

## Great Ming 1391

### Chapter 1391 Keeping a Low Profile Is the True Way

At the same time, in Taiyuan, Shanxi.

Inside the grand hall of the Jin Prince's residence, Zhu Shenxuan, the thirteenth-generation Prince of Jin, was receiving an important guest, and judging from the way the servants stood straighter than usual and even the tea seemed to be poured more carefully, this was clearly not just any casual visit.

The guest sitting across from him was Wu Shen, a man whose name had, over the past few years, spread across Shanxi like wildfire, not the destructive kind, but the kind that brings warmth, light, and a very uncomfortable level of comparison for everyone else.

A few years ago, Shanxi had been a wasteland gnawed apart by drought, the kind of place where even hope felt like an expensive luxury, yet somehow, under Wu Shen's management and with a relentless rain of silver that could only be described as violent economic intervention, the province had begun to breathe again.

Industries restarted, markets reopened, people stopped looking at each other like competitors for survival, and for a brief moment, it almost felt like the place had been patched back together by sheer force of will and money.

Of course, the smarter landowners and gentry had not been impressed so easily.

They had watched quietly from the sidelines, arms folded, calculating in their heads with the cold precision of people who had seen too many short-lived miracles, wondering how long one million taels could possibly last if you were throwing it around like Wu Shen did, hiring labor, funding reconstruction, feeding mouths, stimulating trade, all at once.

It should have collapsed.

It should have run dry.

It should have turned into a grand, embarrassing failure.

Instead, the one million taels not only failed to disappear, it multiplied.

Wu Shen went from "Wu the Million" to "Wu the Ten Million," and if the trend continued, nobody doubted he would eventually become something even more ridiculous.

Only then did the gentry realize that Wu Shen was not fighting alone.

There was something behind him.

Something that occasionally descended, attached itself to that gold-thread embroidery on his chest like a spirit borrowing a vessel, and then casually dropped down "heavenly goods" as if material abundance itself had decided to take sides.

After that realization, resistance became a joke.

The Jin Prince and the local elites did what any sensible people would do when confronted with a force they could neither resist nor fully understand.

They knelt.

They hugged the thickest thigh they could find.

And that thigh belonged to Dao Xuan Tianzun.

That was years ago.

Now, Zhu Shenxuan had long since become a devout believer, so devout that he had even returned most of his lands to the people at low prices, keeping only a handful of shops in Taiyuan for himself, living a quiet, cautious life with one very clear guiding principle.

Stay low.

Stay very low.

Be so low that history itself forgets you exist.

Across from him, Wu Shen put down his teacup and spoke calmly, but with a tone that carried unmistakable intent.

"Your Highness, this is not the time to lie flat anymore. You need to step forward."

The Jin Prince immediately looked like a rabbit that had just heard the word "stew."

"I do not dare."

Wu Shen blinked once, then leaned forward slightly.

"What is there to not dare? Tianzun allows rebellion. Look at Zhu Yujian and Zhu Youzhong, both have already responded to the call and risen. You, as the Prince of Jin, how can you fall behind?"

Zhu Shenxuan shook his head so hard it looked like it might detach from his body.

"I am just a useless prince. All I want is to drift through life quietly. Do you know how many generations the Jin lineage has lasted? Thirteen. Since the third-generation prince, Zhu Jihuang, got caught in a rebellion and lost everything, our family learned a lesson that has lasted ten generations."

He raised a finger, as if delivering a profound truth.

"Low profile is king. Only by staying low can the title survive. Otherwise, one wrong step, and the entire line gets erased."

Wu Shen stared at him for a long moment, then let out a breath that was half sigh, half suppressed laughter.

"The times have changed. Tianzun said you can rebel, so just rebel. You will not lose your title, and you will not die."

Zhu Shenxuan shook his head again, even more firmly.

"It is not that I disobey Tianzun. It is precisely because I respect Tianzun that I refuse. Tianzun has clearly said that no one will be forced to do anything."

That was the core difference.

Dao Xuan Tianzun did not command like a traditional ruler.

He did not coerce.

He did not punish dissent.

He respected choice.

Most people willingly acted, but for the rare few who chose not to, there would be no retaliation, no hidden knives, no quiet retribution.

That, more than anything else, made him fundamentally different from a system built on single-man rule.

Wu Shen rubbed his forehead.

"Fine. Then we have a problem. The emperor has already ordered Xing Honglang to attack Luoyang, and the village committee believes the best move right now is to create chaos in Shanxi, forcing her to turn back. The ideal candidate for rebellion... is you."

Zhu Shenxuan almost jumped out of his chair.

"No. Absolutely not. Please spare me. I only want to remain low, low, and even lower. Ideally, I would prefer if the history books never mention me at all."

Wu Shen paused, then tried a different angle.

"Do you have a son? Let him do it. I will publicly support him, declare him the figurehead, and once Xing Honglang turns back to suppress the rebellion, the imperial authority will be torn apart even further."

Zhu Shenxuan looked at him with genuine confusion.

"My son is also part of the Jin lineage. He was raised with the same philosophy. You did not even know whether I had a son or not, that is how low-profile he is. And now you want him to rebel?"

Wu Shen opened his mouth.

Closed it again.

For a brief moment, logic itself seemed to betray him.

"...That makes an uncomfortable amount of sense."

He sighed.

"Then what, I go find the Prince of Dai or the Prince of Shen? Their influence is not enough."

Zhu Shenxuan suddenly leaned forward, eyes lighting up slightly, as if he had just remembered something important.

"There is someone."

Wu Shen raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Zhu Shenxuan spoke slowly, almost reverently.

"A man settled in Puzhou. His reputation is immense. Everyone knows his story. It is tragic, inspiring, unforgettable. If he raises the banner, the people of Shanxi will follow him without hesitation."

Wu Shen frowned.

"Someone that famous, and I do not know him?"

Zhu Shenxuan's expression turned solemn.

"Puzhou's Chen Qianhu."

Wu Shen froze.

"..."

Zhu Shenxuan suddenly burst into song, voice filled with emotional sincerity.

"I may be ugly, but I am gentle."

Wu Shen's expression collapsed completely.

"...You have got to be kidding me."

Zhu Shenxuan's eyes even grew misty.

"Even I want to follow him. By the way, do you have his autograph? I am willing to pay a high price."

Wu Shen stood up.

Turned around.

And ran.

"I do not have it. Get lost."

He shouted while running, though technically he was the one leaving.

Outside the residence, he stopped, stood still for a long moment, then finally pulled out a brush and wrote a letter.

A few days later.

Chen Qianhu returned to Puzhou overnight, bringing with him six hundred frontier soldiers.

He raised his banner.

"The emperor is misguided, single-man rule will lead to ruin. I will set things right and contribute my part to governing the realm."

The reaction was immediate.

Explosive.

The people of Shanxi surged toward him like a tide.

Because he was Chen Qianhu.

The man everyone once misunderstood.

The man who looked cold but carried burning warmth inside.

The man people felt they owed.

"Chen Qianhu is a good man!"

"Chen Qianhu is right!"

"If nobles can rule, why not a so-called villain actor?"

"We support Chen Qianhu!"

Voices rose, overlapping, chaotic, passionate.

Behind the scenes, Wu Shen stepped forward and announced a massive financial backing, one that would make any traditional army envious.

The Prince of Dai declared support.

The Prince of Shen declared support.

And somewhere in the background, the ever-consistent Zhu Shenxuan remained perfectly, professionally invisible, only mentioning in passing that he was still interested in acquiring Chen Qianhu's autograph.

Meanwhile, on the road to Luoyang, Xing Honglang received the news.

She did not hesitate.

"Forget Zhu Youzhong. We are not suppressing that rebellion anymore. Turn back to Shanxi. Support Chen Qianhu."

Fun Facts: Why Chinese Culture Loves Strategy & Schemes:

1. It all starts with The Art of War

Long before modern strategy books existed, China already had The Art of War by Sun Tzu, a text that basically says:

"The best victory is the one you win without fighting."

This idea shaped an entire mindset where outsmarting someone is more admirable than overpowering them.

2. Strategy is entertainment, not just survival

In China, strategy isn't just for war, it's literally a form of daily entertainment.

Games like Go are insanely popular, and unlike chess, Go is less about killing pieces and more about long-term positioning, influence, and subtle control.

That reflects how people think:

Not "how do I win now?"

But "how do I shape the situation so winning becomes inevitable?"

### 3. 2000+ years of political chess

China's long imperial history means constant power struggles, court intrigue, and survival under authority.

From eras like the Warring States period, people learned that:

Being strong is risky

Being smart is safer

Being predictable is deadly

So naturally, scheming became a survival skill.

### 4. The legendary "36 Stratagems"

There's even a whole collection called Thirty-Six Stratagems, basically a handbook of clever tricks like:

"Hide a knife behind a smile"

"Loot a burning house"

"Make a sound in the east, strike in the west"

These aren't just military ideas, they show up in business, politics, and even everyday life.

5. Confucianism encourages subtle thinking

Philosophies like Confucianism emphasize harmony, hierarchy, and indirect communication.

Instead of saying things directly, people often:

Hint

Suggest

Maneuver socially

Which naturally builds a culture of reading between the lines and thinking several steps ahead.

6. Outsmarting = high IQ flex

In many Chinese stories, the hero is not the strongest fighter, but the smartest one.

Characters like Zhuge Liang became iconic not because of brute force, but because of:

Psychological warfare

Long-term planning

Turning weak positions into winning ones

So culturally, being strategic is seen as cool, elegant, and superior.

7. "Face" culture makes direct conflict risky

The concept of "face" (reputation and dignity) means people often avoid open confrontation.

Instead of direct clashes, they prefer:

Indirect moves

Behind-the-scenes influence

Quiet repositioning

Which again reinforces a scheme-first, conflict-later mindset.

Chapter 1392 Remove Whoever Wrote This

Inside the imperial study of the capital, Zhu Youjian stared at the report from Shanxi with a face that kept changing like a man riding a drop tower.

One moment up, the next moment straight down.

He had barely recovered from the last disaster when another one came crashing in right after it, as if the heavens had personally decided that his day was not going to be peaceful.

Just a short while ago, he had been eagerly waiting for Xing Honglang to return and crush Zhu Youzhong into dust, imagining a clean and satisfying victory that would restore some dignity to the throne.

Yet in the blink of an eye, that same Xing Honglang had turned around and pledged support to another rebel.

Zhu Youjian frowned so hard his eyebrows nearly tied themselves into a knot.

"What kind of creature is this Chen Qianhu," he muttered, pacing slowly. "Why does he call himself that. Where is his real name. Is he hiding it on purpose. Is Chen Qianhu just a title, like Chuang Wang or Zijing Liang. Another bandit king in disguise?"

Beside him, Minister of War Chen Xinjia felt his scalp tightening, but there was no escape from duty, so he forced himself to step forward and speak.

"Your Majesty, please calm your anger. This time is actually better than before. At least it is not a prince rebelling. It is just some unknown petty criminal. There is no need to take it too seriously."

Zhu Youjian turned his head slowly, his face dark as storm clouds gathering over a battlefield.

"Not a prince," he said, voice low. "And yet he has the support of the Prince of Dai and the Prince of Shen. He also has Wu Shen backing him. Even Xing Honglang, who just came back from Liaodong, has declared for him. And you tell me he is nothing?"

His gaze sharpened.

"This man is anything but simple. Who exactly is he?"

Chen Xinjia swallowed and quickly replied, "The Jinyiwei have already gathered intelligence through multiple channels. We have a profile ready. Would Your Majesty like to see it?"

"Bring it here. Immediately."

The document was handed over with both hands.

Zhu Youjian unfolded it and began reading.

At first, everything seemed ordinary enough.

A frontier soldier from Guyuan. Back in the early Chongzhen years he was only a Baihu, a minor officer. He had once followed a Qianhu named Bei Shuilang in rebellion, marching all the way from Guyuan toward Xi'an in an attempt to demand unpaid wages.

When they reached Chengcheng County, they were defeated by Magistrate Liang Shixian and Inspector Fang Wushang. Bei Shuilang was executed on the spot, while the remaining forces surrendered under a man named Nan Feng.

Later, Nan Feng was appointed as a garrison commander in Puzhou, and Chen rose alongside him, becoming a Qianhu and settling there.

Zhu Youjian nodded slightly.

So far, nothing unusual.

Then he flipped to the final page.

And saw the portrait.

"Pffft!"

The sound burst out of him before he could stop it.

His fragile imperial heart took a direct hit, like the moment in the tale of Jing Ke when the map was fully unrolled and the dagger suddenly appeared, except this time the blade went straight into his chest and twisted.

He pointed at the paper with a trembling finger.

"Why does this man look so ferocious," he demanded. "Does he eat five people a day?"

Chen Xinjia coughed awkwardly.

"Five might not be enough, Your Majesty. Judging by his appearance, ten would be more reasonable."

Zhu Youjian felt a cold weight settle in his stomach.

"This is a demon king reborn. How is one supposed to fight something like this?"

Then his eyes shifted slightly downward.

There was a small line of text beneath the portrait.

He leaned closer and read it carefully.

"He is ugly, but he is gentle. His gaze is cold, his heart burns with passion."

Silence filled the room.

Chen Xinjia blinked. "Your Majesty, why have you suddenly gone quiet?"

Zhu Youjian slowly lowered the paper, his face expressionless.

"Find the Jinyiwei who wrote this," he said. "And give him ten strokes."

Chen Xinjia froze. "...Understood."

The unfortunate agent was beaten, but the problem remained.

Zhu Youjian pressed his temples, clearly irritated.

"Even Wu Shen has sided with this rebel. Which army do I even send now to deal with Chen Qianhu?"

Chen Xinjia took a breath before answering.

"At this point, we may have no choice but to redeploy the Xuan-Da frontier troops."

Zhu Youjian raised his head.

"The Xuan-Da troops? You mean Yang Guozhu from Xuanfu and Wang Pu from Datong?"

Chen Xinjia nodded.

"Chen Qianhu comes from the frontier army. Only frontier troops can handle him. The regular garrison soldiers stand no chance."

Zhu Youjian thought for a moment, then gave a firm nod.

"That makes sense. Issue the order immediately. Yang Guozhu and Wang Pu are to move to Shanxi and suppress the rebellion."

The words had barely left his mouth when something felt off.

He paused.

Why does it feel like I keep pulling troops out of Liaodong again and again.

How many soldiers did we even station there in the first place.

He turned sharply.

"How many troops do we actually have in Liaodong?"

Chen Xinjia answered honestly.

"A great many. Almost all elite forces from across the country were concentrated there. That was how we managed to take Dalinhe City. At that time, it was also the best chance to attack Shenyang. With the full strength of the nation, we could have crushed the Jianzhou threat in one decisive strike."

Zhu Youjian inhaled sharply.

In that instant, realization hit him like a sudden chill.

He had missed the opportunity.

The thought crawled under his skin, making his whole body feel uncomfortable.

He knew he had made a mistake.

But he refused to admit it.

People like him, raised in insecurity, sensitive and proud, often found it hardest to admit fault. Even when they knew they were wrong, they would argue, resist, and cling stubbornly to their stance. Push them too hard, and they might even lash out.

It was an old pattern.

And unfortunately, Zhu Youjian fit it perfectly.

Chen Xinjia hesitated before speaking again.

"Your Majesty, perhaps we should reconsider our strategy and focus on attacking..."

Before he could finish, Zhu Youjian cut him off sharply.

"There may have been many troops in Liaodong before, but we have already recalled quite a number. What remains is no longer enough to attack Shenyang. Issue the order. Yang Guozhu and Wang Pu are to return and suppress Chen Qianhu."

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

Chen Xinjia withdrew.

At the doorway, he crossed paths with Cao Huachun. The two men exchanged a glance, and in that brief moment, both clearly understood the same thing.

The emperor had made a mistake.

Neither of them said a word.

They simply walked past each other.

Back at the Six Ministries, the officials gathered around Chen Xinjia with curious expressions. One assistant minister leaned closer and asked in a low voice,

"My lord, what did His Majesty discuss with you?"

Chen Xinjia let out a long sigh.

"He has ordered Yang Guozhu and Wang Pu to return to Shanxi for suppression."

A quiet murmur spread.

No one openly commented, yet the atmosphere itself seemed to speak.

The court was beginning to lose its balance.

At the same time, far away in Xi'an, at the bustling marketplace.

Zhu Cunji and Hong Chengchou sat before a massive "immortal mirror," watching the latest Gao Family broadcast.

On the screen, Chen Qianhu appeared in full view, the camera focused directly on his face.

The audience still found him terrifying at first glance, but for some reason, the floating label above him that read "gentle" softened the impact, making him oddly less frightening.

The reporter smiled politely.

"Commander Chen, you have recently raised the banner of rebellion and declared your intention to participate in governing the country. May I ask what led you to this decision?"

Chen Qianhu looked straight into the camera, his expression steady.

"When the nation rises or falls, every man bears responsibility. If that is true, then I also bear responsibility. I simply wish to do my part in governing the country. If everyone shares this mindset, then we will have true collective governance."

He paused for a moment, then added quietly,

"And that is the only way forward."

Chapter 1393 No Dentures

The reporter smiled, clearly amused but still professional.

"Wanting to help govern the country is admirable," she said, tilting her head slightly. "But from what we know, you have not received much formal education, and you may not fully understand how to run a state. So how do you plan to deal with that?"

Chen Qianhu faced the camera, then slowly broke into a grin.

It was a terrifying grin.

The kind that could make a child cry and a grown man reconsider his life choices.

"I am not fighting alone," he said. "I represent the common people of Shanxi. If the people have demands, they can tell me. I will bring those demands forward and discuss them with others. We solve things together. That is what collective governance means."

The reporter blinked, clearly intrigued.

"Oh? That is quite an interesting idea. So you see yourself as a representative of the people of Shanxi?"

Chen Qianhu nodded.

"The common people need someone to speak for them."

In front of countless screens, the crowd watching erupted into applause.

"Well said!"

"That is right, I have plenty of things I want to say too, but I never knew who to tell."

"Can Chen Qianhu really pass our voices upward?"

"A representative of the people!"

The marketplace in Xi'an instantly turned into a sea of noise and excitement.

Voices rose and overlapped, full of hope, curiosity, and a kind of chaotic enthusiasm that only common folk could produce.

Then suddenly, someone shouted from the crowd.

"Hey, if Chen Qianhu can speak for the people of Shanxi, what about us in Shaanxi?"

The noise paused for half a breath.

Then another voice followed.

"That is right, we do not have anyone speaking for us!"

In that moment, countless eyes turned upward, all focusing on a certain second-floor balcony that had long been known as the "premium TV viewing spot."

Standing there was Zhu Cunji.

Beside him, Hong Chengchou nudged him with an elbow.

"They are all looking at you," he said with a faint smile.

"Looking at me?" Zhu Cunji pointed at his own nose, genuinely confused. "What for?"

Hong Chengchou chuckled.

"They are waiting for you to step out and become their representative."

Zhu Cunji froze for a second, then suddenly understood.

He waved his hand dismissively.

"Stop joking. I do not have time for this nonsense. Once all this chaos settles down and the world becomes peaceful, I am going traveling. I plan to disappear so thoroughly that nobody will be able to find me."

Hong Chengchou shook his head.

"There is no one more suitable than you. You are the number one prince under heaven. If you step forward, the people will accept you. In all of Shaanxi, no one else has your level of prestige."

Zhu Cunji snorted.

"The people do not respect me. They have always seen me as a useless prince. I know that perfectly well."

Hong Chengchou raised an eyebrow.

"That may have been true in the past. But ever since you became a railway tycoon, things have changed."

That statement hit the mark.

Zhu Cunji had once indeed been nothing more than a useless prince in the eyes of the public, but after building railways and developing tourist regions, he had quietly inserted himself into the lifeblood of everyday life.

Railways brought convenience.

Tourism brought income.

And once a man begins to improve the lives of the people, respect follows naturally.

His reputation among the common folk had already risen to unprecedented heights.

Hong Chengchou leaned closer.

"Rebel," he said softly. "If you do it now, you are simply answering the call of Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Zhu Cunji hesitated.

"But what about my travel plans?"

"Finish the rebellion, restore peace, and then travel with authority," Hong Chengchou replied. "No one will dare stop you."

Zhu Cunji rubbed his chin.

"Well... when you put it like that, it does make sense."

His eyes lit up.

"Fine. Then I will rebel."

In the next instant, he leaped to his feet and shouted down at the crowd below.

"Listen up! I, Zhu Cunji, heir of the Qin Prince and number one fief under heaven, am rebelling today! Our slogan is..."

He drew in a deep breath, ready to shout something grand like overthrowing a foolish ruler and replacing solitary rule with collective governance.

At that exact moment, his consort, sitting nearby, casually said to a maid,

"My greatest wish is to have no cavities."

Zhu Cunji's brain misfired.

Completely.

Without thinking, he roared,

"No cavities!"

The palace guards behind him did not dare question their lord.

They immediately echoed at full volume.

"Our slogan is no cavities!"

The crowd below froze.

For a brief moment, confusion spread like a ripple.

Then someone scratched their head.

"Wait... what is wrong with him?"

Another person suddenly slapped his thigh.

"No, no, this makes sense. The Qin heir has always been like this. He loves messing around. Even his rebellion has to follow his unique style."

That explanation spread instantly.

And somehow, everyone accepted it.

"If we are following him, then we follow all the way!"

The crowd erupted again.

"Our slogan is no cavities!"

"We fight for no cavities!"

"We are rebelling!"

...

Inside the imperial study in the capital.

"Your Majesty, Your Majesty, disaster!"

Chen Xinjia stumbled in, nearly tripping over his own robes.

"The Qin Prince's residence has rebelled! They have rebelled!"

Zhu Youjian nearly jumped out of his seat.

"What did you just say?"

Chen Xinjia was panting.

"The heir of the Qin Prince, Zhu Cunji... has raised the banner of rebellion."

Zhu Youjian exploded with anger.

"This is outrageous! I have treated the Qin Prince's household well. I have treated him well! When he seized fertilizer from Wu Shen and Shi Kefa and even deployed death warriors, behavior that bordered

on rebellion, I did not punish him severely. I only fined him fifty thousand taels for disaster relief. How dare he rebel against me? What have I ever done to wrong him?"

Chen Xinjia shrank back, not daring to respond.

Zhu Youjian raged for a long while before finally calming down enough to ask,

"Then what reason does he give for his rebellion? Is he also accusing me of being a foolish ruler who ruined the country? Is he saying I missed the critical opportunity?"

Chen Xinjia shook his head rapidly.

"No, not that."

Zhu Youjian took a deep breath, bracing himself.

"Then tell me clearly. I want to hear what kind of reason could possibly justify rebellion."

Chen Xinjia lowered his head.

"He... he says it is... for no cavities."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

Cao Huachun said nothing.

Wang Cheng'en said nothing.

Every eunuch and maid present said nothing.

Time seemed to stop.

After what felt like an eternity, Chen Xinjia cautiously spoke again.

"Your Majesty... which army should we send to suppress this rebellion?"

Zhu Youjian rolled his eyes.

"A man who rebels for no cavities. Do you really think we need to send an army for that?"

Chen Xinjia hesitated.

"Well... about that..."

Zhu Youjian waved his hand impatiently.

"I refuse to believe anyone would follow such nonsense. This is nothing but a farce. Give it some time and the local gentry in Shaanxi will deal with him and deliver him to me themselves."

For once, Chen Xinjia felt that the emperor sounded surprisingly reasonable.

Almost like a wise ruler.

Then, just as the thought settled, another young eunuch rushed in from outside.

"Report!"

"The Prince of Rui in Hanzhong, Zhu Changhao, has declared support for Zhu Cunji!"

"The long-missing Hong Chengchou has reappeared in Xi'an and is backing Zhu Cunji!"

"The frontier troops in Guyuan, Yinchuan, and Yansui have declared their support!"

"Over three hundred thousand surrendered bandits from Huanglong Mountain have joined him!"

Zhu Youjian stared blankly.

Then he asked, in complete disbelief,

"Do they all want... no cavities that badly?"

Chapter 1394: Rebels Everywhere

Capital City, Imperial Study.

If it had only been Zhu Cunji shouting about fighting for "no cavities," Zhu Youjian would not even have bothered to blink, because that kind of nonsense barely qualified as a joke, let alone a rebellion, but once Prince Rui Zhu Changhao, Hong Chengchou, and the frontier armies from Guyuan, Yinchuan, and Yansui all jumped in together, the situation instantly stopped being funny and turned into something that could shake the foundations of the realm.

This was no longer something you could casually press down with a flick of the hand.

Zhu Youjian felt his whole body go cold as if someone had poured a bucket of ice water down his back, and his voice came out strained and tight.

"How did it come to this? Why does it feel like the entire world suddenly decided to rebel against me?"

Chen Xinjia stood nearby with his head lowered, and although his face remained respectful, his thoughts were far less polite.

Because you brought this upon yourself.

History had never been kind to emperors labeled as foolish rulers, and once that label stuck, rebellion followed as naturally as shadows followed light, especially when a powerful external enemy loomed at the borders, because fear of the throne would begin to crack, and once that fear cracked, ambition would leak out from every corner like floodwater breaking a dam.

It had happened at the end of the Zhou, at the end of the Han, at the end of the Sui and Tang, and at the end of the Yuan, and if one looked closely enough, the pattern never really changed.

When authority weakened, the land fractured.

When fear disappeared, blades appeared.

By this point, the truth was painfully simple.

Zhu Youjian's personal authority had already been ground into dust, and anyone with even a spark of ambition would see this moment as a golden opportunity, because if they did not rise now, then when would they ever dare?

After Chen Xinjia withdrew, Cao Huachun finally leaned in and spoke in a low voice.

"Your Majesty, have you noticed something strange lately?"

Zhu Youjian frowned. "What is it?"

"The ministers who used to shout the loudest for war have all gone quiet. Not a single one of them is pushing for battle anymore."

Zhu Youjian blinked, clearly startled. "That is true. Why is that?"

Cao Huachun's tone turned even softer.

"Because it is no longer a question of war or peace."

Zhu Youjian stiffened.

Cao Huachun continued, each word landing like a stone.

"They are no longer thinking about the empire. They are thinking about themselves."

Silence filled the room, thick and suffocating.

Far away, at Shanhai Pass.

Wu Sangui stood atop the towering walls, gazing southward at the vast land stretching into the distance, his eyes deep and calculating as if measuring the weight of fate itself.

His son, Wu Yingxiong, approached cautiously.

"Father, what are you thinking about?"

Wu Sangui did not turn his head, and his voice came out low and steady.

"I am thinking that when rebellion rises everywhere, it becomes the perfect moment for a man to ask whether kings and nobles are born that way, or whether they seize it with their own hands."

Wu Yingxiong's face went pale. "Father... you mean to rebel?"

Wu Sangui let out a short laugh, sharp and cold.

"Of course. This is an excellent opportunity."

Wu Yingxiong hesitated, clearly shaken. "But that is a crime punishable by extermination of the entire clan."

Wu Sangui finally turned, and there was a strange light in his eyes.

"You only get exterminated if you fail. If you succeed, it is you who exterminates others."

He gestured vaguely toward the south.

"Zhu Youjian has already lost his prestige. The entire realm calls him a foolish ruler. Even now, Prince Tang, Zhu Yujian, the heir of Prince Fu, Zhu Yousong, the heir of Prince Qin, Zhu Cunji, and even some random thousand household commander from Shanxi have all raised their banners. Tell me, when else will you find a better chance?"

Wu Yingxiong swallowed hard, his thoughts clearly wavering.

"...Do we even have enough strength?"

Wu Sangui answered without hesitation, his tone confident and grounded.

"I have over two thousand elite troops capable of armored charges, more than twelve thousand soldiers who can truly fight, and another fifteen thousand irregulars. Add to that the forces under Gao Di at Shanhai Pass, and we are looking at close to fifty thousand men."

That number was no joke.

In those days, most regional commanders barely had a few thousand reliable troops under their command, and even someone as formidable as Lu Xiangsheng only commanded three thousand Tianxiong soldiers.

The best troops of the Ming had long been concentrated in the Guanning region, all under Wu Sangui's influence.

If he rebelled, his strength would far surpass that of any idle prince or upstart warlord.

Wu Yingxiong nodded slowly, then asked the question that truly mattered.

"What reason will we use?"

Wu Sangui laughed.

"What kind of question is that? Of course we use the same one everyone else is using. A foolish ruler ruining the country, missing the chance at victory, and the claim that collective governance is better than rule by one."

Wu Yingxiong frowned slightly. "And after we succeed, will we actually share power?"

Wu Sangui's smile turned sharp.

"Of course not. We only pretend at the beginning. Borrow their slogans, ride their momentum, and once we take the throne, we clean them out. Every last one."

Wu Yingxiong could not help but admire the ruthlessness.

"Father is truly brilliant."

Wu Sangui waved his hand casually.

"Then it is settled. The sooner we rebel, the sooner we establish our name. Let the others fight and exhaust themselves. When the time is right, we march from Shanhai Pass straight into the capital, wipe them all out, and take everything in one clean sweep."

He was not the kind of man who merely talked.

Once he decided, he acted.

Within moments, banners were raised, and the slogan spread like wildfire.

"A foolish ruler ruins the country. Collective governance surpasses autocracy."

Meanwhile, at Daling River City.

The atmosphere here felt strangely peaceful.

Lu Xiangsheng was drilling his Tianxiong Army, pushing them harder with each passing day, because ever since Li Daoxuan had taken over their supplies, the soldiers had been eating well, dressing warmly, and regaining strength at a visible pace.

As long as it did not involve firearms, Li Daoxuan seemed willing to provide anything.

Better food led to stronger bodies, and stronger bodies led to harsher training, and for the first time in a long while, Lu Xiangsheng felt a sense of steady progress.

As for those mysterious firearms, he had not even dared to think about them, because in his mind, he was still an outsider, and expecting such weapons would be nothing short of wishful thinking.

Just as he was lost in thought, Li Daoxuan walked over with a calm smile.

"Lord Lu, your soldiers are finally starting to keep up physically, and their training has reached a decent level. It is about time we addressed something else."

Lu Xiangsheng's expression turned cautious. "What do you mean?"

"Education," Li Daoxuan replied.

Lu Xiangsheng narrowed his eyes. "If you mean your ideas about collective governance, I am not ready to accept that."

Li Daoxuan shook his head gently.

"I am not forcing that on them. What I want them to learn is discipline and character. The more powerful the weapon a soldier holds, the more upright his character must be. If a man with great power falls into darkness, he becomes a disaster."

His gaze sharpened slightly.

"I have high standards for my soldiers. Only those with integrity, only those with a sound sense of right and wrong, will ever be entrusted with advanced weapons."

Lu Xiangsheng froze for a moment, genuinely surprised.

Was he saying that if the Tianxiong Army proved their discipline and character, they would actually receive firearms?

Even though they were not his own troops?

Before he could process this fully, a messenger came rushing in, breathless and urgent.

"Urgent report! The heir of Prince Qin, Zhu Cunji, has rebelled. Imperial orders have been issued. Generals Zhao Guangyuan of Hanzhong and Shi Jian of Yansui are to return immediately to Shaanxi to suppress the rebellion."

Chapter 1395 The Wooden Ox and Gliding Horse Grand Operation

Lu Xiangsheng paused for a brief moment after hearing the report, and his brows knit together slightly as the realization settled in.

The Emperor was pulling troops back again.

And the forces on the Liaodong front were being thinned out bit by bit, like meat shaved off a bone, until one began to wonder what would even remain in the end.

What exactly was going on?

He let out a quiet breath and gave up trying to untangle it, because whether it was court politics or grand strategy, none of it was something he could truly control, and so he defaulted to the only role left to him, which was to act as a messenger and nothing more.

"Someone go and summon General Shi Jian of Yansui and General Zhao Guangyuan of Hanzhong."

Before long, the two men arrived.

Lu Xiangsheng looked at them with an expression that hovered somewhere between helplessness and dry amusement.

"The heir of Prince Qin, Zhu Cunji, has rebelled. He has taken Xi'an and declared support for collective governance. His Majesty has ordered both of you to return to Shaanxi immediately."

He paused, then added with a faint sigh.

"But since all of you are... acting anyway, you might as well decide for yourselves whether you want to go back."

That line carried a subtle weight.

Lu Xiangsheng had long since learned that a glance at a unit's equipment and training was enough to tell whether they belonged to Li Daoxuan, and the answer in front of him was painfully obvious.

Shi Jian was practically shining with top tier gear, armed to the teeth, disciplined, confident, and clearly a core force.

Zhao Guangyuan was slightly less dazzling, but still unmistakably part of the same camp.

If Zhu Cunji's rebellion existed, then it existed because Li Daoxuan allowed it.

Suppressing it was nothing more than a performance.

Shi Jian turned his head toward Li Daoxuan, and when he saw the latter give a slow, calm nod, he broke into a grin.

"Understood. I will return to Xi'an at once... to suppress the rebellion... ah, no, to join the Prince Qin heir's army."

Lu Xiangsheng could not help but laugh.

"So it really is joining, then?"

But Zhao Guangyuan did not follow along so easily.

He suddenly dropped to one knee before Li Daoxuan, lowering his head.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, I have a request."

Li Daoxuan looked at him calmly. "Speak."

Zhao Guangyuan's voice was steady, but there was a quiet intensity beneath it.

"I do not wish to return to Shaanxi to join the Prince Qin heir's forces. I wish to remain here in Liaodong and participate in the campaign against Shenyang."

Li Daoxuan tilted his head slightly.

"Still thinking about avenging your father?"

Zhao Guangyuan nodded without hesitation.

"Yes. I want revenge. If there were real battles to fight in Shaanxi, I would go without question. But this operation is nothing more than staging and preparation for decentralization. There will be no real fighting, only acting. If I return, I will accomplish nothing. I do not wish to go."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

"That is not an unreasonable request. It is perfectly reasonable."

He waved his hand lightly.

"Very well. You will remain at Dalinghe City. Continue training and prepare for the assault on Shenyang."

Zhao Guangyuan's face lit up with relief.

"Thank you, Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Lu Xiangsheng could not help but interject.

"What about the imperial edict? How do you plan to deal with that?"

Zhao Guangyuan answered without even a flicker of hesitation.

"I will trouble Lord Lu to report back to the court that I refused to obey the order, held my troops, and declared rebellion."

Lu Xiangsheng froze.

This was not just pouring oil on the fire. This was throwing the entire oil barrel into the flames.

The Emperor might actually collapse from anger.

He was still struggling with how to phrase the report when the thunder of hooves broke the air.

A rider came charging in at full speed, shouting before he even dismounted.

"Bad news! Urgent news! Wu Sangui, commander of the Liaodong forces, has rebelled together with Gao Di of Shanhai Pass. They have raised the banner of 'A foolish ruler ruins the country. Collective governance surpasses autocracy.'"

Lu Xiangsheng's eyes widened.

"What?"

He turned sharply toward Li Daoxuan.

"Is Wu Sangui also one of your people? At this rate, is there anywhere in the entire Ming that does not belong to you?"

Li Daoxuan spread his hands with a laugh.

"No, no. You wrong me this time. I do not even know Wu Sangui."

"Then what is he doing?"

Shi Jian chuckled.

"A man with ambition jumping into the chaos. When the world is in turmoil, anyone with ambition and troops will want a piece of the game. Do you remember Zuo Liangyu when you were suppressing bandits in Henan? He wanted to ride the chaos to carve out his own throne as well."

Lu Xiangsheng fell silent, the memory clearly hitting home.

Shi Jian turned back to Li Daoxuan.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, what should we do about Wu Sangui? Shall I deal with him on my way back?"

Li Daoxuan shook his head slowly.

"He is waving the banner of collective governance. If we crush a force that claims to support that cause, it will create a contradiction that the common people cannot reconcile."

Shi Jian frowned slightly.

"Then what?"

Li Daoxuan's smile carried a hint of cold amusement.

"Watch him. Wait for his fox tail to reveal itself. The moment it does, we smash his head without hesitation."

Shi Jian straightened.

"Understood."

"Return to Shaanxi," Li Daoxuan added. "Do not concern yourself with Wu Sangui."

Shi Jian nodded.

"Then I will avoid Shanhai Pass."

Lu Xiangsheng gave a small nod.

"Take the route I used when I chased Dorgon. It passes through Mongol territory."

Shi Jian grinned.

"That route is quite convenient. With armored cavalry transport, we can cut the journey significantly."

And so Shi Jian departed with his forces, heading back toward Shaanxi.

Lu Xiangsheng watched him go, his brows slowly drawing together again.

"Another general gone. And one of your core forces."

Li Daoxuan nodded lightly.

"You could say that."

Lu Xiangsheng folded his arms and began counting on his fingers, his voice growing more serious with each name.

"Cao Wenzhao, Gao Jie, Xing Honglang, Wang Xiaohua, Yang Guozhu, Wang Pu, Shi Jian..."

He stopped.

Seven units gone.

Each with three to five thousand men.

More than twenty thousand troops had already been pulled away.

What remained at Dalinghe City now was painfully thin.

"My Tianxiong Army, the capital troops brought by Gao Qiqian, your personal special unit, the Anhui forces sent by Shi Kefa, Luo Xi from Shangnan, and the Sichuan troops..."

He exhaled slowly.

"We cannot keep losing troops like this. If this continues, forget attacking Shenyang, we may not even be able to hold Daling River City."

Li Daoxuan only smiled.

"No problem. Let the music play, let the dance continue."

Far away, Shengjing Palace.

Huang Taiji sat quietly, flipping through a worn copy of Romance of the Three Kingdoms for what must have been well over a hundredth time, his attention fully absorbed in one particular concept.

The legendary Wooden Ox and Gliding Horse.

A miraculous invention said to transport supplies without human effort.

If such a mechanism truly existed, then perhaps even the great iron vehicles could be made to move.

From this thought, he had devised an entire plan.

A grand operation.

Make the iron machines move like the Wooden Ox and Gliding Horse.

And so, the study began with the novel itself.

Just as he was deeply immersed, Fan Wencheng rushed in, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Your Majesty, great news."

Huang Taiji looked up slowly.

"Speak."

Fan Wencheng's voice was almost trembling with delight.

"The Ming court is in chaos. Rebellions have erupted everywhere. Zhu Youjian has recalled a large number of generals from Dalinghe City."

He paused for emphasis.

"The forces stationed there are now less than half of what they were just days ago."

Chapter 1396 The Sichuan People's Representative

Gas, ini gue garap full sesuai canon kamu, gue jaga ritme, politik, sama humor Jianghu tetap hidup.

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Hong Taiji's eyes lit up the moment he heard the report, a flash of instinct from years past surfacing almost reflexively, as though the battlefield itself had whispered into his ear that this was the moment to strike, the kind of chaos within the Great Ming that in earlier days would have sent him surging forward without hesitation, banners raised, cavalry thundering, eager to smash the empire while it staggered under its own weight.

And yet, that same thought barely had time to take shape before it dissolved into something far heavier, something far more frustrating, a dull and suffocating sense of helplessness that clung to him like damp armor after rain.

"Fan Wencheng," he said at last, his voice low, carrying not excitement but restraint, "this is indeed a rare opportunity."

He paused, and the pause itself seemed longer than it should have been, as though even he was unwilling to finish the sentence that should naturally follow.

"But even if the garrison at Dalinghe Fortress has been cut in half, we still lack the strength to attack."

Silence fell for a brief moment.

Fan Wencheng did not respond, not because he had nothing to say, but because there was, in truth, nothing left to argue.

Hong Taiji exhaled slowly, the weight of reality pressing down on every word that followed.

"We cannot break their iron war wagons, and we certainly cannot deal with those floating balloons of theirs."

That last phrase lingered in the air with a peculiar bitterness, as though it offended not just his strategy, but his understanding of war itself.

"Then we wait," he continued, his tone settling into something almost resigned, yet not entirely devoid of calculation. "We keep waiting, and we watch just how far the chaos within the Great Ming will go."

---

From the outside, the Great Ming looked like it was collapsing into utter disorder, a tangled mess of rebellion, betrayal, and authority slipping through imperial fingers like sand.

From the perspective of Emperor Chongzhen, it was no different, the entire realm seeming to twist into knots beyond his ability to untangle, each report from the front only tightening that knot further.

And yet, in the eyes of Gao Village, the same empire presented an entirely different picture, one that might have seemed almost absurd if not for how consistently it unfolded.

To them, this was harmony.

A peculiar, bustling, almost cheerful kind of harmony.

In Chengdu, within the yamen of the Sichuan Provincial Governor, Minister Wang Weizhang sat by the window, watching the streets below where carts rolled endlessly through crowded avenues, merchants called out their wares, and people moved with a sense of purpose that had been absent not long ago.

Ever since the Prince of Shu had been dragged off for labor reform, Sichuan had entered a phase of rapid transformation, one that no traditional official training could have prepared anyone for, as factories of unfamiliar design sprang up across Chengdu and Chongqing, blooming in pairs like something out of a proverb that had suddenly decided to become literal.

The large-scale hydroelectric plant at Dujiangyan, sponsored by Gao Village, was still under construction due to certain technical difficulties that no one in the provincial bureaucracy fully understood, yet a thermal power plant on the outskirts of Chengdu had already been completed ahead of schedule.

And so, Chengdu had electricity.

Blue-capped workers from Gao Village had strung wires across the streets, installed electric lamps, and when evening fell, the entire city lit up in a glow so vibrant that it transformed the night into something almost festive, a scene of lights and movement that made people linger long after they had intended to return home.

At Caishikou, a massive Immortal Mirror Device had been erected, powered by electricity generated by the people themselves, broadcasting the Gao Family News to an audience that gathered each evening with increasing enthusiasm.

Wang Weizhang watched all of this, his mind quietly calculating.

"These should count as my achievements, shouldn't they," he murmured to himself, the question carrying less confidence than he might have liked. "Surely they count... perhaps Dao Xuan Tianzun will take notice."

His greatest concern was not rebellion, nor the court, nor even the shifting tides of power, but something far more personal and far more dangerous for a man in his position.

He feared being overlooked.

After all, he was not part of Dao Xuan Tianzun's inner circle, and he had not forgotten the warning he received back at Mingyue Gorge, a warning so direct that it had forced him to return every illicit coin he had ever taken, leaving him both cleaner and considerably poorer than before.

A trusted aide slipped into the room, lowering his voice as he spoke.

"My lord, Qin Prince Heir Zhu Cunji has also risen in rebellion, and His Majesty has ordered General Commander Shi Jian of Yansui and Zhao Guangyuan of Hanzhong to suppress him, but Zhao Guangyuan has refused to return and remains stationed at the Liaodong Front, while Shi Jian, after reaching Shaanxi, has not only refused to attack but has instead joined the rebels."

He hesitated briefly before adding, "The Emperor is... deeply shaken."

Wang Weizhang nodded, unsurprised.

"The Emperor is but a man," he said calmly, "and how could a man contend with a god, so his panic is inevitable, and his defeat even more so."

He waved his hand dismissively, as though brushing aside the fate of the empire itself.

"That is not our concern. What matters is how we present ourselves before Dao Xuan Tianzun, how we prove that we are still useful, still working, still worthy of being remembered."

The aide leaned closer.

"In that case, my lord, should we not also respond to the call for Shared Governance?"

Wang Weizhang turned his head slightly.

"You mean... we should also rebel, raise a figure of prestige, and declare support for Shared Governance?"

The aide nodded.

"Exactly so."

Wang Weizhang considered this for only a moment before answering with surprising decisiveness.

"Then the obvious choice would be the Prince of Shu."

The aide's expression stiffened.

"My lord... the Prince of Shu has already been taken for labor reform."

Silence.

A very awkward silence.

Wang Weizhang felt a sudden weight press down on him, the kind that could only be described, in the most modern of terms, as being under massive pressure, though he would never have admitted to using such phrasing aloud.

"Then what do we do," he muttered, his composure cracking just slightly. "Do we not even have a figure worth supporting in all of Sichuan? Someone with status, with influence, someone who could unify these factions?"

The aide spoke carefully.

"There is Qin Liangyu, the old general."

Wang Weizhang immediately shook his head.

"That would be even worse than killing her outright. If she does not oppose Shared Governance, it is already out of respect for Dao Xuan Tianzun, and expecting her to lead a rebellion is... unrealistic."

The aide fell silent again.

"In that case, there truly is no suitable candidate."

"No," Wang Weizhang said, his voice tightening, "that will not do. I will not remain idle, I will not fade into obscurity, and I will not allow Dao Xuan Tianzun to forget me. I must produce results, no matter what it takes."

The aide could only sigh.

"Sichuan has long been fragmented, ruled by native chieftains and tangled local powers, and there has never been a figure whose reputation could span all factions, so aside from the Prince of Shu, there is simply no one..."

He stopped mid-sentence.

At that very moment, the Immortal Mirror Device at Caishikou flickered to life.

It was time for the Gao Family News.

And as always, the broadcast began not with news, but with an advertisement.

The first figure to appear on screen was not the famed beauty Chen Yuanyuan, but Flat Rabbit, sprawled across the frame with a rabbit-head hat perched on his head, grinning with all the confidence of a man who had absolutely no concern for dignity.

"Rabbit Brand, Spicy Rabbit Heads," he announced cheerfully. "Doesn't that sound delicious?"

Before he could say more, Zheng Gouzi burst into the frame, wielding a two-meter-long blade.

"Rabbit Lord, lend me your head," he shouted. "Our spicy rabbit heads are selling too fast, and we've run out!"

Flat Rabbit froze for half a heartbeat before screaming, "What the hell, I'm not tasty!"

Zheng Gouzi swung the blade casually.

"With enough spice, everything becomes tasty, including your stupid head."

"Dog, spare my head, spare my head!"

The two of them ran off screen, one chasing, the other fleeing, leaving behind a chaos that felt suspiciously well-rehearsed.

Only then did Chen Yuanyuan step forward, smiling with effortless grace.

"Every coin earned by Rabbit Brand will go toward supporting impoverished mountain regions in Sichuan," she said. "Each spicy rabbit head you purchase helps a child receive two potatoes."

The crowd erupted into laughter.

"Flat Rabbit again!"

"His ads are the best!"

"With him around, even Chen Yuanyuan can only play a supporting role!"

"I respect no one, but I respect Rabbit Lord!"

Wang Weizhang stared at the screen, and then, quite suddenly, it was as if a lamp lit up inside his mind with an audible click.

"I know now," he said slowly, his eyes gleaming with a kind of inspiration that would have terrified any reasonable advisor. "I know who we should support."

The aide's face turned pale.

"My lord... surely not."

"Why not," Wang Weizhang shot back, his confidence swelling rapidly. "He is the perfect candidate."

"My lord, even in desperation, one should not entrust matters to a quack."

"A quack," Wang Weizhang scoffed. "You understand nothing. Flat Rabbit's greatest strength lies in making a fool of himself to entertain others, and he cares nothing for his own dignity so long as others find joy. You may call him lowly, but he is not distant, not aloof, and he connects directly with the people. That is precisely the kind of person the people favor."

The aide was left speechless.

Wang Weizhang did not wait for further objections.

"Good. Then it is settled. We shall also rise, declare our support, and endorse Flat Rabbit as the representative of the people of Sichuan in the cause of Shared Governance."

"My lord, wait, we are really doing this?"

But Wang Weizhang had already made up his mind.

He needed results.

He needed recognition.

And above all, he refused to be forgotten.

---

Five days later, Sichuan made its declaration.

The Provincial Governor, along with various native chieftain commissioners, publicly announced their support for Flat Rabbit.

Only Qin Liangyu remained silent.

And just like that, in a world that claimed to be descending into chaos, a new and rather absurd piece of order quietly took its place.

Chapter 1397 They Chose You

In Dandong City, Flat Rabbit suddenly sneezed, the kind of sneeze that came without warning and carried with it a strange sense of self-importance, as though somewhere in the vastness of the realm, someone had just spoken his name with great sincerity.

He rubbed his nose, grinning from ear to ear.

"Someone's thinking about me again."

Zheng Gouzi glanced sideways at him, his expression filled with the kind of skepticism reserved for people who had long since accepted that their companion lived in a world slightly detached from reality.

"Keep dreaming. Who would think about you?"

Flat Rabbit snorted, puffing up with exaggerated pride, as if sheer confidence alone could overwrite public opinion.

"This Rabbit Lord has plenty of admirers, alright?"

Zheng Gouzi tilted his head, his tone turning deliberately casual, which in itself was a sign that he was about to say something deeply offensive.

"I doubt you even have more fans than Chen Qianhu."

Flat Rabbit froze for half a breath, then suddenly lit up with delight.

"To even be compared with Chen Qianhu is already a victory," he declared, almost glowing with satisfaction. "After that song, 'I'm Ugly but Gentle,' he's practically a celebrity among the common folk, so I don't need to surpass him, I just need to be mentioned in the same breath, and that means I've already won."

Zheng Gouzi rolled his eyes.

"I meant before he sang that song."

Silence.

A heavy, suffocating, utterly merciless silence.

Flat Rabbit's grin collapsed.

"That... is a bit awkward."

He coughed once, straightened his posture, and tried to recover what little dignity he had left.

"Impossible. Absolutely impossible. I am loved by all, admired wherever I go, welcomed by carts and flowers alike, so how could I possibly lose to the earlier version of Chen Qianhu?"

Zheng Gouzi burst into laughter.

"Admit it, you're too ridiculous, and no one actually likes you."

Just as the words landed, footsteps approached from a distance, steady and purposeful, carrying with them the unmistakable air of someone who had actual responsibilities.

He Ticheng arrived, his expression faintly strange, as though he himself had not yet decided whether what he was about to say belonged to the realm of politics or absurd theater.

"Rabbit. Gouzi. I need you both."

The two straightened immediately.

"Instructor He!"

He Ticheng nodded, then spoke without unnecessary preamble.

"News has just arrived from Sichuan. Minister Wang Weizhang, along with a large number of native chieftains, has officially declared support for Flat Rabbit as the representative of the Sichuan people, to participate in Shared Governance."

Flat Rabbit blinked.

Then blinked again.

And finally pointed at his own nose, as though verifying that it still existed.

"Me?"

"Yes," He Ticheng replied calmly. "You."

Flat Rabbit's face shifted into something between shock and existential confusion.

"Why me?"

He Ticheng let out a small laugh, not mocking, but rather the kind that came from watching events unfold in ways that no manual could have predicted.

"To explain that, one must begin with the situation in Sichuan," he said, his tone turning slightly more analytical. "The most suitable figure, in terms of status and legitimacy, would have been the Prince of Shu, but he has already been taken for labor reform due to his misconduct, and beyond him, there is no single figure capable of commanding authority across all factions, as the region is fragmented among various native powers."

Flat Rabbit nodded instinctively, then immediately shook his head.

"But I can't do that either."

He Ticheng smiled.

"No, you can."

The certainty in his voice was so absolute that it left no room for argument.

"Wang Weizhang only just proposed your name, and not a single faction opposed it. On the contrary, all of them agreed."

Flat Rabbit's brain, which had never been particularly burdened by excessive processing, now seemed to struggle under the sudden weight of collective approval.

"Ah...?"

He Ticheng continued, his gaze drifting slightly as though recalling the past.

"When Gao Village first entered Sichuan, I led Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, you, and Zheng Gouzi as part of the initial group, and later the administrative teams followed, assisting the various mountain communities according to Dao Xuan Tianzun's policies."

He paused, then added with a hint of amusement.

"Everyone did their job well, but none of them left a lasting impression, while you, through your... rather unconventional methods, somehow made the entire region remember you."

Flat Rabbit scratched his head, suddenly grinning again.

"That must be because of Rabbit Brand Trading Company, right?"

For once, he was not wrong.

Others had followed policy.

He had followed instinct.

And between those two approaches lay a difference that no document could fully describe, yet every human heart could immediately recognize.

Later, when Flat Rabbit established Rabbit Brand, selling Sichuan's local products and donating every single coin of profit without keeping even the smallest share for himself, the effect became undeniable.

It was not efficiency.

It was sincerity.

And sincerity, inconvenient as it often was, had a way of reaching places that systems could not.

He Ticheng shook his head, half amused, half exasperated.

"Wang Weizhang is acting recklessly, eager to claim merit, and he did not even consult you before making this declaration, while you are still here in Dandong. If you do not return, and the people of Sichuan feel deceived, the situation could turn from opportunity into disaster."

Flat Rabbit's expression snapped into panic.

"Then I need to go to Sichuan immediately."

He Ticheng nodded.

"I will arrange the fastest ship to take you to Shanghai, and from there you will transfer to river vessels and head inland as quickly as possible. Do not delay, or you may turn a good situation into a bad one."

Flat Rabbit did not waste another second, turning and sprinting toward the coast with surprising speed for someone whose life philosophy rarely included urgency.

"Gouzi," He Ticheng added.

Zheng Gouzi paused.

"Yes?"

"Go with him."

Zheng Gouzi blinked.

"And what exactly am I supposed to do?"

He Ticheng looked at him as though the answer should have been obvious.

"Flat Rabbit has popularity, but no capability. If he goes alone, Sichuan will descend into chaos within days, so you will go and keep him under control."

Zheng Gouzi laughed.

"Understood."

And with that, he too ran toward the shore.

He Ticheng watched them leave, shaking his head slightly, though there was a trace of satisfaction in his expression, as if he had just set a particularly unpredictable piece into motion on a very large board.

At that very moment, several ships began crossing the Yalu River from the south, their movement steady and unhurried as they approached Dandong.

He Ticheng turned his head, and the moment he saw the figure standing at the bow of the lead vessel, his expression brightened instantly.

White robes.

Hands clasped behind his back.

The wind catching the fabric just enough to give him the kind of presence that seemed carefully designed to look effortless.

"Mr. Bai!"

He Ticheng strode forward quickly, calling out with genuine enthusiasm.

"Long time no see."

Bai Yuan smiled, the kind of composed smile that suggested everything was proceeding exactly as expected.

"Instructor He. It has indeed been a while."

"You've been handling affairs in Joseon," He Ticheng said. "Returning now means things there are mostly settled?"

"More or less," Bai Yuan replied. "I introduced some of our outdated technologies, as per Dao Xuan Tianzun's instructions, allowing them to experience a measure of his benevolence, and I also delivered several hundred thousand copies of Dao Xuan Tianzun's Demon-Slaying Chronicles."

He Ticheng burst into laughter.

"That alone is enough to reshape a country."

Bai Yuan's smile deepened slightly.

"What is more interesting is that Dao Xuan Tianzun personally manifested to instruct me that anything we provide must be recorded in Joseon's official histories, including when it arrived and who introduced it, and that we should obtain a copy of those records ourselves."

He Ticheng blinked.

"Recorded in their histories? And clearly attributed to the Great Ming? That... seems unusually specific."

"I do not fully understand it either," Bai Yuan admitted.

At that moment, the golden-threaded image of Dao Xuan Tianzun on Bai Yuan's chest suddenly spoke, his voice carrying a faint trace of amusement that felt entirely out of place for something so divine.

"It is a precaution."

Both men immediately straightened and saluted.

"What are we preventing?"

Dao Xuan Tianzun chuckled.

"We are preventing a situation, several hundred years from now, where they claim these things as their own inventions."

Bai Yuan raised an eyebrow.

"They would dare?"

He Ticheng frowned.

"That seems... excessively shameless."

Dao Xuan Tianzun only laughed, a knowing, almost playful sound.

"Whether they would or not, I know quite well."

The two men exchanged glances, then nodded in silent agreement, because if there was one thing they had learned, it was that when Dao Xuan Tianzun spoke of the future, it was less speculation and more memory.

"In that case," Bai Yuan said thoughtfully, "recording it in their histories alone may not be sufficient as a deterrent."

He Ticheng scratched his head.

"Then we just remind them from time to time who their father is, so they don't forget."

Bai Yuan laughed.

"Let us not go that far. Joseon is still obedient, and King Yi Jong is firmly aligned with the Great Ming, so excessive force would only breed resentment. What truly matters is that we remain strong, remain ahead, because as long as that remains true, the child will not dare to defy the parent."

Chapter 1398 They Are Entering the Capital

Within the Imperial Capital, Emperor Chongzhen sat alone in the imperial garden, his expression vacant in a way that no court historian would ever dare to record, yet one that perfectly captured the state of a man who had slowly come to realize that the world no longer responded to his commands.

Moments earlier, he had turned on a faucet to wash his hands, the water flowing freely with a steady sound that should have been soothing, yet he had forgotten to turn it off, leaving it running as though even such a simple act now required more attention than he could spare.

Eunuch Wang Chengen had hurried over, quietly reaching out to close it for him, the small gesture carrying with it a silent acknowledgment that the Emperor's mind was elsewhere, far removed from the mundane.

Everywhere across the realm, the tide of Shared Governance was growing stronger, no longer a distant murmur but a roaring current that surged from province to province, sweeping up officials, generals, and even commoners into something that resembled both a movement and a storm.

And now, when Emperor Chongzhen looked at the situation, he discovered something both absurd and terrifying.

He could no longer leave the capital.

From three directions, the city was effectively surrounded by forces that claimed allegiance to Shared Governance, leaving only the northern route relatively open, though even that felt less like an escape and more like a temporary illusion.

Not long ago, he had still been issuing orders, attempting to recall the garrison from Dalinghe Fortress to suppress the rebellions, clinging to the belief that decisive action could still restore order.

Now, even that effort seemed pointless.

"What is there left to suppress," he muttered bitterly, his voice tinged with exhaustion rather than anger. "The entire world has already risen in rebellion."

His thoughts drifted, unwillingly, toward Sichuan, where the situation had taken a turn so absurd that even in this moment of crisis, it managed to provoke disbelief.

"They actually supported someone called Flat Rabbit," he said, almost incredulously. "With a name like that, he is obviously a bandit, and yet the Provincial Governor and the native chieftains have chosen him."

He let out a short, humorless laugh.

"Have things truly deteriorated to the point where even a bandit is more worthy of allegiance than I am?"

Before anyone could respond, Minister of War Chen Xinja entered, bowing quickly.

"Your Majesty, the ministers are awaiting your decision."

Emperor Chongzhen hesitated, his stubborn nature wrestling with the reality before him, and for perhaps the first time, that stubbornness began to show cracks.

"The reason the Shared Governance faction has grown so bold," he said slowly, "is because we have not attacked Shenyang. If we were to launch a campaign now, perhaps we could silence them."

The suggestion itself carried a faint trace of compromise, as though he were considering aligning, even partially, with the logic of those who opposed him.

Chen Xinja lowered his voice.

"Your Majesty, had we attacked earlier, that might have been possible, but now... Liaodong's forces under Wu Sangui, along with the troops at Shanhai Pass under Gao Di, have already joined the Shared Governance faction."

He paused just long enough for the implication to settle.

"Shanhai Pass lies dangerously close to the capital. If our Liaodong forces move to attack Shenyang now, Wu Sangui could take advantage of the situation and strike directly at the capital."

Emperor Chongzhen stiffened.

Chen Xinja continued.

"They command nearly fifty thousand troops. If they advance, the capital will be in grave danger."

Silence fell once more.

This time, it was heavier.

This time, it carried regret.

Had he acted sooner, had he listened to those who urged decisive action, had he taken Shenyang before the situation spiraled beyond control, perhaps the realm would not have descended into this state.

But history, like power, had no patience for regret.

"What should I do now," he asked quietly, the question no longer directed at policy, but at fate itself.

Chen Xinjia spread his hands helplessly.

"I do not know. I am but a powerless Minister of War."

Emperor Chongzhen stared at him.

"Is this not precisely the matter you are supposed to handle?"

Chen Xinjia gave a bitter smile.

"When I assumed office, the troops had already been taken to Liaodong by my predecessor, Lu Xiangsheng, along with the supervising eunuch Gao Qiqian. I have no forces at my disposal."

Silence.

An awkward, almost suffocating silence.

By the time Chen Xinjia withdrew, Emperor Chongzhen remained seated, unmoving, as though even the act of standing required a certainty he no longer possessed.

After an indeterminate amount of time, he turned to Eunuch Cao Huachun.

"What should I do?"

Cao Huachun sighed deeply.

"At this point... perhaps we can only wait for the Shared Governance faction to fracture from within."

---

In truth, Emperor Chongzhen was not alone in this expectation.

Across the realm, among those who did not belong to Dao Xuan Tianzun's system, there existed a shared belief, almost a certainty, that the current situation could not sustain itself indefinitely.

Too many factions.

Too many leaders.

Too many ambitions.

If there had been only one rebel, such as Prince Tang, there would have been unity.

If it had been only Prince Fu Heir Zhu Yousong, the outcome would have been straightforward.

But now, the landscape was crowded with figures of wildly different backgrounds, from nobles to soldiers to... Flat Rabbit, whose presence alone seemed to challenge the very definition of political legitimacy.

"They all claim Shared Governance," people whispered. "But who leads? Who decides?"

And in that question lay an inevitable conclusion.

They would have to fight.

Even opportunists like Wu Sangui were preparing to enter the stage, ready to seize whatever advantage emerged from the chaos, while those without armies could only watch from the sidelines, waiting to see which banner would prevail before choosing their allegiance.

---

"Your Majesty!"

A young eunuch stumbled into the Imperial Study, breathless with urgency.

"Your Majesty, the rebel Qin Prince Heir Zhu Cunji has declared his march toward the capital, and their slogan... has changed."

Emperor Chongzhen jolted upright.

"They are coming to the capital? What is their slogan now?"

The eunuch hesitated, as though unsure whether the words themselves constituted a crime.

"They say... they will ensure that Your Majesty also has 'No Cavities.'"

For a moment, the Emperor simply stared.

Then, very nearly, he overturned the table in front of him.

Before his anger could fully manifest, Chen Xinjia rushed back in.

"Your Majesty, this may be an opportunity. If the Shaanxi rebels march toward the capital, they must pass through Shanxi, which means they will inevitably clash with the Shanxi rebels under Chen Qianhu."

Emperor Chongzhen's eyes lit up.

Yes.

That made sense.

Two rebel forces, each claiming legitimacy, each seeking dominance, would have no choice but to confront one another.

Just as in the final years of the Yuan dynasty, when the future founder of the Ming had to defeat his rivals before claiming supremacy.

"This... may be worth watching," he murmured.

Chen Xinjia pressed on.

"We could recall Lu Xiangsheng from Liaodong and prepare to strike when both sides have exhausted themselves, eliminating them in one decisive blow."

"Excellent," Emperor Chongzhen said, a flicker of hope returning at last.

But hope, in times such as these, was a fragile thing.

Another eunuch rushed in almost immediately.

"Your Majesty, urgent news. Chen Qianhu of Shanxi has also declared his march toward the capital."

"What?"

Even Chen Xinja faltered.

"If both armies march toward the capital instead of fighting each other, they will arrive one after the other... they will not clash."

Emperor Chongzhen froze.

And before he could process that development, more reports flooded in, each one more alarming than the last.

"Sichuan's Flat Rabbit has declared his march toward the capital, joined by thirty-two native chieftain forces."

"Prince Fu Heir Zhu Yousong of Henan is advancing toward the capital."

"The Prince of De from Shandong is marching as well."

One after another.

Wave after wave.

The entire realm seemed to be converging on a single point.

The capital.

Panic crept into Emperor Chongzhen's voice.

"Only Prince Tang remains unaccounted for. Where is he? Has Cao Wenzhao already eliminated him?"

The answer came swiftly.

Cao Wenzhao had not eliminated him.

Instead, he had joined him.

Leading the entire naval force, uniting with Zheng Zhilong along the southeastern coast, forming a massive fleet that sailed directly to Tianjin Port.

The local officials had not even attempted resistance.

They surrendered immediately.

And just like that, the first of the Shared Governance forces to reach the capital's doorstep was Prince Tang.

A result so unexpected that even Emperor Chongzhen, in all his despair, could not have predicted it.

At this point, there was little left to do.

"We must recall Lu Xiangsheng from Liaodong," he said at last, his voice heavy but resolute in a way that suggested this was no longer a strategy, but a final attempt.

He turned to Cao Huachun.

"Organize the palace guards and the eunuchs. We will defend the city and wait for Lu Xiangsheng's return."

Chapter 1399 Our Move

"The first army of the Shared Governance faction has already reached Tianjin."

Wu Yingxiong rushed in, breath still uneven, his urgency barely concealed as he spoke to his father.

"Father, shouldn't we make our move as well?"

Wu Sangui let out a low chuckle, the kind that carried more calculation than amusement, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he were already arranging the pieces of a game that only he believed he fully understood.

"Yes," he said, almost lazily. "It is time we moved."

He paused, then continued, his tone shifting into something more deliberate.

"But we cannot be the first to arrive, because the first to stand out is the first to be struck down."

Wu Yingxiong nodded instinctively.

"And we cannot arrive too late either," Wu Sangui added, "because if we do, we will appear insignificant within the Shared Governance faction, and when the time comes to speak, our voice will carry no weight."

He leaned forward slightly, the faintest hint of a smile forming.

"We must be the second to arrive."

Wu Yingxiong blinked.

"The second?"

Wu Sangui's smile widened, revealing the full extent of his thinking.

"When we reach the outskirts of the capital, we will camp separately and watch as the others create chaos. Once they force the Emperor from the throne, we will step forward at the perfect moment and accuse them of being false, claiming they acted only for personal gain rather than the good of the nation."

His voice dropped, colder now.

"And then we kill them all."

Understanding dawned instantly.

Wu Yingxiong's expression sharpened.

"And after that... we decide everything."

Wu Sangui chuckled.

"Exactly."

Wu Yingxiong hesitated, a flicker of doubt surfacing.

"But what if they unite against us?"

Wu Sangui snorted, clearly unimpressed.

"I have lived a lifetime of brilliance, and yet I have somehow produced a son who still asks such questions. Those fools in the Shared Governance faction will never unite. Each of them harbors their own ambitions, their own schemes, and sooner or later, they will turn on one another."

He waved his hand dismissively.

"In fact, we do not even need to act immediately. We can simply wait for them to weaken each other, and then step in to clean up what remains. With fifty thousand troops under our command, what is there to fear?"

Wu Yingxiong fell silent.

He understood.

Within the Great Ming, the most elite troops were concentrated in the Guanning forces, and the fifty thousand soldiers under their control were, by any reasonable measure, among the strongest in the entire realm.

The advantage, as they saw it, was entirely theirs.

"Advance."

With a single command, Wu Sangui set his forces in motion, the Liaodong troops under his command, along with the Shanhai Pass forces led by Gao Di, forming a massive army that began its march toward the capital.

---

At this point, Beizhili had descended into chaos so complete that even those accustomed to instability found themselves overwhelmed.

Wealthy merchants were fleeing the capital in droves, dragging their families and possessions along with them, their only thought being to escape before the storm reached its peak.

And yet, the moment they left the city, a new problem emerged.

Where could they go?

To the east, the route had been sealed by the forces of Prince Tang, who had landed at Tianjin and was advancing toward the capital.

To the west, Chen Qianhu's forces blocked the way.

To the south, the army of Prince De pressed forward.

With three directions cut off, only the north remained.

And to the north lay the steppe.

Even so, the merchants had no choice.

Clenching their teeth, they pushed onward, hoping against hope that they might slip through some unnoticed path, avoiding the armies converging from all sides.

Among them were two figures who stood out not for their strength, but for their reputation.

Qian Qianyi, a leading figure of the Jiangnan literary world, and his close associate, the Huizhou merchant Cheng Jiasui.

Cheng Jiasui had originally intended to return south after his previous visit to Liang Shixian, planning to establish a waterworks system, yet like many merchants, his instincts had led him to linger when new opportunities presented themselves.

And opportunities there had been.

Power plants.

Electric lamps.

Electric fans.

Each one a glimpse into a future that promised profit beyond imagination.

So he stayed.

And because he stayed, Qian Qianyi stayed as well.

And because they stayed, they now found themselves caught in a situation neither poetry nor commerce could easily resolve.

They had set out toward Tianjin, intending to take a ship south, only to learn halfway that Prince Tang had already landed there.

At that moment, their situation had become... awkward.

With no other options, they continued forward, hoping only to pass by the advancing army without encountering it.

Along the way, they encountered countless refugees.

The people of Beizhili, long accustomed to the devastation brought by the Jin forces, had learned a simple rule for survival.

When armies come, run.

It did not matter whether the soldiers wore the banners of the Great Ming or those of their enemies, because in the eyes of the common people, both could bring suffering.

The safest place, ironically, was the capital itself.

Cheng Jiasui sighed as he watched the fleeing crowds.

"Just when the region had finally found some peace after driving back the invaders, now the rebel armies advance on the capital, and once again the people are forced into displacement."

Qian Qianyi shook his head slowly.

"When the nation prospers, the people suffer. When it falls, the people suffer as well."

Their conversation had barely ended when chaos erupted ahead.

"Rebel army! Rebel army!"

Voices rang out in panic.

"Cavalry! Armored cavalry! They're fast, run!"

For a moment, instinct drove everyone forward, the refugees attempting to flee toward the capital, but reason quickly caught up with them.

If the enemy was cavalry, they would never outrun them.

And so, almost as one, the fleeing masses changed their course, scattering into the forests along the roadside, hiding among the trees.

Qian Qianyi's face paled.

"What do we do? Do we turn back?"

Cheng Jiasui, to his credit, remained calm.

"Look at the people. No one is running anymore. If we stay on the road, we will be caught. The only chance we have is to hide."

That logic was unassailable.

Without hesitation, they led their attendants into the forest, dozens of men slipping between the trees, crouching low, watching the road through gaps in the leaves.

They had barely concealed themselves when the army arrived.

Qian Qianyi had heard of heavy cavalry.

He had never heard of armored cavalry.

And so, when the sound came, a deep mechanical rumble unlike anything he had ever experienced, his mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing.

From the southeastern road, several massive black iron vehicles emerged.

They were not fast, not by the standards of the future that had birthed them, yet on the uneven roads of Beizhili, they moved with a speed that no human could match on foot.

No wonder the people had chosen to hide.

Qian Qianyi stared, his breath catching in his throat.

What kind of thing was this?

The vehicles rolled closer, their imposing forms casting long shadows, until at last, they came to a stop near the forest.

Within the trees, the refugees trembled.

Parents clutched their children, covering their mouths, terrified that even the smallest sound might draw attention.

And then, something unexpected happened.

From the lead vehicle, a man climbed out.

He appeared to be in his thirties, his build unremarkable, even somewhat frail, the kind of person one might overlook in a crowd.

Yet when he raised a metal loudspeaker and spoke, his voice carried clearly through the forest.

"Do not be afraid."

"I am the former Prince Tang, Zhu Yujian."

"I now stand as a representative of the people within the Shared Governance faction."

He paused, allowing his words to settle.

"Our army is the army of the people. We will not harm you, nor will we behave like the Jin invaders or the old Ming troops, who acted without restraint."

There was something almost deliberate in the way he framed it, as though each word had been chosen not merely to reassure, but to redefine.

"Please, come out of the forest with peace of mind."

And in that moment, the battlefield that had yet to begin revealed another front entirely.

Not one of steel and blood.

But one of trust.

Chapter 1400 Winning Hearts

The moment Prince Tang Zhu Yujian finished his announcement, the forest did not stir.

Not even a leaf dared to move.

Trust, after all, was not something that could be summoned with a few loud words shouted through a metal tube, especially not in a land where the people had long learned that the louder an army spoke of righteousness, the more likely it was to rob them blind the next moment.

Since ancient times, rebel armies had always been fiercer than official troops.

If anything, they were worse.

Zhu Yujian seemed to understand this perfectly well, for he showed no sign of impatience, instead raising the loudspeaker once again, his tone calm, steady, and strangely sincere.

"Fellow villagers, our Shared Governance faction has come to the capital this time not to bring chaos, but to change this country and build a better future."

He paused, then added with a trace of apology that did not feel forced, which in itself was already something unusual.

"We have frightened you, forcing you to flee your homes in haste, disrupting your livelihoods and daily lives, and for that, I offer my sincere apologies."

A few people in the forest shifted slightly.

Apologies from soldiers were rare.

Apologies from rebel leaders were unheard of.

"And so," he continued, "to make amends, we will now distribute some supplies."

The moment those words fell, an odd mechanical rumble followed.

A transport truck rolled forward, its engine growling like some iron beast that had learned to obey human commands, and stopped right at the edge of the forest.

With a sudden tilt of its cargo bed, a cascade of burlap sacks spilled onto the ground, piling up in a rough mound.

From between the leaves, Qian Qianyi narrowed his eyes.

The sacks were full.

Heavy.

Bulging.

Whatever was inside, it was not something trivial.

A soldier jumped down from the truck, his movements relaxed, as though he were not standing in front of a forest full of terrified civilians, but rather in the middle of a marketplace.

He casually opened one of the sacks and lifted it slightly, letting the contents show.

"Grain," he called out. "All of this is grain. Come and take it."

He grinned.

"No money needed. This is compensation for disturbing you."

Qian Qianyi felt his thoughts stumble.

Compensation?

For disturbing the people?

He turned slightly, glancing at Cheng Jiasui, only to find that the merchant looked just as stunned.

Around them, the forest fell into a strange silence.

Parents who had been desperately covering their children's mouths began, little by little, to loosen their grip.

One child, finally able to breathe, let out a long gasp.

"Mother, you almost suffocated me."

The moment the words left his mouth, every adult nearby froze.

Disaster.

The child had spoken.

Their position was exposed.

And yet...

No soldiers charged in.

No blades flashed between the trees.

Instead, from outside, a voice came, warm, almost amused.

"There's a child hiding over there, is there? Come out and get something good to eat. Uncle will give you an extra small bag of flour."

The sound of someone swallowing rang out clearly in the quiet.

Then another.

Hunger, after all, was a force stronger than fear.

As the old saying went, under great reward, there would always be brave men.

At last, one poor man stepped out from the forest, his movements cautious, his voice trembling.

"Y you are really giving out grain?"

"Of course we are."

The soldier handed him a full sack without hesitation, placing it firmly into his arms.

Right behind him, Zhu Yujian added another layer to the moment, his tone solemn.

"I am sorry for disturbing you. Please accept this grain, and I hope that in the future, you will support our Shared Governance faction."

The man stood there, stunned.

He had received grain.

Actual grain.

And along with it, a formal apology from the leader of the rebel army himself.

The weight of that apology was... heavy.

Too heavy.

So heavy that it crushed through suspicion, through fear, through years of accumulated distrust.

In an instant, something shifted in his heart.

The transformation was almost absurdly fast, as if a switch had been flipped.

If one insisted on naming it, perhaps it could be called something like a sudden and overwhelming emotional surrender, the kind that made a person decide, without quite knowing why, that the one standing before him must surely be a good man.

A very good man.

With that first step taken, the rest followed naturally.

One by one, the villagers emerged from the forest.

The militia soldiers handed out sacks of grain to each of them, while Zhu Yujian personally offered a sincere apology to every single recipient, ensuring that each person felt seen, acknowledged, and, most importantly, respected.

Laughter began to replace fear.

Relief replaced tension.

For a moment, it was almost as if war had never existed.

From within the trees, Qian Qianyi frowned slightly.

"This feels like... an act. A performance to win hearts."

Cheng Jiasui let out a quiet chuckle.

"Even if it is an act, it is still better than those who cannot even be bothered to act."

Qian Qianyi considered this carefully.

Then he nodded.

"That... is true."

Neither of them stepped forward to receive grain.

They were, after all, wealthy men, and pride, along with habit, kept them rooted in place.

Only after the iron vehicles finished their distribution and continued toward the capital did the two men finally emerge from hiding and resume their journey.

---

The road ahead felt... different.

Gone were the panicked refugees fleeing for their lives.

In their place were people carrying sacks of grain over their shoulders, smiles on their faces, voices filled with something that had not been present before.

Hope.

"Who would have thought, the rebels actually gave us food."

"What rebels? They are the Shared Governance faction. Don't call them rebels."

"Have you ever seen rebels give grain to the people?"

"Exactly. The rebels of the past burned, killed, and looted. That was rebellion. These people actually want to govern the country properly. They are not the same at all."

Qian Qianyi listened in silence.

Cheng Jiasui smiled faintly.

They passed through a small village.

At first glance, everything seemed normal.

Too normal.

Then the difference revealed itself.

A small squad of Shared Governance soldiers, fewer than ten men, was moving through the village, each carrying a large pack.

One was handing out illustrated booklets to the villagers.

Another was giving candy to children.

A third was helping an elderly woman carry a heavy load.

The entire scene radiated an almost unnatural harmony.

Qian Qianyi inhaled sharply.

"I know this is about winning hearts, but this is... excessive."

Cheng Jiasui shrugged lightly.

"I told you. Even if it is about winning hearts, it is still better than those who never try to win them at all."

They were about to pass through the village when one of the soldiers spotted them from afar and quickly approached.

At once, their attendants tensed, hands moving toward their weapon hilts.

The soldier, however, showed no hostility.

He greeted them cheerfully.

"Hey there, you folks look like learned gentlemen."

Qian Qianyi, maintaining his scholar's pride, said nothing.

Cheng Jiasui, ever the merchant, responded with a polite smile.

"This gentleman beside me is Qian Qianyi, a leading figure of the Jiangnan literary world. As for myself, I am merely an insignificant man. May I ask what you need?"

"Please don't call me 'sir'," the soldier laughed. "If my captain hears that, I will get scolded. Just call me little brother."

Cheng Jiasui smiled.

The soldier continued.

"You are not locals, are you? Heading to Tianjin Port?"

Cheng Jiasui nodded.

"We are returning to Jiangnan and hope to take a ship from Tianjin. We heard your forces have landed there, so we were concerned..."

The soldier waved his hand dismissively.

"That is exactly why I came over. Our Shared Governance faction may have landed at Tianjin, but it does not affect port operations at all. You can go there, find a ship, and no one will interfere with you."

Relief flashed across Cheng Jiasui's face.

Qian Qianyi also visibly relaxed.

The soldier grinned.

"In fact, this is the best time to find a ship. Our large vessels, along with Zheng Zhilong's fleet, are all gathered at Tianjin. You might even be able to hitch a ride on one of our transport ships to Shanghai."

Cheng Jiasui's eyes lit up.

"That is exactly where I intend to go."

"Well then, that is perfect," the soldier said. "Just head to the docks, find any of our people, and tell them you want to go to Shanghai. Someone will help you arrange it."