

Great Ming 1411

Chapter 1411 The Immortal's Perspective

Zhu Youjian's gaze swept slowly across the faces of the officials and eunuchs around him, sharp and probing, as if he could peel open their skulls just by staring hard enough and catch the guilty thought before it fled.

Who said it?

Someone must have said it.

But the moment his eyes passed over them, his expression stiffened.

Every single face looked uneasy.

Not the kind of panic that comes from being caught, but the kind that comes from hearing something true, something so ordinary that no one even thought to deny it.

Which meant one thing.

Even if they had not said it out loud, they all believed it.

Zhu Youjian's voice turned hoarse.

"So... the armies of my Great Ming... are mostly like this?"

Silence fell.

It stretched just long enough to become uncomfortable, until finally Chen Xinjia, the Minister of War, lowered his head and spoke in a subdued tone.

"Not all, Your Majesty... but most of them, yes. Only a handful of commanders refrain from such behavior. People like Sun Chuanting... and Lu Xiangsheng..."

Zhu Youjian's fingers twitched.

"Then why?" he snapped, his voice suddenly rising. "If you all knew this, why did none of you tell me? Why did no one say a word?"

Chen Xinjia let out a slow breath, the kind a man releases when he has already accepted the consequences of what he is about to say.

"If we told you, would it have changed anything?"

That single sentence landed like a stone dropped into still water.

He did not wait for an answer.

"These generals act this way because the court withholds their pay. No grain, no silver. Without provisions, how are they supposed to sustain their troops? If they do not take from the people, what else can they do?"

He paused for a heartbeat, then added quietly,

"In the early years of your reign, many officials submitted memorials requesting that funds from the inner treasury be used to pay the army. But Your Majesty... did not approve them."

Zhu Youjian froze.

It was not that he did not want to approve them.

It was that he had nothing to give.

Before he could say anything, the "Immortal Mirror" flickered again, drawing everyone's attention back to the massive glowing screen.

The next scene began to play.

In the dead of night, three eunuchs approached Wu Sangui in secret, their conversation unfolding clearly before everyone's eyes. Wu Sangui's voice rang out without the slightest attempt at concealment.

"I am not one of them," he said. "Leave the others to me. I will deal with the Public Governance faction."

The city walls fell into a strange, suffocating silence.

Zhu Youjian said nothing.

There was nothing he could say.

The scheme to set wolves upon wolves, to let them tear each other apart while he reaped the benefits, had been laid bare in front of the entire capital, stripped of all dignity and pretense.

Outside the walls, however, laughter erupted.

"See? Truth stays true, lies stay lies."

"Wu Sangui was never one of us. You can tell just by looking at him."

The female reporter raised her metal megaphone again, her tone calm and professional, as if she were merely announcing the weather.

"Now then, let us show everyone what a real Public Governance army has been doing on its way to the capital."

The scene shifted.

Refugees who had fled in panic were being gently persuaded to return to their homes.

"Go back," soldiers told them. "Live your lives as usual. We will not harm you."

"We disturbed the people during our march, and for that we apologize. Compensation will be provided."

The image changed again.

At Tianjin's docks, Qian Qianyi and Cheng Jiasui were searching for transport back south. On the deck of a ship, Zhuge Wangchan spoke with an easy smile.

"As compensation for the disturbance, we will waive your fare. Consider this a free passage home."

Another shift.

A village that had just been plundered lay in ruin, its people still trembling in fear, when armored cavalry rode in. These were the heavy riders under Ma Shouying. Instead of looting, they dismounted and began distributing grain and silver, moving through the village with practiced efficiency.

The despair hanging over the villagers did not vanish all at once, but it cracked, then softened, then slowly gave way to relief, like a storm cloud breaking apart under sunlight.

Laughter returned.

Voices rose.

Life crept back in.

Up on the city wall, Zhu Youjian's face darkened.

The officials exchanged glances, none daring to speak.

The militia soldiers, however, did not need anyone to explain what they had just seen.

They had come here to defend the court, to hold the line against the so-called rebels, yet now the truth was playing out before their own eyes. Their homes had been ransacked by imperial troops, their families beaten and robbed, while the very people they were told to resist were the ones handing out food and aid.

The comparison was not subtle.

It was brutal.

One soldier suddenly threw his spear to the ground.

"I'm not dying for this."

Another followed, tossing aside his bow.

"Whoever wants this job can have it."

"My village got emptied out by Wu Sangui's men," someone shouted. "The Public Governance army fed my family. Why the hell am I standing here defending this city?"

A ripple turned into a wave.

Weapons clattered against stone as more and more militia soldiers abandoned their posts, cursing as they went.

"Only an idiot would keep fighting for this."

The formation collapsed in an instant.

No amount of shouting from their instructors could bring them back. They scattered into the streets of the capital, vanishing into alleys and crowds, unwilling to return even if it meant punishment.

The supervising troops did not dare act.

If they started executing these men on the spot, the entire city would erupt into chaos.

And so, they did nothing.

In the blink of an eye, the once-crowded walls were left with only a thin line of imperial guards, palace troops, and eunuch soldiers, looking painfully small against the vast expanse of stone.

Zhu Youjian stood there, staring blankly at the Immortal Mirror.

A single question echoed in his mind, louder and louder with each passing second.

Why?

Was the heavens not on his side?

He was the Son of Heaven.

If anyone should be favored, it should be him.

Yet the miracles unfolding before his eyes seemed to favor those outside the walls instead.

Before he could sink deeper into that thought, the image on the screen shifted again.

This time, the perspective changed.

The ground fell away.

The city shrank.

The view rose higher and higher, until the entire capital lay spread out below like a map.

The reporter blinked in surprise.

"I didn't touch anything," she muttered. "What's going on?"

The embroidered figure on her chest spoke calmly.

"I am controlling it."

Understanding dawned instantly on her face.

So the Dao Xuan Tianzun had decided to show something personally.

What appeared next was beyond anything the people of this world could comprehend.

From their perspective, it was as if an immortal had taken to the skies, looking down upon the mortal realm with indifferent clarity, every street and courtyard exposed beneath that divine gaze.

Gasps erupted everywhere.

"This... this is what the immortals see?"

The view swept across the capital, gliding over bustling streets, weaving through alleys, even passing above the imperial palace itself.

Zhu Youjian's breath caught in his throat when he saw a familiar figure.

His eldest princess was in the imperial garden, happily playing in the mud, then running to wash her hands under a water spout, completely unaware that she was being watched from the heavens.

"..."

The officials were no better off.

Several of them spotted their own residences in the image, their expressions turning increasingly strange.

The "immortal" continued its flight, drifting northward beyond the city walls until it reached a dense forest.

There, hidden beneath the canopy, lay an army.

Silent.

Still.

Waiting.

The view descended, drawing closer, closer still, until the figures became clear.

It was Wu Sangui.

He stood among his men, speaking to a scout.

"They still haven't started fighting?" he asked, impatience evident in his tone.

"Not yet," the scout replied. "They've formed ranks outside the southern gate. The leaders are gathered together, seemingly in discussion. There are no signs of battle."

Wu Sangui clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Useless bunch. Why aren't they tearing each other apart already? If they would just weaken each other, I could walk in and pick the spoils clean."

He waved his hand dismissively.

"Keep watching them."

"Yes, General."

The scout departed at once, slipping back into the forest.

Wu Sangui turned his gaze toward the capital, lifted his riding whip slightly, and let out a low chuckle.

"When I'm done cleaning all of you up, that dragon throne will have my name on it."

He laughed.

And this time, everyone heard it.

Chapter 1412 So This Is How Wars Are Fought Now?

Wu Sangui's arrogant grin filled the entire screen, zoomed in so close that even the pores on his face were painfully clear.

Zhu Youjian stared at the Immortal Mirror with a face darker than storm clouds. Around him, the civil and military officials looked just as grim, like a funeral procession that forgot who died.

But outside the city, the leaders of the Public Governance faction were all smiles, relaxed, even amused.

Zhu Yujian spoke first, tone calm but sharp. "I think it is time we deal with him."

Zhu Youzhong snorted. "A bastard pretending to be one of us just to muddy the waters should obviously be dealt with."

Zhu Cunji raised a brow. "Oh? And who is going to do the dealing? My Shaanxi army is quite strong, you know. It includes one of Gaojiacun's core elite units, Shi Jian's division."

Chen Qianhu immediately jumped in. "My Shanxi army is strong too."

"I will go!"

"No, I will go!"

"Enough talking. I am going."

And just like that, the scene collapsed into chaos.

Everyone present held equal standing. No one could override the others. Authority, that useful thing in most armies, suddenly became a missing luxury.

So now what?

Flat Rabbit crossed its tiny arms, looking far more composed than the humans. "In a situation like this, everyone wants to go, and no one can out-argue the others. So let us vote."

"That makes sense!"

"Vote!"

"Agreed, vote!"

Unanimous approval.

Chen Qianhu immediately declared, "I vote for myself."

Flat Rabbit tilted its head. "What a coincidence. I also vote for myself."

Zhu Yujian nodded. "Same. I vote for myself too."

A moment of silence.

Then someone finally said what everyone was thinking.

"If everyone votes for themselves, we will never get a result. This is just a waste of time."

Zhu Cunji, the so-called number one prince under heaven, stepped forward to restore order. "No one is allowed to vote for themselves. You may only vote for others."

"That makes sense!"

"Agreed!"

The rule passed instantly, and the vote restarted.

Now that self-interest was off the table, people actually began thinking. Real evaluation. Real judgment. Who could win this fight the fastest, the cleanest, the least troublesome?

When the results came in, the answer was overwhelming.

The Shaanxi army.

Zhu Cunji stood up, smug enough to make saints want to punch him. "Very well. I will go deal with Wu Sangui. Please await good news."

"We do not need to wait," someone said, pointing at the tablet device. "With the Immortal Mirror here, we can watch everything in real time."

Zhu Cunji froze for a second, then burst out laughing. "Right, right. That is even better. Then watch closely."

He spun around dramatically, then looked straight at Shi Jian.

Shi Jian spread his hands like a man who had already accepted his fate, then turned and began issuing orders with crisp precision.

"Yansui army, Yinchuan army, Guyuan army, Yan'an army, Xi'an army, and Gaojiacun's home militia. Move out with me."

That lineup alone was enough to make any enemy reconsider their life choices.

This was not just elite.

This was elite among elites.

The Shaanxi forces set off, circling along the capital walls and heading north.

Inside the capital, Zhu Youjian, the officials, and countless citizens crowded along the walls, watching as the army marched away. No one spoke. They just watched.

Soon, the troops disappeared beyond the horizon.

But almost immediately, they reappeared on the tablet device.

The Immortal Perspective had switched back, locking onto the marching army like an all-seeing eye.

Naturally, everyone's attention snapped back to the Immortal Mirror.

On screen, Zhu Cunji led the Shaanxi army forward at an easy pace. Their march looked effortless, almost leisurely, like a stroll rather than a campaign.

Before long, they reached the dense forest where Wu Sangui's forces were hiding.

Zhu Cunji pulled out a loudspeaker, his voice booming across the trees.

"Wu Sangui, stop hiding. Stop pretending. Everyone is watching you."

Inside the forest, Wu Sangui had already noticed the approaching army. He had stayed still, clinging to the hope that maybe, just maybe, they had not spotted him.

That hope died instantly.

With no way left to hide, he led his troops out and formed ranks.

He smirked the moment he saw who it was.

"Oh, I was wondering who it might be. Turns out it is Zhu Cunji, the Prince of Qin's heir. A man who will spend his entire life as a mere heir, never inheriting the title. What, got desperate and decided to rebel?"

Once upon a time, those words would have hit Zhu Cunji right where it hurt.

Now?

Zhu Cunji just laughed, open and unbothered.

"Ah yes, my tragic life. Truly heartbreaking." He waved a hand casually. "But it does not matter anymore. I have no intention of becoming Prince of Qin. From now on, please address me as a wanderer of the four seas, Zhu Piaoling."

Wu Sangui blinked.

"...What?"

That was not a response he had prepared for.

He let out a cold snort instead. "Zhu Cunji, why are you even here? I, Wu Sangui, have no interest in fighting over the throne. Whoever becomes emperor, I will follow. You do not need to treat me as an enemy. Go back and discuss things with the other princes. That is the sensible move."

Zhu Cunji shook his head slowly, like a teacher correcting a particularly stubborn student.

"No, no, no. You want to compete very badly. You are just waiting for us to kill each other first. Then you step in and take the prize."

Wu Sangui fell silent.

Zhu Cunji smiled. "So I am here on behalf of everyone to beat you up. Surrender now, and you might live. Looting civilians is a serious crime, so you will face a military tribunal, but execution is unlikely. If you resist..."

He tilted his head slightly.

"Bullets do not have eyes."

Wu Sangui glanced back at his army.

Fifty thousand troops.

The last true elite of the Ming court.

The Guanning Cavalry.

With this force behind him, why would he fear a useless prince?

He sneered. "Surrender? My ass. If you want to fight, then fight. I am tired of pretending anyway. I will wipe out all you little Public Governance faction fools, then go have a proper talk with Zhu Youjian."

Zhu Cunji's smile widened. "You said that yourself."

Wu Sangui lifted his chin. "So what if I did?"

Zhu Cunji turned around and shouted to his army.

"Did you all hear that?"

The soldiers roared back in unison, voices shaking the ground.

"We heard it!"

Zhu Cunji grinned. "Then tell Wu Sangui. What is our tactic?"

The answer came like thunder.

"When poor, maneuver. When rich, blow them up!"

Zhu Cunji raised his hand. "And right now, are we poor or rich?"

"Rich!"

"So what do we do?"

"Blow him up!"

"Blow him up!"

"Blow him up!"

Wu Sangui frowned, completely baffled. "What nonsense are these idiots—"

Before he could finish, the artillery behind Zhu Cunji's formation roared to life.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Back at the capital, the crowd was still glued to the tablet device.

On screen, the Public Governance forces and Wu Sangui's army faced each other from a distance. After a brief exchange of words, Zhu Cunji made the first move.

To be precise, he shouted one line.

"Blow him up."

And then... he did absolutely nothing else.

No tactics. No formations. No command finesse.

Everything else was left to the generals.

Because Gaojiacun's way of fighting resembled something far closer to a modern army. And modern armies had a very simple philosophy.

First, bombard.

After that, you could talk about formations.

Wu Sangui had lined up his troops neatly.

Which, unfortunately for him, made them perfect targets.

Shell after shell rained down into his ranks.

From the Immortal Perspective, it looked almost surreal. Like flowers blooming in a sea of people.

Except each "flower" was an explosion.

And each explosion erased an entire circle of men.

Back on the capital walls, the defenders' faces turned pale.

Zhu Youjian could not hold back anymore.

"What is going on?" he blurted out. "Is this how wars are fought now?"

Chapter 1413 Go Home and Get Some Sleep

Inside the capital, countless people stared blankly at the screen.

From the Immortal Perspective, what they saw was nothing short of horrifying. Continuous explosions bloomed across Wu Sangui's army, one chain after another. One side exploded, then another, like a relentless storm that refused to end.

Wu Sangui's fifty thousand troops were stunned in an instant.

The strongest among them, over two thousand elite soldiers capable of charging in full armor, immediately rushed forward. Standing still meant death, so they chose to gamble on movement.

They barely took a few steps before they were met with a wall of gunfire.

Firearms. Endless firearms. So many that no one could even count them.

And the rate of fire...

It was terrifyingly fast.

Zhu Youjian suddenly felt a long-buried memory claw its way back to life and punch him straight in the face.

Years ago, he had read a memorial written by a certain vice general named Luo Xi. The man claimed that Shi Jian's troops had fired four volleys of gunfire within ten breaths and crushed Mongol cavalry.

At the time, Zhu Youjian had dismissed it as nonsense. He had stripped Luo Xi of his post on the spot and thrown him out for "writing fiction."

And now?

Now he was watching that same "fiction" unfold right in front of his eyes.

Wu Sangui's elite troops collapsed in barely ten breaths under the storm of bullets.

As for the rest of the army, they fared even worse. The bombardment had already shattered their morale. Fifty thousand men broke almost at once, screaming as they fled in every direction.

Zhou Di, the commander-general of Shanhai Pass, needed exactly zero point zero one seconds to make his decision.

He peeled away from Wu Sangui's army, ran to the side of the battlefield, and knelt down neatly.

Surrender.

Clean. Efficient. No hesitation.

That left only Wu Sangui's core forces stranded in the center of the storm, being torn apart by shells and bullets, trapped between panic and annihilation.

Zhu Youjian's mouth hung open.

He forgot to close it.

So did every official around him.

The common people said nothing. But when they turned their heads to look at the emperor and his officials, there was something new in their eyes.

Mockery.

Wu Sangui's army collapsed into complete chaos, scattering in all directions.

Firearm units had one well-known weakness. They were not great at pursuit.

Under normal circumstances, this would have allowed many enemies to escape.

Unfortunately for Wu Sangui, Gaojiacun did not rely on firearms alone.

A heavy cavalry unit that had been shadowing the battlefield from a distance suddenly charged forward.

Ma Shouying's armored cavalry.

They swept in like a steel tide and cut off the fleeing soldiers.

The moment the fleeing troops saw cavalry blocking their path, they understood.

There was no escape.

So they dropped to their knees.

Surrender again.

From the perspective of the audience, the battle felt fast.

In reality, it was even faster.

At most, the time it took for two sticks of incense to burn.

That was all it took for the entire battle to end.

Wu Sangui and his son were unlucky. A shell had struck them directly, sending them off to the underworld before they could even consider rehabilitation.

No labor reform. No second chances.

As for the tens of thousands under his command, they were all captured.

Every single one.

Not a single man escaped.

"Alright, alright." Zhu Cunji stretched lazily. "General Shi, you stay here and handle the cleanup. I am heading back to the capital."

Shi Jian smiled and waved him off. "Leave it to me."

Zhu Cunji turned and left without another thought.

Soon, the Immortal Perspective followed him again, drifting through the air as he returned.

Before long, Zhu Youjian could see him with the naked eye.

Zhu Cunji walked back as if he had just taken a casual stroll, not fought a battle involving tens of thousands.

He returned to the hotpot table and dropped into his seat.

"Hey, the dishes I like are all gone."

Zhu Yujian pointed without hesitation. "Flat Rabbit ate the most."

Flat Rabbit looked completely unapologetic. "I am poor. I cannot afford good food most of the time. Since you are treating us today, of course I eat more."

Everyone froze.

"You are a founding-level figure. How can you be poor?"

Flat Rabbit shrugged. "Gave it all to the poor."

Silence.

Zhu Yujian cleared his throat. "The battle is over. Time to return to business. Who is going to persuade Zhu Youjian to abdicate?"

"I will go." Chen Qianhu stood up. "I am full anyway."

He wiped his mouth, then suddenly frowned.

A strand of beef was stuck between his teeth.

It bothered him.

Very much.

He instinctively reached for a toothpick.

Then remembered he was out in the field.

No toothpick.

So he did the next best thing.

He used his finger.

Digging around in his teeth while walking toward the southern gate of the capital.

Step by step.

Calm.

Focused.

And absolutely horrifying.

Chen Qianhu stopped outside the gate and looked up.

On the walls stood Zhu Youjian.

Now, Chen Qianhu already looked intimidating on a normal day.

Right now, he had one finger in his mouth, digging around, occasionally pulling it out with a bit of saliva trailing along.

It was... not a good look.

In fact, it was the kind of look that haunted people's dreams.

The officials and citizens on the capital walls collectively sucked in a breath so sharply it could have vacuumed dust off the stones.

They instinctively took three steps back.

Zhu Youjian let out a miserable scream and toppled backward, chair and all.

Wang Chengen rushed forward and caught him. "Your Majesty, hold on."

Zhu Youjian trembled. "He is coming to eat me."

Wang Chengen was drenched in sweat, but still spoke with absolute loyalty. "This servant will protect Your Majesty even at the cost of his life. If he wants to eat you, he will have to eat me first. Once he is full, he will not harm Your Majesty."

Zhu Youjian froze.

What kind of comfort was that?

Yes, it was loyal.

But it somehow made everything worse.

Chen Qianhu grinned.

A line of saliva slid from the corner of his mouth, mixed with a hint of chili oil, bright red and deeply unsettling.

Inside the city, hearts pounded wildly.

If you gathered all those heartbeats together, they could probably form a full symphony.

Loud. Grand. Terrifying.

Chen Qianhu finally spoke.

"Zhu Youjian, you have seen the situation. I advise you to abdicate and hand the realm over to collective governance. Otherwise..."

He trailed off.

A sinister chuckle followed.

"Heh heh heh..."

On the walls, at least two thousand people completed the sentence for him in their minds.

"If you do not, he will eat the emperor!"

Zhu Youjian: "!!!"

Chen Qianhu: "What the hell are you all thinking? Stop adding lines for me!"

He snapped.

The reaction was immediate chaos. Guards tightened their grip on their weapons, but the memory of the earlier battle flashed in their minds.

Their weapons were useless.

Completely useless.

Despair crept in.

Chen Qianhu took a deep breath and corrected himself.

"What I meant was... otherwise... I will beat him."

The crowd gasped again.

"So he beats the emperor before eating him? He will not even grant a quick death. That is even more brutal than we imagined."

Chen Qianhu: "!!!"

Zhu Youjian could not take it anymore.

He jumped to his feet and fled, covering his face.

Wang Chengen hurried after him. "Your Majesty, wait for this servant!"

Only Wang Chengen followed.

Not a single official moved.

At this point, imperial authority had completely collapsed.

Everyone knew it was over.

So the officials began thinking for themselves.

What posture should they use to surrender?

How could they secure a good position in the new regime?

Among the crowd, the Grand Secretary He Fengsheng quietly glanced at Liang Shixian.

Most officials looked troubled.

Liang Shixian did not.

He looked calm. Too calm.

The king of quiet coasting clearly had a plan.

He Fengsheng carefully moved closer and whispered, "Brother Liang, guide me. In this moment of dynastic change, how do I stay invisible and continue coasting?"

Liang Shixian did not even hesitate.

"Go home. Close your door. Sleep properly. Do not get involved."

Chapter 1414 I Am Going to Die

Zhu Youjian stumbled all the way back into the imperial palace, his steps unsteady and disordered, as if the strength had been drained from his bones and replaced with something hollow that could collapse at any moment.

After watching that video, he already understood everything, not on the surface but deep inside, in a place where denial could no longer survive.

He was finished.

It was not only because the capital no longer had any army capable of real resistance, because even if such a force still existed, it would not change the outcome in the slightest, since against the Public Governance faction, against that kind of casual and effortless bombardment, any so-called resistance would only end up as a tragic joke.

If he wanted to live, there was only one path left to him.

Abdicate.

That was the only remaining way to preserve his life.

However, Zhu Youjian was not that kind of man who would bend himself just to survive, because although he knew very well that he had many faults, he also knew equally clearly that there was one thing he would never do, and that was to wag his tail like a dog in front of his enemies in exchange for mercy.

If death was the price, then so be it, he could die, but he would never allow himself to become something ugly just for the sake of continuing to breathe.

Before dying, there were still things that had to be done.

He quickened his pace and rushed toward the inner palace.

By the time he arrived, chaos had already spread everywhere.

After that horrifying video circulated, everyone in the palace understood that the emperor was finished, and once that realization settled in, self-preservation became the only instinct left, so guards, eunuchs, and palace maids had already begun to flee, clutching valuables in their arms as they rushed out of the palace in disorder.

All across the palace, people could be seen carrying antiques, jade, and ornaments, scrambling to escape like scattered birds.

In the past, if Zhu Youjian encountered such a scene, he would not hesitate to order executions on the spot, but now he did not even spare them a glance, because whether they ran or stayed had nothing to do with him anymore.

With Wang Chengen following behind him, he crossed through layers of palace halls and finally arrived at the residence of Empress Zhou.

Inside, Empress Zhou stood waiting anxiously with only one personal maid remaining at her side, as the once crowded attendants had already scattered, leaving her in the same lonely state as the emperor himself, who now had only Wang Chengen left beside him.

Zhu Youjian looked at her, and in his gaze there was a deep sorrow that could not be easily described.

Empress Zhou saw it immediately, and her heart sank.

Zhu Youjian let out a quiet sigh and spoke in a calm voice that carried an unbearable weight.

"Kill yourself."

Empress Zhou was startled and could not help but respond in confusion.

"What did you say?"

"I will soon be dead," Zhu Youjian said slowly, his tone steady yet heavy, "and after I am gone, if you remain alive in this world, you will inevitably fall into the hands of the rebels, and what will happen to you then will be beyond endurance."

Empress Zhou fell silent.

After a moment, she clenched her teeth and made her decision.

She turned to the maid and said softly, "Take everything in this room that you value, including my jewelry, and leave."

The maid burst into tears, calling out to her, but Empress Zhou had already turned away and picked up a length of white silk.

Zhu Youjian, meanwhile, had already left without another word, heading toward the next place he needed to go.

After sending the maid away, Empress Zhou tied the silk to a beam, adjusted it carefully, and then placed the loop around her neck.

At the moment her body lifted, the silk suddenly snapped cleanly, as if it had been cut by a sharp blade, and she fell heavily to the ground.

She froze in confusion, then frowned and tried again, this time more carefully than before.

Before she could even complete the motion, the silk broke once more, the cut clean and precise.

She picked up the broken silk and examined it, certain now that it had not broken naturally, but had been deliberately cut, yet when she looked around, there was no one in sight.

Just as doubt filled her mind, a small figure suddenly appeared on the beam above.

It was a palm-sized humanoid figure, holding a tiny fruit knife in its hand, sitting casually as if it had been there all along.

Recon-type Dao Xuan Tianzun CC-01.

It sighed lightly and spoke.

"Do not kill yourself, because you will not be humiliated, so you can rest assured."

Empress Zhou was shocked and asked, "What are you, a deity or a demon?"

The small figure spread its hands and replied, "There is no need to concern yourself with what I am, what matters is that you do not need to die, and I can guarantee that you will not suffer any inhumane treatment, because at times of dynastic change, the ones who suffer the most are always women and children."

"Stay here peacefully, nothing will happen to you."

...

At the same time, Zhu Youjian continued running through the inner palace without stopping, as if driven forward by something that would not allow him to rest.

Soon, he arrived before the Crown Prince, and without hesitation, he personally changed the boy into ragged commoner clothing while speaking in a firm and urgent tone.

"Today you are the Crown Prince, but tomorrow you will be nothing more than a common man, so in times of chaos you must conceal your identity and hide your name, and when you see the elderly you should address them as elder, while those younger than you should be addressed as uncle or brother."

"If by chance you survive and one day are able to avenge your parents, then you must never forget what I have told you today."

The Crown Prince burst into tears.

Zhu Youjian kicked him to the ground and immediately turned to leave, continuing forward without pause.

In a small garden ahead, the eldest princess Zhu Meichuo and the younger Zhaoren Princess were still playing, unaware of the chaos that had already engulfed the palace, as all the attendants had fled and the world around them had already begun to collapse, yet their young age left them unable to understand any of it.

Zhu Youjian looked at them, and his eyes were filled with both love and unbearable pain.

"In such times, why were you born into my family?"

After saying this, he raised his sword and struck toward the eldest princess.

If this strike had landed, history would have taken a different turn.

However, at the moment the blade descended, it was suddenly stopped by something invisible, and no matter how much force Zhu Youjian exerted, the sword could not move forward even the slightest distance.

He was shocked and shouted, "Who is it that dares to block my sword?"

No one answered.

Only the frightened eyes of the two young princesses stared back at him.

"Who is it, come out!"

Wang Chengen, trembling, said, "Could it be that an immortal has intervened?"

Zhu Youjian suddenly realized that this was indeed the only explanation, because not long ago at the southern gate he had personally witnessed an Immortal Mirror descending from the sky, and if something unseen could block his blade, then it could only be the work of such a being.

He raised his head and shouted toward the sky.

"Immortal, you help the rebels seize my empire, and now you come to stop me from killing my own daughters, do you understand how miserable women are in times of chaos, are you trying to save them or harm them?"

The sky remained silent.

Zhu Youjian swung his sword once more, but the result was exactly the same, as the invisible force blocked his strike again and protected the two girls.

At that moment, he understood that whoever was intervening would not allow him to kill them.

He stopped, turned, and ran.

Wang Chengen hurried after him and asked anxiously, "Your Majesty, where are you going now?"

Zhu Youjian gritted his teeth and replied, "To die."

Wang Chengen was shocked and tried to stop him, but Zhu Youjian ignored him completely and continued running forward.

In truth, he did not know where to go, but in such moments of confusion, people instinctively move toward higher ground, and the nearest high place within reach was Wansui Hill.

As he ran, he muttered to himself, "Having lost the empire, I have no face to meet my ancestors, and I cannot die in my bed, but at the top of Wansui Hill there used to be a crooked tree, and I will hang myself there."

Chapter 1415 Living Is Harder Than Dying

The crooked tree that Zhu Youjian liked the most had originally stood at the highest point of Wansui Hill, growing there for years like a silent witness to everything that had passed beneath it.

Unfortunately for him, the newly built waterworks facility also required the highest possible ground, because only from such elevation could water be distributed efficiently to the areas below, and so that unfortunate crooked tree had been cut down without hesitation.

Zhu Youjian stood in front of the brand new facility, his mood sinking to an even darker place.

This was simply unreasonable.

He could not even hang himself on the tree he liked most.

The surroundings were completely quiet, with no workers in sight, as the facility was currently in a state of rest, leaving the entire mountaintop empty and still.

Wang Chengen hesitated before speaking, his voice cautious.

"Your Majesty, perhaps... we do not need to hang ourselves after all."

Zhu Youjian shook his head stubbornly and replied, "There must be another place suitable for hanging, there must be."

Wang Chengen tried again, his tone almost pleading, "There is no need to be so persistent about this kind of thing."

Zhu Youjian ignored him completely and swept his gaze across the area, and soon enough he noticed a thick water pipe suspended slightly above ground level not far away.

In his eyes, that pipe was no different from a crooked tree branch.

Without hesitation, he took out the white silk he had already prepared and threw it over the pipe.

At that exact moment, the door of the waterworks facility suddenly opened from the inside, and a mass-produced Dao Xuan Tianzun stepped out with a faint smile.

"Zhu Youjian, why are you in such a hurry to die?"

Zhu Youjian turned sharply, his eyes locking onto the man before him, and although he did not recognize Li Daoxuan, he could immediately tell that this person was anything but ordinary, because no normal man would dare to call out his name so casually while facing him with such calm composure.

"Who are you?"

Li Daoxuan casually flicked his robe and replied, "Just someone passing by to buy soy sauce."

Zhu Youjian did not believe a single word of that, because if he were truly just passing by, he would not dare to address the emperor in such a manner, so Zhu Youjian said coldly, "I intend to hang myself here, so if you have nothing important, do not interfere."

Li Daoxuan looked at him and said plainly, "You are a coward."

Zhu Youjian's anger erupted instantly as he shouted, "Impudent, how dare you call me a coward, I do not even fear death, how could I be described as such, at this moment there is nothing I fear."

Li Daoxuan shook his head slightly and said, "In truth, you are very afraid, because you are afraid of living on and facing the ridicule of others, afraid of a life you can no longer adapt to, afraid of the

humiliation that comes after losing the throne, afraid of becoming an ordinary man, and it is precisely because you are so afraid that you want to die, because once you are dead, everything ends cleanly and easily."

Zhu Youjian fell silent.

He found himself unable to refute even a single word.

Li Daoxuan continued, "Your Empress Zhou, your Crown Prince, and your daughters have already been protected by my people, and they are all alive and unharmed at this moment, although their future lives will most likely no longer include luxury and privilege, and they will have to endure hardship, but that hardship is simply what ordinary people experience every day, and there is nothing extraordinary about it."

Zhu Youjian was shocked and immediately asked, "You protected them, then you must be the leader of the rebels."

Li Daoxuan smiled and shook his head.

"No, the rebels do not have a leader, at least not for now, although they act according to my instructions, I am not their leader, and in fact, I do not even belong to this world."

Zhu Youjian was stunned, and in his mind, those words immediately took on another meaning, because to not belong to this world was to stand beyond the three realms and outside the five elements, which could only describe one kind of existence.

A god.

Realization struck him all at once, and his face turned pale.

"So it is you."

Wang Chengen was so frightened that he dropped to his knees without hesitation.

Li Daoxuan spoke calmly, "Zhu Youjian, all these years, you have been diligent and hardworking in your attempt to become a good emperor, and that much I do acknowledge."

Zhu Youjian's body trembled slightly.

Li Daoxuan continued, "However, your diligence was misdirected, and because of your limitations in ability, the more you worked, the worse the situation of the realm became."

Zhu Youjian's voice turned hoarse as he retorted, "Is it not because you stirred chaos that the world has become like this, if not for you, I would have already pacified the Manchus, eliminated the bandits, and restored peace to the realm."

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly and shook his head.

"If I had not intervened, the Ming dynasty would already have been beyond saving, the rebel forces would have overthrown it, Chuang Wang Li Zicheng would have entered the capital, and then the Manchus would have moved in, defeated him, and become the new masters of the realm, and the Ming would have collapsed completely, turning into the Qing."

Zhu Youjian's eyes widened in shock.

Li Daoxuan raised his hand casually, and in the next instant, a tablet device descended from the sky, its screen lighting up as it began to play a television drama.

It was Playful Qianlong.

Li Daoxuan gestured toward it and said, "Take a look, this is what the world will become a hundred years from now."

Zhu Youjian stared at the screen, and as he watched the scenes unfold, his breathing grew heavier, because although he did not fully understand what he was seeing, he believed it completely.

Within the Immortal Mirror, the future was already laid bare before him.

"So the realm truly falls into the hands of the Manchus."

He did not even need an answer.

Li Daoxuan looked at him and said, "I came into this world to prevent it from becoming like that, and yet you claim that I am causing chaos, when in reality, it is you who has been interfering with my efforts all along, because I am trying to make the world better, while you have been pushing it in the opposite direction."

Zhu Youjian collapsed onto the ground.

Those words cut deeper than any blade.

All this time, he had believed himself to be a wise ruler, someone who had struggled to save a crumbling dynasty, and that only in the matter of Liaodong had he shown a bit of stubbornness that others exploited to label him incompetent and rise in rebellion.

But now he realized that from the very beginning, he had been wrong, and had stood on the opposite side of what was truly right.

There was nothing more painful than having one's entire life denied in a single moment.

Zhu Youjian had always been stubborn and unwilling to admit fault when facing those beneath him, but now, in front of a being who knew the past and the future and possessed unimaginable power, that stubbornness could no longer hold.

He let out a broken cry and clutched his head.

"This cannot be true, this cannot be true, I am not this incompetent, I am a wise ruler, I am a wise ruler."

Li Daoxuan said calmly, "Crying will not help, and dying will not help either, so stop trying to escape."

Zhu Youjian's voice trembled as he asked, "Then what should I do now?"

"Reform through labor," Li Daoxuan replied with a faint smile, "although your actions have caused harm to society, you did not act with malicious intent, and deep down you did wish to govern well, but due to your lack of ability and other factors, you must bear indirect responsibility for the suffering of the people, so I sentence you to ten years of reform through labor, during which you will learn how to live as an ordinary person, experience the reality of work, and understand the life that common people endure."

Zhu Youjian fell silent.

Li Daoxuan looked at him and said, "Living is far more difficult than dying, so if you are not a coward, then continue to live, and use your own experience to understand what this new world should be like."

Chapter 1416 Entering the Capital

Zhu Youjian broke down completely, crying out loud without restraint, the sound raw and unfiltered, no longer carrying even a trace of the dignity he had once clung to as emperor.

Wang Chengen stood beside him, wiping his own tears again and again, because this loyal eunuch had already made up his mind long ago that if his master chose to hang himself from that crooked tree, he would follow without hesitation, yet now that Zhu Youjian had abandoned the idea of suicide, a heavy weight in his chest finally loosened, leaving behind a complicated mixture of relief and sorrow.

At that moment, hurried footsteps echoed along the mountain path as another figure rushed upward in panic, shouting before he even reached the summit.

"Your Majesty, do not act rashly!"

The man who arrived in such a flustered state was none other than Jin Yiwei Qianhu, Mi Qingli.

When he reached the top and saw Zhu Youjian and Wang Chengen in tears, while Li Daoxuan stood calmly in front of the waterworks facility, everything became clear to him in an instant, and his face lit up with relief as he quickly cupped his fists.

"Many thanks to Dao Xuan Tianzun."

Zhu Youjian turned his head sharply, staring at him with disbelief.

"So it is you, a Jin Yiwei, and yet you have..."

Mi Qingli's expression turned bitter as he lowered his head.

"Your Majesty, I joined the rebels only to preserve your life."

Zhu Youjian fell silent.

Li Daoxuan waved his hand casually and said, "Mi Qingli, Zhu Youjian and Wang Chengen will temporarily be placed under the custody of the Sky Shield Bureau, and his family members will also be taken under their protection, after matters here are concluded, they will be transferred to a designated reform through labor facility for management."

Mi Qingli hesitated for a moment before asking carefully, "May I ask, how many years has His Majesty been sentenced to?"

Li Daoxuan only smiled without answering.

Wang Chengen, however, spoke up from the side, "The immortal just said... ten years."

Mi Qingli's face immediately showed joy.

"Ten years is not much, that is truly good news."

Zhu Youjian looked at him in confusion, unable to understand how such a thing could be considered good.

Mi Qingli continued earnestly, "Your Majesty is not yet thirty years old, so even after ten years, you will still be under forty, and moreover, reform through labor is not necessarily fixed in duration, as long as your performance is good, your sentence can be reduced and you may be released early."

Zhu Youjian was stunned.

Mi Qingli then added, "This humble servant is willing to accompany Your Majesty into the labor camp and assist you, so that you may regain your freedom sooner."

Zhu Youjian's expression turned dazed, and after a long pause, he spoke slowly, "All the officials of the court have abandoned me, and yet the one willing to accompany me in the end is a traitor who has already joined the rebels."

Wang Chengen immediately added, "This servant is also here."

Zhu Youjian let out a long sigh, raised his head, and stared into the distance with empty eyes.

...

The gates of the capital were opened.

Of course, they did not open on their own, but were opened by Cao Huachun.

However, the scene that people had imagined, where rebel forces would surge into the city like a flood, did not occur.

"To prevent disturbance to the people, the army is not to enter the city in full."

"Each unit will send only five hundred men into the city to maintain order."

"Soldiers entering the city are strictly forbidden from entering private residences."

"Looting is strictly prohibited."

"No one is allowed to take even a single item without authorization."

Commanders of each force repeated these orders again and again to their troops, emphasizing discipline without pause.

Although the Gao Family Village regional militia had already undergone strict ideological training and moral education, this was still the capital, where officials and nobles were everywhere and wealth was abundant, and the greatest danger was that soldiers might be tempted by what they saw.

Li Daoxuan understood this clearly, because in the original course of history, when Chuang Wang Li Zicheng entered the capital, everything had collapsed almost overnight.

Why did it collapse?

Because power and wealth blinded them.

After enduring long hardship to seize the world, a thought would naturally arise in people's minds, that from this day forward, no one could destroy their clan, and instead they would be the ones deciding the fate of others, and once that thought took root, everything would fall apart in an instant.

Before success, people unite around ideals and struggle together toward a shared vision.

After success, unity dissolves, and those ideals are easily twisted by desire.

For this reason, Li Daoxuan had to firmly control the situation and prevent the people of Gao Family Village from following the same path of rapid corruption.

He opened the lid of the sandbox and allowed his signature low-hanging cloud to hover above the capital, while deliberately extending one hand into the world, wearing the Infinity Glove, letting part of his golden hand remain visible in the sky.

As a result, everyone in the capital could see an immortal cloud floating overhead, within which a faintly visible golden hand appeared like a divine presence watching over everything.

People from Gao Family Village immediately erupted in cheers.

"That is Dao Xuan Tianzun's hand!"

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is personally overseeing the capital."

"With Dao Xuan Tianzun here, everything is safe."

With such a presence above them, no one dared to violate orders or act out of line.

The forces of Gao Family Village entered the city in organized groups, maintaining strict discipline.

Inside the capital, silence filled the streets.

Officials, guards, merchants, and commoners who had previously gathered at the city walls to watch had all retreated into their homes, fear still lingering in their hearts.

But that fear did not last long.

The army of the Public Governance faction proved to be far better than they had imagined, because not only did they refrain from causing disorder, they actively maintained it, with squads stationed at every street corner and temporary assistance stations set up at intersections to help the people.

At one point, a militia soldier, accustomed to speaking loudly, accidentally frightened a civilian while talking, and was immediately reprimanded by his squad leader, who scolded him on the spot, which instead caused the civilian to feel embarrassed and step in to defend the soldier, insisting that it was only his own timidity and not the soldier's fault.

Meanwhile, Zhu Yujian, Zhu Youzhong, Zhu Cunji, Zhu Youxu, Chen Qianhu, and Flat Rabbit, along with several others, hurried toward the imperial palace as representatives.

The guards at the gates had already fled, leaving the palace wide open.

They entered without resistance.

Inside, the corridors and pathways were in disarray, with items scattered everywhere, belongings dropped by fleeing eunuchs and palace maids, many of which were valuable treasures.

Zhu Cunji bent down and casually picked up a piece of jade, weighing it in his hand before shaking his head with a faint smile.

"This piece alone would be worth at least a hundred taels of silver, and yet it has been discarded here so carelessly."

Zhu Yujian replied, "It was likely taken by a palace maid from her master's chambers in hopes of escaping with it, but she carried too much and dropped it along the way."

Zhu Youzhong added, "The eunuchs and maids have it hard as well, if they can take some wealth and start a new life outside, that would not be a bad outcome."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

At that moment, Flat Rabbit suddenly leapt forward and snatched the jade from Zhu Cunji's hand, grinning as it spoke, "You may have picked it up, but now it belongs to me."

Zhu Cunji laughed and scolded, "Gao Family Village strictly forbids the private possession of spoils, if you take that, Dao Xuan Tianzun will deal with you."

Flat Rabbit grinned wider and replied, "Who said I am keeping it for myself, I am going to distribute it to the poor."

Zhu Cunji shook his head and said, "Even if you intend to give it to the poor, you cannot just take it like that, you must first register and submit it to the village treasury, then apply for its allocation before distributing it, otherwise you are violating procedure."

Flat Rabbit blinked and said, "Is that not just making things more complicated for no reason, going in a circle only to reach the same result?"

Zhu Youzhong smiled and explained, "Such procedures are necessary, because not everyone is like you, you may act without selfish intent, but others may not, and if this item passes through the hands of someone else without proper process, it may never reach the poor in the end."

Chapter 1417 The World Belongs to You

Flat Rabbit nodded along in a half-understanding way, clearly not interested in digging deeper, because in its mind, if the learned people had already explained things like this, then there was no need to overthink it, just follow along and things would work out.

It pulled out a large sack, tossed the jade inside with a casual flick, then waved at the others with a grin that looked entirely too pleased with itself.

"Come on, come on, anything you pick up goes in here, we will submit everything to the village treasury together, and after a few days, I will go file an application to take it back out, hehehe."

The others burst into laughter at once.

"Only you, Rabbit, would dare apply for something like that, nobody else has the guts to even try."

"That is right, if it were us, we would not even dare open our mouths."

Laughing and chatting, the group continued deeper into the palace.

Along the way, every palace hall they passed showed signs of having been ransacked by palace maids and eunuchs, leaving chaos everywhere, valuables stripped away in haste, yet plenty of items still scattered about, abandoned in the panic.

From time to time, a body could be seen lying on the ground, the result of desperate struggles over wealth, where people had turned on each other in their final moments.

At the sight of this, several people instinctively lifted their heads to look at the faint golden hand in the sky, half-hidden within the clouds, and a thought rose quietly in their hearts.

If Dao Xuan Tianzun had not insisted all this time on strict moral discipline within the Gao Family Village regional militia, then perhaps right now it would be their own people inside this palace, hacking at each other over treasures, descending into the same kind of rot.

That kind of foresight was not something ordinary people could possess.

They walked on in silence for a while, until at last they arrived at the Hall of Imperial Supremacy.

The moment they stepped forward, they saw Crown Prince Zhu Cilang kneeling to the left of the entrance, and beside him stood Yong Wang-Zhu Cijiong and Ding Wang-Zhu Cihuan, the three brothers dressed in ragged commoner clothing, with the words "obedient citizen" pasted onto their hats in crude characters.

Everyone paused, caught completely off guard, unsure how to respond to such a scene.

Before anyone could decide what to do, hurried footsteps approached from the distance as Mi Qingli ran over, raising a token high in his hand.

"I am an agent of the Sky Shield Bureau, Mi Qingli. By the order of Dao Xuan Tianzun, I am here to escort Zhu Youjian's family members for unified management."

Zhu Cunji blinked, then pointed at himself.

"Wait, do I count as his family?"

Zhu Youzhong raised a brow.

"I suppose I count as well?"

Zhu Yujian spread his hands.

"That would make quite a large family."

The group burst into laughter.

Mi Qingli shook his head.

"Stop joking, everyone knows what is meant. Direct family only, wife, children, daughters. Those who have already branched out do not count. You all handle your own matters, I will take these children first."

They had been worrying about what to do with the three boys, so having someone step in to take responsibility felt like a great relief, and they watched as Mi Qingli led them away before turning and entering the hall.

This was the place where the Ming court once held its assemblies, where officials argued fiercely day after day, sometimes even coming to blows right in the hall, yet now it stood empty and silent, a vast space stretching out with only a few palace cats wandering lazily inside.

One large orange cat spotted them and bolted in an instant, disappearing into a hole with a flash of fur.

The group looked around, exchanging glances, until Chen Qianhu finally spoke.

"With things like this, what do we actually do next? Zhu Youjian has been brought down, the officials are all hiding in their homes, do we set up a new emperor?"

"A new emperor or not is not the key point," Zhu Yujian replied calmly, his tone steady, yet carrying a weight that drew everyone's attention. "What is clear is that the system of rule by one must end, what comes next has to be rule by many."

Zhu Youzhong nodded.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun himself said it clearly, who sits on the throne is not important, but a system where one person decides everything cannot continue."

Flat Rabbit scratched its head.

"This is where my knowledge ends, you scholars handle it, discuss it among yourselves, and once you are done, just let Dao Xuan Tianzun take a look, that should settle everything."

The suggestion was so straightforward that the others found themselves nodding in agreement almost immediately.

"Yes, that makes sense, we discuss among ourselves, that is rule by many, and once we reach a conclusion, we let Dao Xuan Tianzun make the final call."

However, before the thought could fully settle, the golden-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on Zhu Yujian's chest suddenly spoke, its voice carrying a faint trace of amusement.

"That will not do. If only a few of you discuss matters and then hand everything to me for a final decision, how is that fundamentally different from the Six Ministries discussing matters and then submitting them to the emperor for approval?"

Chen Qianhu responded without hesitation.

"Of course it is different, you are Dao Xuan Tianzun, you know five hundred years into the past, five hundred years into the future, and everything in between, you cannot be wrong, letting you decide would prevent us from making mistakes."

Laughter echoed again.

The cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on Chen Qianhu's chest spoke next.

"When I travel across the world, visiting distant mountains and rivers, will you all simply wait for me to return before making decisions?"

Silence.

Then the cotton-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on Flat Rabbit's chest added another question.

"When I go into seclusion for cultivation, will you suspend all governance and wait for me as well, would that not simply return things to the old days?"

More silence.

Then the golden-thread Dao Xuan Tianzun on Zhu Cunji's chest spoke, its tone now calm and firm.

"This world ultimately belongs to you, and to the people, not to me. I can help you for a time, but not for a lifetime. What you need to build is a system of governance that can function even without me, not one where the emperor's rule is simply replaced by mine."

That single statement struck everyone like a sudden jolt.

"Think carefully, do not rush your decisions," Li Daoxuan continued. "I will watch from above, and only watch. You have already read enough from the heavenly texts, I do not intend to say another word."

With that, every Dao Xuan Tianzun, whether golden-thread, silver-thread, or cotton-thread, fell silent all at once.

The hall was left in complete stillness.

Several seconds passed before Zhu Cunji finally spoke, scratching his head awkwardly.

"You all know me, I am nothing but a useless playboy, governing a country is not something I understand, I will return to Shaanxi and bring over the real scholars to offer advice."

Chen Qianhu laughed.

"I am just an actor, I will also need to find people with real knowledge to help."

Flat Rabbit slapped its forehead.

"Sichuan has plenty of local chieftains and administrators who actually know how to manage territories, I should go ask them what they think."

Zhu Youzhong nodded.

"I will call in capable people from Henan as well."

Zhu Youxu added thoughtfully.

"And the old official system must be reorganized and cleaned up."

A moment later, everyone spoke at once.

"There is too much to do."

"There is no way we can finish all of it quickly."

...

The next day, the Public Governance faction issued a joint proclamation to the former officials of the Ming court.

"All civil and military officials are to submit their names and positions by the following day, and three days later present themselves for court. Those willing to serve will be appointed according to their abilities, those unwilling may return to their hometowns."

The moment the order was released, those eager for official careers rushed forward to register, while others chose to remain in the shadows, quietly observing how the situation would develop.

Three days later, the registered officials gathered outside Meridian Gate, dressed in simple blue robes and small caps, kneeling as they waited to be called.

Men who once carried themselves with dignity, men known for clever speech or literary fame, men full of pride or sharp tongues, all now stood with lowered heads, subdued and cautious, like wooden figures stripped of their former presence.

Some had shaved their heads to become monks, others feigned illness with cloth wrapped around their foreheads, all manner of strange behaviors on display, far too many to fully describe.

Among the crowd stood He Fengsheng, the former Grand Secretary.

Beside him was Liang Shixian.

The two stood in line, waiting as the members of the Public Governance faction reviewed their registrations and decided whether they would be retained.

He Fengsheng lowered his voice.

"Brother Liang, do you think I will still be able to secure a position this time?"

Liang Shixian smiled faintly.

"I thought your only goal was to drift along and preserve your life, why are you suddenly so eager to return to office?"

He Fengsheng let out a quiet laugh.

"That is different. Drifting along while holding office still comes with a salary, and the higher the position, the higher the pay."

The moment his words fell, a voice rang out from inside.

"He Fengsheng, you are next."

Chapter 1418 They Called My Name

He Fengsheng's eyes lit up the moment he heard his name, and he nudged Liang Shixian with barely concealed excitement, his voice dropping but unable to hide the thrill bubbling underneath.

"Ah, Liang-xiong, they called me, finally my turn."

Liang Shixian smiled calmly, the kind of smile that carried both distance and quiet amusement.

"Congratulations."

He Fengsheng rubbed his hands together, already stepping forward with a grin that leaned closer to greed than dignity.

"I wonder what position they will give me. Grand Secretary is out of the question, that seat will surely go to one of their own people. As for someone like me, an old official, I would be satisfied with a lower-ranked idle post, something comfortable, nothing too demanding."

Liang Shixian gave a small nod, his tone gentle but layered.

"Let us hope so."

He Fengsheng did not catch the nuance at all, already hurrying inside with brisk steps, his robe swaying as he called out loudly.

"He Fengsheng reports in."

The moment he entered, the scene inside the hall made him pause for a fraction of a second. The leaders of the Public Governance faction were seated in a circle, not in rigid hierarchy but in a loose formation that felt strangely informal yet deliberate. At the center sat a statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun, but it was only a statue, devoid of presence, without that overwhelming aura that came when the real one intervened.

Around it sat Zhu Cunji, Zhu Yujian, Chen Qianhu, Flat Rabbit, and the others, each holding a sheet of paper, clearly reviewing his submitted background.

Flat Rabbit was the first to finish, or rather the first to put the paper down, since he could not read anyway. He waved his hand casually as if dismissing something trivial.

"He Fengsheng, we have looked at your resume."

He Fengsheng immediately bent slightly at the waist, smile stretched wide in practiced humility.

"So... what will my future position be?"

"You will go home and retire."

Zhu Yujian cut in directly, his tone clean and without hesitation, like a blade that did not bother to hide its edge.

"Our new system has no need for an official who only drifts along."

The smile on He Fengsheng's face froze instantly, then shattered.

"What? That is not accurate. I did not only drift along. I helped establish the fertilizer factory, I took the lead in the waterworks project, the steel plants around the capital, the power stations, and recently I have been working on electric lighting and electric fans..."

Zhu Youzhong chuckled softly, his eyes narrowing with amusement.

"Are you sure? Those were Liang Shixian's projects, were they not?"

He Fengsheng stiffened, then quickly tried to salvage the situation.

"But I was the one leading them. That counts as a contribution."

Laughter broke out across the circle, not mocking in a cruel way, but unmistakably dismissive.

"So when it comes to doing the work, you float around and avoid effort, but when the credit is handed out, you step forward to claim your share. An official like that has no place here. Go home."

The verdict was final.

He Fengsheng stood there for a moment, the color draining from his face, before turning and walking out with heavy steps, his shoulders slumped as if someone had taken a knife and cut out the spine that held his pride together.

When he reached Liang Shixian, he lowered his voice, the earlier excitement completely gone.

"Liang-xiong... I was not accepted. I have to return home."

Liang Shixian smiled, still calm, still composed.

"Congratulations. You have lost your position, but you have kept your life."

He Fengsheng blinked, stunned, then paused to think.

"Ah... that is true. When I chose to drift along before, it was precisely to protect my life. Now the position is gone, but I am still alive. That is already not bad."

His expression shifted gradually, the bitterness thinning out, replaced by a kind of reluctant relief. He clasped his hands toward Liang Shixian.

"Then I shall return to my hometown. May your career flourish."

Liang Shixian inclined his head.

"May the mountains remain green, and the waters flow long..."

Before he could finish, a voice from inside called out again.

"Liang Shixian, your turn."

Liang Shixian gave a brief apology and stepped inside, leaving He Fengsheng standing outside.

Instead of leaving, He Fengsheng hesitated, then quietly moved toward the door, pressing his ear against it, curiosity overpowering dignity.

He muttered to himself.

"I want to see what kind of position Liang-xiong will get. He used to be the emperor's trusted man, helping gather funds, practically part of Zhu Youjian's inner circle. In the new system, he should be sidelined. Maybe reduced to a minor post, or even sent home like me."

He held his breath and listened.

Inside, Zhu Yujian's voice rang out clearly.

"Minister Liang, I believe the position of Minister of Revenue is yours."

Zhu Youzhong spoke immediately after.

"I agree."

Chen Qianhu followed.

"Approved."

Flat Rabbit slapped the table lightly.

"Solid choice."

Unanimous.

Liang Shixian's voice carried a faint smile.

"Then I will accept."

Outside, He Fengsheng nearly coughed up blood, his whole body shaking.

What kind of outcome was this.

Fear that a friend might suffer, yet dread that the same friend might succeed beyond measure, all tangled together until his heart felt like it was being twisted.

He turned around, dazed, taking a few unsteady steps, only to see another man ahead walking in the same hollow manner.

It was Chen Xinjia.

He Fengsheng blinked.

"Minister Chen, you too?"

Chen Xinjia looked just as lost.

"Grand Secretary, you as well?"

The two men stared at each other, then sighed in unison.

"So we both lost our positions."

They stood there, exchanging looks filled with shared misery, words failing them.

After a moment, He Fengsheng spoke again.

"Who will become the new Minister of War?"

Before the question could settle, a familiar figure approached with steady steps, wearing a composed and confident smile.

Sun Chuanting.

Chen Xinja raised his brows.

"Minister Sun, you are here too?"

Sun Chuanting laughed lightly.

"Of course. I have been sitting idle for long enough. Time to move again."

Chen Xinja lowered his voice.

"You came to apply for Minister of War?"

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"That is the plan."

He Fengsheng and Chen Xinjia exchanged glances, both showing the same expression.

Impossible. Absolutely impossible.

Yet before they could dwell on it, a Public Governance officer standing at the gate suddenly snapped to attention and gave a crisp salute.

"Principal Sun, sir."

Sun Chuanting waved casually.

"Ah, Xiao Wu. You used to be such a troublemaker, and now you are an officer."

The officer's face flushed with pride.

"All thanks to your teaching. I am no longer the useless brat I once was."

Sun Chuanting nodded.

"Good. Keep it up."

As he walked forward, more officers recognized him, each one greeting him with respect.

"Principal Sun."

"Long time no see."

"How have you been?"

"I will visit you sometime."

He Fengsheng and Chen Xinjia watched in stunned silence, their expressions growing darker by the second.

"So he was the academy head of their military."

A realization hit them like a hammer.

Not long after, the news spread. Sun Chuanting had been appointed Minister of War once again, commanding all military forces.

Chen Xinjia could not help but mutter.

"What about Lu Xiangsheng?"

He Fengsheng frowned.

"Yes, Lu Xiangsheng is still out there with his army. When he returns and sees the capital like this, what will he do? Will he march against the city?"

Neither of them had answers.

But one thing was clear. This was no longer their concern.

The old court was gone, the new system had no place for them, and aside from returning home, there was nothing left to do.

So they left.

He Fengsheng's hometown was in Wuchang of Hubei. He had lived in the capital for many years and had not returned for a long time. Now, on his journey back, what he saw overturned everything he had imagined.

The villages were densely populated, people moved along the roads carrying goods on their shoulders, markets formed at midday and dispersed at dusk, a lively and orderly rhythm pulsing through the land.

This was not the chaos he had expected. This was peace.

When he finally entered Wuchang, he saw something even more astonishing.

At the center of the city stood a towering statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun, gleaming under sunlight, its golden surface reflecting brilliance in every direction.

At its base was a plaque.

"Funded by Prince Chu, Zhu Huadie."

The old Prince of Chu, already seventy years old, was kneeling before the statue, holding incense with both hands, his posture devout, his voice low.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, protect us."

He Fengsheng stood there, stunned, his mind struggling to catch up.

"So my hometown... already joined the Public Governance faction?"

He blinked again, still unable to process it.

"When did that happen?"

Chapter 1419 The Kind of Representatives Chosen Like This

Gao Village Family, main village.

Gao Yiye was quickly packing her luggage, her movements brisk and efficient, her hands moving without pause as she folded clothes and stuffed them neatly into her bag, showing none of the hesitation or delay one might expect from someone preparing for a long journey.

Although she held the lofty status of a Saintess, she had no servants or maids attending to her daily needs, and even the former Four Secretaries did not involve themselves in such trivial matters of life, as their responsibilities were strictly limited to handling formal work and official affairs, never extending into personal service.

More importantly, Gao Yiye herself did not enjoy being served.

Just as she finished stuffing the last piece of clothing into her bundle, a voice rose from below the watchtower, loud and familiar, carrying the tone of an old man who had long since grown used to speaking his mind without restraint.

"Yiye! Yiye! Still not ready yet? Young girls really are troublesome, taking forever just to prepare for a trip."

Only the Old Village Chief dared to tease the Saintess like this, while no one else in the village would ever risk speaking to her in such a casual and irreverent manner.

Gao Yiye leaned out from the balcony, smiling as she replied, "Grandpa Village Chief, I'm already very fast, alright? Stop rushing me, I'll be right down."

The Old Village Chief chuckled cheerfully, clearly enjoying himself. "Hurry up and come down."

Gao Yiye quickly ran downstairs, only to find that a large group had already gathered and completed their preparations, waiting for departure with everything in order.

Shan Shier, Tan Liwen, Fang Wushang, Xu Dafu, and many others were present, and it seemed that nearly the entire village committee had mobilized, leaving behind only a small number of people to maintain the basic operations of the village.

Of course, the Old Village Chief himself did not hold any official position within the committee, so his purpose for joining the trip was simply to watch the excitement unfold.

Additionally, there were several unexpected figures in the group, such as Luo Tuimao, who had now become the director of the papermaking factory, Shi Laosì, the author of Gao Piao, and Teng Yifeng, a contractor from Chengcheng County.

"Let's go," Shan Shier said with a grin, glancing around at the assembled crowd before continuing, "Everyone's here, so we can head to the capital now, this is what you call getting the carriage ready and setting out properly."

"To the capital!"

Among the group, the most cautious person was naturally Xu Dafu, the head of the firearms bureau, who could not help but ask in a careful tone, "Speaking of which, I can understand why the village committee is going to the capital to handle official matters, but why are people like Luo Tuimao, Shi Laosì, and Teng Yifeng coming along as well, what exactly are they supposed to do there?"

Gao Yiye smiled and answered patiently, "Director Xu, this trip to the capital is not only about handling practical affairs, we are also going to attend a meeting."

"A meeting?" Xu Dafu blinked in confusion. "What kind of meeting?"

"A People's Representatives Assembly," Gao Yiye replied calmly.

Seeing the confusion on his face, she pointed toward Luo Tuimao, Shi Laosì, Teng Yifeng, and the others, explaining in a clear and steady voice, "They are going as representatives of different trades and professions, chosen to speak on behalf of ordinary people."

Xu Dafu frowned slightly. "I've been stuck in the firearms bureau all day and haven't paid attention to these things, so what exactly does this assembly do?"

Gao Yiye continued, "It's quite simple in principle, each trade selects people who can represent them, these representatives gather opinions from the people, bring them to the meeting, discuss them together, and then decide whether they should be implemented."

Xu Dafu nodded slowly, then asked again, "Then what does Luo Tuimao represent?"

"The workers," Gao Yiye answered.

"And Shi Laosì?"

"Cultural workers."

Xu Dafu thought for a moment before saying, "Then Teng Yifeng represents private enterprises."

Gao Yiye nodded. "Exactly."

Xu Dafu lowered his voice and muttered, "This may work fine here, since these people are reliable, but in other places, wouldn't the representatives just end up being local gentry and landlords?"

"That's correct," Shan Shier interjected with a sigh, his expression turning slightly serious as he continued, "In most regions, the so-called representatives are not truly ordinary people, but rather local elites."

Xu Dafu shook his head. "Then I don't quite understand the meaning of this assembly, ordinary people still don't really have a voice."

Gao Yiye smiled faintly. "You're not the only one who doesn't understand, most people don't fully grasp it either, but regardless of whether we understand it or not, Dao Xuan Tianzun insists that it must be done, even if it is criticized as mere formality, the form itself must still exist."

Xu Dafu looked even more puzzled.

Shan Shier let out a soft sigh before explaining further, "In today's world, those who possess knowledge are still a minority, nine out of ten people are illiterate, and under such conditions, it is unrealistic to expect ordinary people to directly participate in governance, because if you pick a representative from a group of illiterate people, that person will likely have nothing meaningful to say."

The group fell silent.

"But," Shan Shier continued, "Dao Xuan Tianzun advocates collective governance, and its ultimate goal is that the rise and fall of the nation concerns everyone, even the common man, and although the common people lack the ability now, that will not always be the case, so we must first establish the framework, to prepare for the future, this is what you call preparing in advance."

Only then did Xu Dafu begin to understand a little.

Gao Yiye laughed lightly. "It's just like me, I used to understand nothing, if people had chosen me to manage affairs back then, I wouldn't have been able to do anything at all, but now things are different, if I were to take charge..."

The Old Village Chief burst out laughing before she could finish. "You would still just sneak off to steal cotton."

"Hahaha!"

The older villagers all laughed together, completely unrestrained.

Meanwhile, the newer villagers looked horrified, unable to believe that anyone would dare to joke about the Saintess like this.

Gao Yiye puffed her cheeks slightly. "What do you mean, I can handle a lot of things now, Grandpa Village Chief, you're terrible."

The Old Village Chief only stroked his beard and laughed even harder.

Gao Yiye paused and thought seriously about her own abilities before finally admitting defeat. "Alright, maybe I still don't understand much, but among the younger generation of Gao Village Family, there are already people with real knowledge, like Uncle Laba's son, Gao Shan, who runs the bookstore in the new village, he truly has some learning."

"That's right," Shan Shier said with a smile, "he was also elected as a representative, though not by Gao Village Family, but by the scholars and students of Yan'an Prefecture, he's heading to the capital by a different route, and you'll meet him there, this is what you call meeting an old acquaintance far from home."

"Stop butchering idioms," the others complained.

"Does that even matter?" Shan Shier laughed.

"Hey, the train's here!"

"Get on, get on!"

The group boarded the large train in a rush, only to discover that many familiar faces were already on board, including a large number of representatives coming from Xi'an, among whom was Bin Sheng, a model worker chosen by the laborers of the Chang'an factory.

It was not unusual for a model worker to be selected as a representative, as such individuals naturally earned the trust of the people.

However, Bin Sheng had another identity.

He was the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Yes, that S.H.I.E.L.D., the kind you might imagine, a mysterious organization that sounded extremely powerful and secretive, clearly carrying a slightly tongue in cheek flavor as if it had been borrowed straight from some other world.

Which made the situation rather awkward.

Shan Shier gave him a strange look.

Bin Sheng leaned closer, returning an embarrassed smile as he lowered his voice and said, "This really isn't my fault, I didn't want to be elected, but the workers insisted on choosing me, and I couldn't exactly tell them that I'm actually a secret agent, could I?"

Shan Shier could not help but laugh. "Fair enough."

Chapter 1420 Time for a Meeting

By the time Gao Yiye and the rest of the group led by Shan Shier arrived at the gates of the imperial palace in the capital, the place was already packed to the point of absurdity, with carriages clogging every approach road and streams of people pouring in from all directions, all of them representatives of various trades and regions across the country.

At a glance, it looked lively and grand, yet if one took a closer look, it was exactly as Xu Dafu had complained earlier, because the majority of these so-called "representatives of the people" were not really common folk at all, but rather local gentry, landlords, wealthy merchants, and famous figures with status and education, which in plain terms meant that it was still largely the same old ruling class wearing a slightly different coat.

There was simply no helping it, since governing a country could not be entrusted to illiterates, and those who possessed knowledge were, more often than not, products of the old system itself, a reality that Li Dao Xuan understood very clearly as he observed everything from above, knowing that the road toward true collective governance would be long and difficult, and that even in the era he came from, such ideals were still... well, not exactly perfect, yet difficulty alone was no excuse to abandon the direction entirely.

Inside the palace, the Huangji Hall had already been thoroughly rearranged.

What had once been a solemn hall where only the emperor could sit upon the dragon throne while all officials stood below to debate had now been transformed into something entirely different, as the throne itself was occupied by a statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun to "hold the scene," while a chair had been placed beside it for Gao Yiye, also to "hold the scene," and the rest of the vast hall had been filled with rows upon rows of chairs, each one occupied by a representative from some corner of the land.

Shan Shier stepped forward with a draft in hand, cleared his throat with exaggerated seriousness, and looked over the crowd before speaking.

"I hereby announce that the New Ming National Assembly is officially in session," he said, pausing for a moment as if about to add one of his usual idioms, then abruptly waving it off with a self-conscious grin. "Actually, forget it, this is a serious occasion, I'd better not mess it up with my nonsense this time."

A ripple of awkward silence spread through the hall, followed by a few suppressed chuckles.

Shan Shier coughed again, regaining his composure as he continued, "Now then, the first issue on the agenda is whether we should launch an attack on Shenyang."

The moment the words left his mouth, Flat Rabbit shot to his feet like a spring-loaded trap, his voice loud enough to echo across the entire hall. "What is there to discuss? We attack, of course! Just send the troops and be done with it!"

"Sit down!" Shan Shier snapped immediately, glaring at him. "This is a formal meeting, not a tavern brawl."

Before Flat Rabbit could even sit properly, Chen Qianhu from Shanxi had already stood up as well, raising his hand as if afraid to be left behind. "I cast my vote in favor of attacking Shenyang immediately."

Shan Shier's forehead twitched. "There is a process to follow! You cannot just jump in like that."

Zhu Yujian, representing the Jiangnan merchants, spoke calmly from his seat, "I support the military action."

"I support it as well," Zhu Youzhong added without hesitation.

"I agree too," said Shi Lao Si from the Gao Village Family, nodding earnestly.

That was the last straw.

"Enough!" Shan Shier raised both hands, half exasperated, half amused. "All of you talking over each other like this might work in a small meeting, but there are hundreds of people here. If everyone shouts 'I agree' one by one, do you expect me to keep count with my ears alone?"

The hall fell silent again, this time with a hint of embarrassment.

Shan Shier pointed at the small wooden placards placed in front of each representative and explained, "You all have a card on your table. The red side means you agree, and the white side means you oppose. Just raise the side you choose so I can see it clearly."

The moment he finished speaking, a wave of motion swept across the hall, and in the blink of an eye, every single placard was raised with the red side facing forward, creating a sea of unanimous approval.

Shan Shier blinked, then let out a short laugh. "Well then, that makes things easy. I hereby declare that the proposal to attack Shenyang has passed unanimously, and from this moment onward, it takes immediate effect."

A hesitant voice rose from somewhere in the crowd.

"Um... shouldn't we still consult Dao Xuan Tianzun about this?" the representative asked cautiously. "After all, the campaign against Shenyang has always been under his direction, and his incarnation is still at Dalinghe City. What if he does not approve?"

Before Shan Shier could respond, the statue seated on the dragon throne suddenly spoke.

"There is no need to ask for my opinion anymore."

The voice of Li Dao Xuan carried calmly through the hall, causing every head to snap toward the throne.

"From this day forward, all major decisions will be made by the assembly," he continued in a relaxed tone. "Not by me. I am... somewhat tired, you see, and I have plans to travel the world for a bit. I even promised Cai Xinzi and Queen Qianyan M that we would play mahjong until the last tile falls, but I have not had the time yet."

A murmur spread among the representatives, many of whom recognized Queen Qianyan M as a famous figure in the immortal realm, though Cai Xinzi remained a mystery to them, likely another deity in the heavens.

Tan Liwen raised his hand, his expression serious. "Tianzun, we are still mortals, lacking true foresight. If we make the wrong decision and choose the wrong path, what then?"

Li Dao Xuan let out a soft sigh before replying, "Then you bear the consequences of your mistake, and afterward, you correct it. Remember this well, no one in this world is always right. Making mistakes is not what is frightening. What is truly frightening is stubbornly refusing to correct them."

Flat Rabbit suddenly leaned forward, his usual brashness replaced with unease. "Tianzun... the way you are speaking... are you saying you are going to leave us?"

Li Dao Xuan chuckled lightly. "Not quite. I will still be watching from above, but most of the time, I will only be watching. I may come down to play now and then, but I will not interfere much. By now, you already possess both the courage and the ability to stand on your own."

He turned his gaze toward Gao Yiye. "If something truly major happens, you may ring the bell to call me, though whether I respond or not will depend on my mood at the time."

As his voice gradually faded, the hall fell into complete silence, and in the next instant, a series of thuds echoed one after another as every representative dropped to their knees in unison.

...

Far away, at Dalinghe City, Lu Xiangsheng received two pieces of news almost at the same time.

One was the imperial edict from Zhu Youjian ordering him to return to the capital to provide aid.

The other was the report that the capital had already fallen, with Cao Huachun opening the gates to welcome the forces of collective governance.

Standing atop the city walls, Lu Xiangsheng could only let out a bitter smile, for there was nothing else he could do. He turned toward the direction of the capital, bowed from afar, and sighed deeply, his heart heavy with uncertainty about what fate awaited him in this new era.

He thought of seeking out Li Yuanwai for guidance, only to find that the man had entered a state of silent meditation, unresponsive no matter how many times he was called.

Just as confusion began to settle in, a new order arrived.

It was from Sun Chuanting, the newly appointed Minister of War.

"The first resolution passed unanimously by the Assembly is to attack Shenyang," the message read. "Effective immediately. All frontline forces are to advance under the command of Vice Minister of War, Lu Xiangsheng."