachun huffed and puffed his way up the slope.

By the time he reached the top, he found He Fengsheng and Liang Shixian standing beside a massive water reservoir, chatting casually like two men who had nothing better to do.

Cao Huachun frowned.

"Lord He, Lord Liang... what exactly are you doing here? This is Wansui Hill. You can't just build things here as you please."

Liang Shixian smiled calmly.

"Eunuch Cao, while this is indeed a royal garden, do not forget that in the early years of the dynasty, this place was used for military reserves. That makes it a strategic location. What we are building here also has military value."

Cao Huachun paused.

That... actually made sense.

The Ming court loved talking about "ancestral precedent." If something had been done in the founding era, it became almost untouchable logic.

Even the emperor could get scolded for violating precedent.

A eunuch like him definitely wasn't going to argue.

So he changed the topic.

"This large pool... is it just for storing water?"

Liang Shixian shook his head.

"Not just storing water. It can deliver water directly into people's homes. In the future, no one will need to fetch water from wells or rivers anymore. Turn a valve, and water comes out. That's why it's called 'zilai shui'."

Cao Huachun froze.

"...What?"

Liang Shixian grinned.

"Come, I'll show you."

He led Cao Huachun down the hill, stopping halfway.

There, a strange curved pipe was fixed into place, with a peculiar valve mechanism attached.

Liang Shixian reached out and twisted it.

Instantly—

Water burst out with a rushing sound.

Cao Huachun's eyes widened.

Liang Shixian casually washed his hands under the stream, then, without hesitation, wiped them back and forth on Cao Huachun's robes.

"How is it? Convenient, right?"

Cao Huachun stared at him.

"...It is convenient. But why are you wiping your hands on my clothes?"

Liang Shixian replied with perfect sincerity.

"I don't feel like dirtying my own clothes."

Cao Huachun: "..."

For a moment, he almost lost his temper.

Almost.

But he was famous for being mild-tempered. So he endured it.

Silently.

He reached out, washed his own hands... then turned, intending to wipe them on Liang Shixian in revenge—

But Liang Shixian had already darted several steps away.

Cao Huachun could only turn and wipe his hands on a nearby young eunuch.

The poor kid didn't dare move.

Instantly promoted to human towel.

Cao Huachun coughed, pretending nothing happened.

"Where does this water come from? Why does it keep flowing endlessly when you turn that mechanism?"

Liang Shixian pointed upward.

"See that pipe? It connects directly to the reservoir at the top. Water flows downward. As long as a location is lower than the reservoir, the water can reach it through pipes."

Cao Huachun's eyes lit up.

"I see... I see! This is brilliant!"

Now he understood.

Wansui Hill was the highest point within the capital. If the reservoir was built here, then theoretically, water could be delivered anywhere in the city.

Anywhere.

He slapped his thigh.

"This is incredible! If you connect pipes to the palace, His Majesty and the consorts can have water at any time. Turn the valve, and it flows. Washing hands, bathing... everything becomes effortless."

Liang Shixian nodded.

"Exactly. And not just the palace. We can extend it to the Eight Great Alleys, and then to the homes of officials."

Cao Huachun's eyes suddenly gleamed.

"...And then charge them money."

Liang Shixian smiled.

"Correct. Common people won't pay for this. They'd rather fetch water themselves. But officials? If the palace has it, they must have it too. Otherwise, they'll look uncultured."

He paused, then added calmly:

"So we can charge a premium."

Cao Huachun almost clapped.

"Lord Liang... you are truly a capable minister! A true problem-solver for His Majesty's treasury!"

Liang Shixian waved his hand.

"No, no. This is all Lord He's achievement."

He Fengsheng, who had been standing there mostly as decoration, immediately straightened his posture.

In truth, he hadn't done much.

But if someone insisted on handing him the credit, he wasn't about to refuse.

After all, this was the kind of project that pleased the emperor and impressed the officials.

Perfect political capital.

He Fengsheng stroked his beard and spoke with solemn dignity.

"This official will arrange for a main pipeline immediately. We shall first connect water to the imperial harem... and let His Majesty experience it personally."

Chapter 1387 Eunuch Cao, Just Name Your Price

The six ministers of the Six Ministries hurried into the imperial garden, only to find that everything had already been arranged in advance, with a tea table neatly set in the open air while Zhu Youjian sat calmly beside it, a small stove at his side and a full spread of delicate tea utensils laid out before him as if this were nothing more than an ordinary afternoon tea gathering.

On the surface, it really did look ordinary.

But none of the six ministers believed that for even a second.

Especially the Minister of War, Chen Xinjia, whose entire body was already tense with anticipation as if every nerve had been wound tight like a drawn bowstring, waiting for the emperor to finally bring up

the two rebelling princes and the question of how exactly they should be suppressed, not to mention the unresolved issue of whether Ming forces should continue their campaign toward Shenyang, which remained one of the most critical military decisions on the table.

As the man responsible for military affairs, he was practically drowning in matters that demanded immediate attention.

The moment he reached the tea table, he sharpened his focus, ears stretching metaphorically, mind alert, every thought lined up in readiness as if preparing for battle itself.

And yet, at this very moment, Zhu Youjian was thinking about none of that.

To hell with rebellions.

To hell with strategy.

Right now, all he wanted was one thing, and one thing only, which was money, money, and more money.

He raised a hand and beckoned them over with a casual motion. "Come, my ministers, sit."

The six ministers sat down, each one only daring to place half their weight on the chair, their bodies still rigid, their minds still braced for impact.

Then, before their eyes, Zhu Youjian slowly turned his body, deliberately unhurried, and placed a small kettle beneath a strange curved pipe. With a simple twist of a mechanism, a stream of clear water burst forth with a rushing sound, filling the kettle in an instant.

He filled it completely, then calmly twisted the mechanism shut again, cutting off the flow.

Every movement he made was slow.

Deliberate.

Measured to ensure that not a single detail escaped their notice.

And of course, nothing did.

All six ministers stared, stunned.

Without saying a word, Zhu Youjian placed the kettle onto the stove and began heating the water, his expression perfectly composed as he glanced at them. "What are you staring at, have you never seen..."

He suddenly paused, his line slipping for a brief moment as he lowered his gaze to the booklet resting on his lap, the "Liang Shixian Money-Making Strategy", scanning it quickly before lifting his head again and continuing smoothly, "Have you never seen imperial-grade running water?"

The first to break was Chen Xinjia, who could no longer hold back his curiosity. "Your Majesty, what exactly is this 'imperial-grade running water'? How can water appear the moment you turn that mechanism?"

Zhu Youjian maintained his calm demeanor, his eyes flicking briefly toward the strategy guide again before he spoke in a slow, almost leisurely tone. "This is a royal privilege, running water. Ever since the palace adopted this system, there has been no need to draw water from rivers or wells in such an undignified manner. One only needs to twist this slightly..."

As he spoke, he demonstrated once more, turning the mechanism so water flowed again in a steady stream. "You see, once the valve is opened, the water comes by itself. This device is called a faucet."

The six ministers all wore the same expression, the unmistakable look of men who had just realized how small their world had been.

This was beyond impressive.

Watching the emperor retrieve water with such effortless grace, it felt as if even something as mundane as fetching water had been elevated into an act of refined nobility, further reinforcing the idea that what belonged to the imperial household was fundamentally different from anything used by commoners.

At that very moment, Zhu Youjian's hand slipped slightly, knocking over a teacup so that tea splashed onto his hand. He let out a soft exclamation, then casually turned and placed his hand beneath the flowing water, rinsing it clean with ease before smiling faintly. "With running water, even washing one's hands becomes effortless. There is no longer any need to summon eunuchs or palace maids to bring a basin. A simple turn, and the water is there."

The six ministers could only think one thing.

This is absurdly convenient.

Zhu Youjian then waved his hand lightly. "Now then, let us drink tea and discuss some matters of state."

At once, all six ministers shifted into official mode.

Yet in truth, there was not much to discuss.

The matter of Shenyang remained stalled, with Zhu Youjian still refusing to authorize an attack. Zhu Yujian was somewhere at sea, and Cao Wenzhao's navy had yet to locate him. Over in Henan, Gao Jie had only just arrived, and suppressing the rebellion would take time.

For once, it felt as though there were no urgent crises pressing down on the court.

Only the Minister of Rites spoke at length, discussing the reopening of several ports and the increasing presence of Westerners, while the rest of the conversation drifted without weight.

After a long while, the discussion came to an end, and the ministers rose to take their leave.

Just then, Cao Huachun hurried in from outside, speaking rapidly. "Your Majesty, the Eastern Palace has also been connected to the running water system. Her Highness is extremely pleased and sent this servant to inform you."

Zhu Youjian nodded. "Good."

Cao Huachun continued, his voice intentionally loud enough for everyone present to hear clearly. "The Empress Dowager has also tried it and praised it highly. The ladies all find it most convenient, and the Grand Princess was overjoyed."

Zhu Youjian gave another simple nod. "I understand. Have the Western Palace installed as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Cao Huachun bowed and withdrew.

But the six ministers had already caught onto something important from those few sentences.

This entire matter was under Cao Huachun's control.

They quickly followed him out into the palace corridor, catching up with him before he could leave. "Eunuch Cao, please wait a moment."

Cao Huachun turned back. "What instructions do the ministers have?"

The Minister of Revenue stepped forward. "That imperial faucet system you arranged for His Majesty, what exactly is it?"

Cao Huachun replied smoothly, "It is a highly convenient water supply mechanism."

The Minister of Revenue nodded repeatedly. "It is indeed extremely convenient. After seeing His Majesty use it, I cannot help but admire its practicality. I wonder, is this something reserved exclusively for the imperial household, or may we also partake in its use?"

Cao Huachun chuckled. "It is not restricted. His Majesty has issued no prohibition. Anyone may use it."

One of the ministers lowered his voice slightly. "But we heard His Majesty call it a 'faucet' with the word 'dragon' in it. That would not be appropriate for us to use."

Cao Huachun waved a hand dismissively. "Then simply change the name. Call it a fish head if you like."

That made perfect sense.

The six ministers were immediately delighted. "Then how does one go about acquiring such a system?"

Cao Huachun's smile deepened. "This is not something you can construct on your own. The scale of the project is considerable. You must rely on the imperial waterworks to supply it."

At those words, the ministers understood instantly.

So it was a matter of purchasing it from the imperial household.

Well then, purchasing it was no problem at all.

Being able to use the same things as the emperor carried its own prestige, and although the emperor was often criticized these days, the imperial name still held immense weight.

Besides, they were not lacking in wealth.

If even the emperor could afford such a system, how difficult could it be for them?

They leaned in eagerly.

"Eunuch Cao, what is the price?"

Cao Huachun's eyes lit up as he spoke. "There is an initial installation fee, which includes pipes and the... fish head device. After that, there will be a monthly water supply fee. Let me be clear, the monthly cost will not be low. Your households are large, your consumption will be significant, and our imperial waterworks must continuously supply you. Water must be carried day and night to reservoirs atop Wansui Hill to maintain pressure. Just consider how much labor that requires."

Chen Xinjia simply smiled, completely unfazed. "Eunuch Cao, just name the price."

Chapter 1388 Wealth Must Return Home

The six ministers did not hesitate for even a moment, immediately pulling out a massive sum to cover the installation fee, which included the cost of pipes and the so-called fish-head valves, and of course, none of their residences would ever settle for just a single pipe or a single outlet.

They were high officials, and behind every high official stood an entire clan.

Any one of their mansions in Beijing was absurdly large, the kind of place where a kitchen alone required a dedicated water line, the gardens needed irrigation, guest courtyards demanded their own supply, and the main residence absolutely had to be fully equipped, which meant that aside from the main pipeline drawn down from Wansui Hill, the internal system had to branch into multiple secondary lines, each one fitted with its own fish-head valve.

Every branch meant money.

Every valve meant more money.

And yet none of them flinched.

Each household paid an enormous sum before the installation was even completed, and as for that installation fee, it was, naturally, accepted with great satisfaction by Gao Village, who then handed over a portion as tax to Zhu Youjian, neatly packaged as his imperial cut.

The blue hats and yellow hats of Gao Village worked with terrifying efficiency, and the moment the payments were confirmed, the running water systems were installed almost instantly, as if the entire operation had been waiting for this exact moment.

And then...

It was showtime.

Human beings, since the dawn of civilization, had always shared one universal instinct.

The desire to show off.

There was an old saying that wealth which does not return home is like wearing fine clothes in the dark, unseen and unappreciated, and the meaning behind that saying was painfully clear, because if one became rich and did not display it, then what was even the point of becoming rich in the first place.

Showing off was not optional.

It was a fundamental need.

The very next day after their homes were connected to the running water system, the six ministers began hosting lavish banquets, inviting guests from all circles, and just like Zhu Youjian, they performed demonstrations right in front of their audiences, washing their hands with flowing water, brewing tea with effortless elegance, perfectly replicating the emperor's earlier display.

After all, they had already been shown how to do it.

Now it was simply a matter of executing the performance to perfection.

Their guests were stunned, admiration pouring out without restraint.

Naturally, the questions followed immediately. "How is this done? Where can one have this installed?"

The ministers, of course, answered with carefully measured pride. "This is not something easily obtained. It was originally an imperial-exclusive device, and the valve was once called a dragon-head, a name only His Majesty could use. It is only through imperial grace, and our good relations with Eunuch Cao, that it was renamed as a fish-head valve, allowing us the privilege of installing it."

The moment those words were spoken, the guests understood exactly how the game worked.

Gifts were presented without hesitation.

"Minister, please do us a small favor and speak to Eunuch Cao on our behalf. We would also like to install one."

And just like that...

What had once been imperial-exclusive ceased to be exclusive at all.

Within a short span of time, the entire capital was swept up in the trend, and across the Eight Great Hutongs of Beijing, every household of status rushed to install their own system, to the point where any noble or official who did not have running water would hesitate to even call themselves part of high society.

From there, the wave spread naturally from the political sphere into the world of commerce.

Merchants might not hold high official rank, but their wealth was undeniable, and spending money to align themselves with the consumption patterns of the elite was not merely vanity, it was a strategic necessity, a way to signal status and legitimacy in a rigid social hierarchy.

And once the wealthy merchants had also installed their systems...

The supply capacity of the imperial waterworks reached its limit.

Gao Village simply did not yet possess the infrastructure to match the capabilities of a fully industrialized water system, and the reservoirs atop Wansui Hill could barely sustain the daily needs of the imperial palace and the upper elite, let alone expand further.

For now, this was as far as it could go.

After all, in this era, the common people simply could not afford to pay for water, and until productivity increased and average income rose significantly, there was no realistic path for this system to spread into ordinary households.

After the initial frenzy began to settle...

There were, as always, a handful of individuals whose minds moved faster than the rest, people who could spot opportunity in even the smallest shift of circumstance.

One morning, Liang Shixian had just risen when he was informed that a visitor had arrived.

He stepped out to receive them and saw a man with a lean, scholarly face, the kind that immediately suggested deep learning, and more importantly, the man looked familiar, as if they had crossed paths somewhere in the past.

Liang Shixian's mind began turning rapidly, memories flipping through like pages in a book, until suddenly, it clicked.

Donglin Academy.

Years ago, during literary gatherings, he had formed connections with like-minded scholars, and among them had been this very man.

"Ah, Qian Qianyi, Brother Qian," Liang Shixian said with exaggerated delight. "It has been many years, yet your elegance remains unchanged."

Qian Qianyi, however, was no longer a figure of power.

After being entangled in political struggles, falsely accused, and dragged through factional conflicts, he had ultimately been stripped of his position and sent back home, his career in ruins despite briefly gaining the upper hand with the help of Cao Huachun.

Now, he stood here as a commoner.

He returned the greeting with a polite smile. "I did not expect Lord Liang to still remember me."

Liang Shixian waved it off with practiced ease. "How could I forget a scholar of your caliber?"

Qian Qianyi smiled slightly. "I have not come today for myself, but to introduce a friend. He has made inquiries and learned that the running water system originates from your work, and wishes to speak with you."

As he stepped aside, another man emerged.

"I am Cheng Jiasui," he said with a respectful bow. "A close literary friend of Brother Qian. I have long admired Lord Liang's reputation, and now that I see you in person, it is indeed well deserved."

Liang Shixian returned the courtesy. "Brother Cheng, your name is also well known to me."

What followed was the usual exchange of empty pleasantries, mutual praise, and literary politeness that could have filled volumes, but none of it truly mattered.

Eventually, they arrived at the point.

Cheng Jiasui spoke plainly. "To be honest, my grandfather Cheng Rong and my father Cheng Yanshou were both Huizhou merchants. Our family has long been engaged in trade, and I have inherited the business. At present, I operate in Jiading."

The moment Liang Shixian heard the word merchant, he already understood the purpose of this visit.

As expected, Cheng Jiasui continued, "I have heard that the running water system is your creation, and it is truly an extraordinary innovation. I wonder whether you have any interest in expanding it to the southern regions. If you are willing, I would like to invest capital while you contribute the technology. Together, we could establish waterworks in the prosperous Jiangnan region and secure considerable profits."

Liang Shixian immediately put on a delighted expression. "If Brother Cheng has such intentions, then it could not be better. I have long wished to expand southward, but without local support, it would be difficult to manage operations. If you are willing to take part, then let us proceed."

Chapter 1389 A Tiny Bit of Shock... Worth a Hundred Million

Liang Shixian leaned slightly forward, his tone casual yet probing as he looked at Qian Qianyi and Cheng Jiasui. "Lately I have been hearing that things are not exactly peaceful in the Jiangnan region. It seems that Zhu Yujian, who had long been in hiding, has suddenly resurfaced, and Zheng Zhilong has declared his support for him. With such a situation unfolding, you two still have the mind to discuss waterworks expansion, are you not concerned that a war might break out and reduce everything to ruin?"

Cheng Jiasui cupped his hands politely, his expression calm, almost dismissive. "Such events have indeed occurred, but in my view, they are not of great consequence, and they will not interfere with our plans to establish waterworks."

Liang Shixian raised an eyebrow deliberately. "Oh? And why is that?"

Qian Qianyi lowered his voice slightly, his tone carrying the quiet confidence of someone who believed he had read the situation correctly. "Because it will not escalate. The moment Zheng Zhilong declared his support, he retreated to the sea and vanished without making any real move. That alone tells you everything. He fears the might of the imperial army."

Liang Shixian nodded as if considering the point, then added casually, "I have also heard that merchants in Hangzhou have contributed funds to support Zhu Yujian and Zheng Zhilong."

Qian Qianyi gave a faint smile. "That is true, but it will not amount to much. Recently, Cao Wenzhao has already moved south. There is no way Zheng Zhilong can stand against him. It is only a matter of time before he is defeated at sea. This will not affect business in Jiangnan in the slightest."

Hearing this, Liang Shixian finally understood.

So this was how the Jiangnan elites saw the situation.

As someone already aligned with the Dao Xuan Tianzun system, he naturally believed Gao Village would prevail, yet Jiangnan was still outside the sphere of influence, and their perspective, dismissive and confident in the Ming court, was precisely what made them valuable to observe.

To them, the empire still stood firm.

Just as they had once dismissed the northern threat as a minor irritation, they now viewed the rise of Crowd Governance in exactly the same way, as nothing more than a passing disturbance that could never truly shake the foundation of imperial rule.

Liang Shixian leaned in slightly. "Then tell me, Brother Qian, what do you think of this idea of Crowd Governance?"

Qian Qianyi chuckled softly but gave no answer.

He had already experienced the brutality of political tides once before, and that experience had taught him caution. No matter what thoughts he held, he would not reveal them so easily, especially not to someone he had only just reconnected with after years apart.

Only after he and Cheng Jiasui left Liang's residence and walked some distance away did he finally speak again in a lowered voice. "Brother Cheng, when Lord Liang asked about Crowd Governance earlier, I noticed you hesitated. It seemed you had something to say but held back."

Cheng Jiasui nodded. "I did. But we met him only today, and speaking too freely could bring unnecessary danger."

Qian Qianyi smiled knowingly. "I thought the same."

They exchanged a glance, an unspoken understanding passing between them, before Cheng Jiasui continued. "Still, if we speak frankly, I believe Crowd Governance must be better than single-man rule, at least for merchants like us. If more people are involved in governing, then sooner or later, someone will speak on behalf of commerce. Merchants have long wanted a voice in court, and those in Hangzhou likely supported Zhu Yujian for precisely this reason."

Qian Qianyi nodded slowly. "If such a system truly takes shape, then it will become a contest of influence among the great families within the court."

Cheng Jiasui smiled faintly. "And the merchants are not without power."

Their voices faded as they walked further away.

Back in the residence, Liang Shixian stepped into a quiet room and stood before a portrait of Dao Xuan Tianzun. He bowed deeply, lit incense, and spoke in a respectful tone. "Tianzun, the people of Jiangnan still do not take our actions seriously. They believe the court will undoubtedly prevail."

He had not expected a response.

But then, the painted eyes shifted.

The paper at the mouth of the portrait began to move, and a voice emerged.

It was Li Daoxuan.

"This is only natural. The prestige of the Ming dynasty has been built over nearly three centuries. It will not crumble so easily."

Liang Shixian's face lit up with excitement. "Tianzun has arrived."

Li Daoxuan's voice carried a hint of amusement. "If you want them to truly believe that change has begun, then they will need... a little more shock."

He paused briefly.

"Just a tiny bit."

"And it is coming very soon."

The shock arrived the very next day.

News came from Henan.

Gao Jie had returned from Liaodong and moved to suppress the rebellion led by Zhu Youzhong, who had rallied forces under the banner of Crowd Governance.

The two sides clashed outside Luoyang.

What followed stunned everyone.

The Crowd Governance faction fought with fierce morale and unwavering determination, and against all expectations, they defeated Gao Jie's forces completely. Gao Jie himself fled with only a dozen cavalry into the mountains, too afraid to return and report to the court, while nearly all of his troops were captured and ultimately surrendered, joining the opposing side.

When this news reached the capital, it sent shockwaves through both court and common society.

Everyone received that "tiny bit" of shock.

The people of Beijing began to whisper among themselves. "Have you heard? The Crowd Governance faction actually defeated Gao Jie."

"I heard they are mostly young men, full of energy and determination."

"Well, Gao Jie's troops were mostly former bandits anyway, their combat strength was probably weak to begin with."

"Seems like sending such troops to suppress a prince was never going to work. Only proper imperial generals can handle something like this."

Inside the imperial study, Zhu Youjian stared at the report, his emotions rising and falling like a man strapped to a falling machine.

"I knew it," he snapped, his voice filled with frustration. "I knew Gao Jie was unreliable. Not long ago, I personally encouraged him at the city gates, and the moment he left, he went off to harass women in brothels. A surrendered bandit is still a bandit. And now he cannot even defeat Zhu Youzhong."

Beside him, Cao Huachun spoke cautiously. "Your Majesty, Zhu Youzhong is supported by the Hunan Governor Fan Shangjing. While Zhu Youzhong himself may lack ability, Fan Shangjing is a capable administrator and should not be underestimated."

Zhu Youjian took several deep breaths, forcing himself to calm down. "Then who should be sent next to suppress them?"

Cao Huachun wisely remained silent, stepping back slightly, fully aware that offering suggestions in such moments was a dangerous game.

Zhu Youjian began pacing, then pulled out a map, studying the military jurisdictions carefully until his finger suddenly stopped at a point. "Hedong Circuit in Shanxi... it is close to Luoyang. Crossing the Yellow River would allow a direct strike south."

He frowned slightly. "The commander there... I seem to recall..."

He attempted to search his memory, imitating Liang Shixian's method, but his thoughts collapsed almost immediately into confusion.

In the end, he had no choice but to call out.

"Summon the Minister of War."

When Chen Xinjia arrived, Zhu Youjian asked directly.

"Who commands Hedong?"

Chapter 1390 Before Painting the World, Paint the Beauty First

Chen Xinjia straightened slightly before answering, his tone carrying a hint of forced confidence. "The commander of Hedong Circuit is named Xing Honglang. She was once a surrendered bandit, but unlike the others, her discipline is strict and her record in battle is consistently outstanding. Furthermore, she is not merely a military officer, she also understands trade and logistics, which is why she was promoted to the position of Military Defense Circuit official."

Zhu Youjian blinked, clearly caught off guard. "Is that not a civil post? And yet they appointed a surrendered bandit... and a woman at that?"

He waved the thought away almost immediately, as if realizing it was irrelevant. "Never mind that. What matters is whether she can defeat Zhu Youzhong."

Chen Xinjia quickly replied, "Since her surrender, she has not suffered a single defeat. Every campaign she has led has ended in decisive victory. If she takes the field, she should be able to capture Zhu Youzhong in one battle."

Zhu Youjian's expression brightened. "Excellent. Then have her march on Luoyang immediately."

Chen Xinjia hesitated. "However... Xing Honglang is currently stationed at Dalinghe City, preparing for operations against Shenyang. If we withdraw her now, that front will be weakened."

Zhu Youjian frowned without hesitation. "At a time like this, who cares about Shenyang? Is it more important than Luoyang? Recall her at once. Immediately."

Chen Xinjia felt that something about this constant redeployment of frontline forces was... not quite right, but he could not openly oppose an imperial command, and given the urgency of Luoyang, he had no choice but to comply.

Thus, a fast rider was dispatched, carrying the order toward Dalinghe City.

Several days later, Xing Honglang returned from Liaodong.

Just like Gao Jie before her, she would pass through the capital on her way south, but unlike Gao Jie's earlier passage, this time the reception was far more grand.

A large number of officials gathered at the city gates, and Zhu Youjian once again came in person to encourage a general before departure, standing at the eastern gate and gazing into the distance where a cloud of dust marked the approaching army.

"She should be arriving soon, correct?" he asked.

Chen Xinjia nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. That dust is from her marching troops."

Zhu Youjian narrowed his eyes slightly. "I have heard of a skill called reading the dust, where one can estimate troop numbers from a single glance. As Minister of War, you must possess such ability. Tell me, how many troops does she command?"

Chen Xinjia froze.

He absolutely did not possess such a skill.

But at this point, there was no way to admit it.

His mind raced, calculating rapidly, recalling that Shanxi had suffered years of drought, that taxation had been insufficient, that any force stationed there would likely be underfunded, and that standard garrison troops often existed only on paper.

With that in mind, he made his guess.

"Your Majesty, from what I can observe, Xing Honglang commands approximately fifteen hundred troops."

Zhu Youjian frowned slightly.

Too few.

Could such a force really suppress Zhu Youzhong?

But he quickly suppressed the doubt, thinking that regardless of the number, these were still troops he desperately needed, and more importantly, this was a moment to inspire loyalty.

His thoughts shifted.

If he could compose a poem for her, personally written by the emperor himself, it would surely be seen as the highest honor, enough to secure her absolute dedication.

Yes.

A poem.

At that very moment, something remarkable happened.

His desire to suppress the rebellion, combined with the limited yet suddenly surging inspiration within him, fused into a rare moment of clarity, and lines of poetry began to flow through his mind like a sudden spring.

He turned sharply. "Bring me writing tools."

Wang Cheng'en immediately stepped forward, presenting brush, ink, paper, and inkstone.

Zhu Youjian lifted the brush and wrote in a swift, confident motion:

"Wielding broom and dustpan to sweep away the northern foes,

Cheers rising like thunder across the land.

When future generations look upon the halls of merit,

Let the painted scroll begin with a beauty's portrait."

When he finished, he read it again and felt a surge of satisfaction.

He was convinced.

He was not only a capable ruler.

He was also a poet of the highest order.

Around him, eunuchs and ministers immediately echoed in agreement. "Your Majesty's poetry is truly excellent. When General Xing receives this, she will surely be deeply moved."

Zhu Youjian nodded, pleased.

Soon, Xing Honglang's army arrived.

As they drew closer, Zhu Youjian took a careful look and suddenly felt something was off.

Had Chen Xinjia not said there were fifteen hundred troops?

But before him now stood no fewer than five thousand.

He turned sharply. "Minister Chen, is there something wrong with your so-called dust-reading skill?"

Chen Xinjia stammered, unable to respond.

Zhu Youjian immediately understood.

Utter nonsense.

He shot him a cold glare. "We will settle this later."

Chen Xinjia fell silent.

Zhu Youjian quickly adjusted his expression, forcing himself into a gentler demeanor, reminding himself that he was about to receive a female general, that he had just written a poem praising her as a beauty, and that he absolutely could not appear harsh.

He forced a smile.

At that moment, Xing Honglang arrived.

Clad in heavy armor, she dismounted in one fluid motion, stepped forward, and removed her helmet.

Zhu Youjian stared.

Everyone stared.

Silence.

There was, perhaps, only one person in the world who would consider Xing Honglang a beauty, and that person was Gao Chuwu.

For everyone else, that concept simply did not exist.

In a flash, Zhu Youjian spun around, grabbed the poem he had just written, tore off the final three words, and shoved them straight into Chen Xinjia's mouth. "Eat it."

Chen Xinjia could only mumble helplessly.

Xing Honglang stepped forward and cupped her fists. "This general greets Your Majesty."

All the gentle and inspiring words Zhu Youjian had prepared vanished instantly, replaced by a stiff, expressionless face. "General Xing, proceed to Luoyang at once and suppress Zhu Youzhong."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As she turned, her gaze briefly landed on the torn paper behind him. "Your Majesty, that poem..."

Zhu Youjian wiped a trace of sweat from his forehead. "That... was written for the Shizhu female general, Qin Liangyu. Yes, that is correct."

Xing Honglang nodded. "General Qin will surely be pleased."

With that, she turned, mounted her horse in one clean motion, her movements sharp and commanding, carrying a kind of raw, unrefined power.

Unfortunately...

Zhu Youjian did not appreciate that kind of beauty.

Meanwhile, at the edge of the crowd, a group of courtesans began shouting excitedly.

"Big sister is so cool!"

"Step on me, sister!"

Xing Honglang, unlike Gao Jie, showed no interest in such attention. Without even sparing them a glance, she flicked her whip and rode off toward the southwest, her figure disappearing into the distance with cold, unwavering resolve.