

Great Ming 1421

Chapter 1421 The Final Battle Plan

Only after receiving the order did Lu Xiangsheng finally realize that the "New Ming" had not cast him aside as an outsider, but instead had reappointed him as Vice Minister of War, placing him in overall command of the frontline forces.

That... was something he truly had not expected.

To the Collective Governance faction, he was, at best, a former official of the old regime, someone who had not even stood on their side from the beginning, and yet they had entrusted him with such a high position without hesitation, a decision that left him momentarily unable to make sense of it.

In the end, however, he simply shook his head and let the thought go, because there was no time to dwell on confusion when war stood right in front of him, and besides, marching on Shenyang had always been his long-cherished ambition anyway.

"Then so be it," he muttered to himself, already turning toward his officers. "We move at once."

The army stationed at Dalinghe City began to mobilize under his command, with the Tianxiong Army forming the core, joined by Zhao Guangyuan from Hanzhong, Luo Xi from Shangnan, the Anlu militia, and the so-called "young masters" from the capital's garrison, all of them forming a massive force that surged forward like a tide as they advanced toward Shenyang.

At the same time, far out on the Mongolian grasslands, where they had long been waiting for the signal, Zao Ying led her armored cavalry battalion into motion, accompanied by Zhebu and a vast contingent of Mongol horsemen, their formation sweeping across the plains like a storm as they aimed straight for the same target.

Meanwhile, in Dandong City, Cheng Xu stood with Bai Yuan at his side, the two veterans of the Gao Village Family now well past their youthful days, one in his forties and the other already over fifty, yet both still standing firm like pillars that had weathered a decade of storms.

Cheng Xu flipped through the order in his hand and let out a small laugh. "Did you notice something interesting?"

Bai Yuan glanced at him. "What is it?"

"This order," Cheng Xu said, tapping the paper lightly, "was not delivered by Dao Xuan Tianzun speaking through the embroidery on our chests, nor was it issued in the name of the village committee. This time, it comes directly from Sun Chuanting, the Minister of War of the New Ming."

Bai Yuan's expression softened as he nodded. "I noticed. Tianzun has not manifested at all these past few days."

A faint trace of melancholy appeared on Cheng Xu's face as he lowered his gaze for a moment. "Back then, when Tianzun saved my life from the Jinyiwei, it feels like it all happened in the blink of an eye, yet ten years have already passed. We have grown used to him always being there, so now that he has suddenly stepped back..." He trailed off, letting out a quiet sigh.

Bai Yuan did not respond with words, but instead clasped his hands together and performed a solemn salute toward the sky, his movements precise and respectful, as if bidding farewell to a teacher he deeply revered.

For a brief moment, the two men stood in silence.

Then, from across the Yalu River, the sound of shouting and galloping horses suddenly broke the stillness.

They turned their heads and saw an approaching force, banners fluttering, armor glinting, and at its center rode King Yi Jong of Joseon, personally leading ten thousand troops to join the campaign.

Bai Yuan raised an eyebrow. "Ah, the soy sauce brigade has arrived."

Cheng Xu chuckled. "He is not here to win battles, he is here to declare his stance. Still, bring him along."

With that, he raised his hand and gave the order.

"Move out!"

In an instant, Dandong City sprang to life, troops pouring out like water released from a dam.

Among them were two familiar figures, Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, both leaping to their feet with grins that spoke of long-suppressed excitement.

"Finally, something to do again," Zheng Daniu said, stretching his arms.

He then glanced at Gao Chuwu with a playful grin. "Hey, after this battle, the world should finally settle down, right? What do you think we will do then? Feels like we might end up useless."

Gao Chuwu blinked, then shook his head firmly. "No way. There will always be something for us to do."

Zheng Daniu laughed. "If nothing else, my only use will be eating."

Gao Chuwu burst out laughing as well. "Eating is a perfectly good use. When this is over, we will eat until we cannot stand."

"Deal!" Zheng Daniu slapped his thigh. "We take Shenyang first, then we feast like kings."

With laughter echoing behind them, the army set out, marching toward Shenyang.

Three great forces, advancing from three directions, all converging upon the same point.

And at this moment, the Qing Empire had already run out of options.

Inside the imperial palace of Shengjing, Huang Taiji listened to Fan Wencheng's report with a dark expression.

"So, the Ming have launched a three-pronged attack against us?"

"They no longer call themselves Ming," Fan Wencheng corrected carefully. "They have renamed themselves the New Ming. Zhu Youjian has reportedly been detained, and his whereabouts are currently unknown. The first act of the new regime... is to attack us."

Huang Taiji let out a long breath. "What are we to do now? Has the Great Iron Cart still not been made operational?"

Fan Wencheng shook his head slowly. "Your Majesty, the plan to make the Great Iron Cart move like the Wooden Ox and Flowing Horse has failed. We have no way to make such a massive construct move."

Silence fell.

Huang Taiji stood there, momentarily at a loss.

Then, one after another, urgent reports came rushing in.

"Your Majesty! General Zao Ying of the New Ming has broken through our border defenses, several forts have been destroyed by her iron war machines!"

"What about the trenches and fortifications we prepared?" Huang Taiji demanded.

"The enemy used aerial balloons and artillery to bombard us relentlessly, then sent in infantry to sweep through the ruins. Their engineers filled our trenches with incredible speed, allowing their iron vehicles to advance without obstruction."

"...I see."

Another messenger burst in.

"Your Majesty! King Yi Jong of Joseon has joined forces with the New Ming troops stationed in Dandong. Our border forts were unable to resist and have already fallen!"

Before anyone could catch their breath, yet another report arrived.

"Your Majesty! Lu Xiangsheng's army has broken through three of our main defensive forces in succession and completely shattered our northern line near Jinzhou. There is no longer any force capable of stopping them from reaching Shenyang!"

Huang Taiji fell silent.

The officials around him, both civil and military, were already pale with fear, their eyes fixed on him as if he alone could pull a miracle out of nothing.

But he was still just a man.

In the face of such overwhelming odds, even a man of his caliber could not conjure a solution where none existed.

After a long pause, Huang Taiji let out a deep sigh, then calmly changed into a fresh imperial robe before making his way up to the city walls, where he stood quietly, waiting for the arrival of the New Ming army.

His state of mind at that moment was eerily similar to Zhu Youjian's not long ago, when he had stood upon his own walls, waiting for the inevitable.

Soon enough, the enemy came.

From the east, the south, and the north, the forces of the New Ming advanced like an endless tide, surrounding Shengjing completely, while in the sky floated observation balloons, on the ground rolled iron war machines, and behind them stood rows upon rows of artillery so numerous that they seemed to stretch beyond sight.

Even an ordinary civilian with no knowledge of warfare could tell that this battle was unwinnable.

Huang Taiji, a brilliant commander in his own right, understood this even more clearly than anyone.

Standing atop the high walls, he looked down at his soldiers and officials and spoke in a loud, steady voice.

"I shall now enact our final battle plan."

The officials were stunned, their despair momentarily replaced by a flicker of hope.

Even now, His Majesty still had a plan?

Just as admiration began to rise in their hearts, Huang Taiji reached into his robes and pulled out a fire starter.

"The name of this plan," he declared, "is 'Gongsun Zan Burns Himself.'"

"?"

Before anyone could react, he struck the fire starter and ignited the oil that had long been prepared on the tower.

With a roar, flames erupted skyward, engulfing the entire structure in an instant.

From within the fire came the sound of his laughter...

But as the flames grew higher, the laughter gradually faded, until nothing remained.

The people left behind stared at one another in stunned silence.

"So... do we keep fighting?" someone asked weakly.

"Fight your ass," another voice snapped. "We surrender."

"They said we Manchus are one of the fifty-six ethnic groups now," someone else added quickly. "What we did before can be treated as... unrest among minority groups. If we surrender, we will be treated well."

That was all it took.

The Manchu soldiers and officials present made their decision almost instantly.

Only Fan Wencheng and the group behind him remained silent.

They understood something the others did not.

The culture of the Ming might forgive rebels, but it would never forgive traitors.

Fan Wencheng placed both hands on the wall, pushed himself up, and leaped outward in a smooth motion.

Midair, he twisted, spun, and flipped with exaggerated flair, as if performing some absurd acrobatic routine, before plunging headfirst toward the ground.

With a dull thud, everything went still.

Chapter 1422 Enjoying the World

Li Dao Xuan sat quietly before the sandbox, his gaze fixed on the miniature world within, where the city walls of Shengjing were being devoured by roaring flames that climbed higher and higher as if they intended to swallow the sky itself.

This time, he had truly done nothing at all, not a single intervention, not even the slightest invisible push, and he forced himself to hold back that old, troublesome habit of meddling as he simply watched everything unfold.

And he kept watching like that for days.

He saw the rise of the New Ming, saw the People's Congress grow steadily from something tentative into something firm and dependable, and saw the new generation of scholars nurtured by the Gao Village Family begin to spread across every walk of life, quietly but powerfully shaping the direction of the entire nation.

The country was moving forward toward a better future with confident, unhesitating steps.

Yet as he continued to watch from the outside, he gradually felt that something was missing, something subtle yet impossible to ignore, like a faint hollow echo lingering in the back of his mind.

The feeling reminded him of something from long ago, back when he had quit World of Warcraft after playing it for ten years, when his account had already reached the maximum level, every piece of equipment worth collecting had been obtained, and every dungeon had been cleared so many times that even repetition had lost its meaning.

The guild he had built with his own hands had already become the strongest on the server, flourishing under the management of several capable vice leaders, which made leaving feel wasteful, yet staying felt equally unnecessary, because whenever he logged in, he would find himself standing there with nothing left to do.

Then a thought surfaced in his mind.

There had always been players like that, those who no longer chased progress but instead returned to low level areas, sitting quietly at places like Crossroads or climbing to the peaks of Redridge Mountains just to watch the rivers and sunsets of Azeroth stretch endlessly into the horizon.

They were no longer playing the game.

They were simply living inside it.

Li Dao Xuan's fingers tapped lightly against the edge of the sandbox as a faint smile appeared on his face, because he suddenly realized that he could do the same.

A god should not exist solely to save the world, because he also had the right to enjoy the very world he had helped create, and that thought alone felt unexpectedly liberating.

With that decision made, he reached into the sandbox and gently picked up a mass produced Dao Xuan Tianzun body, placing it into a quiet, uninhabited mountain valley, and then casually added a simple scholar's robe beside it.

The moment he activated the connection, his consciousness dropped into the world.

The first thing he did after arriving was glance down at himself, only to immediately frown at the overly flashy outfit he was still wearing, which looked exactly like the young noble hero costume worn by Yang Kang in the 1983 version of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*.

Without hesitation, he removed it and changed into the plain scholar's robe, then took out a folding fan and snapped it open with a crisp motion, studying his reflection for a moment before nodding slightly in satisfaction.

Even so, a problem quickly came to mind.

His face was far too recognizable within the Dao Xuan Tianzun liberated territories, which meant that he would be identified almost instantly if he walked around like this, and that would ruin the entire experience.

Without getting up, he reached out across space, extending his hand directly into the main fortress of the Gao Village Family, then into Gao Yiye's home, where he grabbed a piece of cloth before withdrawing his hand again.

He tied the cloth across his face and examined the result.

A masked scholar, somewhat mismatched and even a little absurd, yet effective enough that no one would ever associate him with Dao Xuan Tianzun.

Satisfied, he finally stepped out of the empty valley.

He had entered this world countless times before, yet never in such a state of ease, with no mission weighing on his mind, no urgency urging him forward, no one waiting to be saved, and no problem demanding his attention, so he simply walked along the official road without any clear destination, allowing the landscape to unfold naturally before his eyes as he wandered.

The mountains stretched wide, rivers flowed like silver threads, and the land felt as beautiful as a painting, which gradually lifted his mood until he realized that he did not even know where he was anymore, yet for once, that uncertainty did not trouble him.

Before long, a small town appeared ahead.

It was not particularly prosperous, but it happened to be market day, and the streets were filled with lively energy as vendors called out their goods, customers bargained loudly, and children darted through the crowd, creating a warm and bustling atmosphere.

Li Dao Xuan walked into the town at an unhurried pace, blending naturally into the flow of people until his attention was caught by a small roadside stall where a young girl was selling boiled water caltrops.

That single detail was enough for him to guess his location.

"Jiangnan is fair, its beauty once familiar to me. At sunrise, river flowers glow redder than fire, and in spring, the river water turns green like orchids."

He recited casually, almost as if speaking to himself.

The girl immediately brightened and leaned forward with a cheerful smile.

"Young master, that is such a beautiful poem," she said, her tone lively and persuasive, "and a refined mood like yours would pair perfectly with some freshly boiled water caltrops, which will surely taste even better right now."

Li Dao Xuan could not help but laugh.

"That sales pitch really landed right on me, didn't it," he said with amusement, shaking his head lightly, "fine, I will buy some."

He slipped a hand into his sleeve, quietly opening the hidden storage compartment along his arm before taking out a silver ingot and handing it over.

"Keep the change."

The girl jumped in surprise and waved her hands quickly.

"Oh no, young master, I cannot accept such a large piece of silver," she said nervously, "this would not be buying water caltrops anymore, this would be like buying me as well."

Li Dao Xuan chuckled softly.

"Buying you is not an option," he replied, "this is the New Ming, and Dao Xuan Tianzun does not allow human trafficking."

The girl laughed.

"That is true," she said, nodding, "the People's Congress already made that decision clear, and they even said it was a rule set by Dao Xuan Tianzun from the very beginning, so no one dares to break it, even though he has already ascended and has not appeared for quite some time."

Hearing this, Li Dao Xuan's mood lifted even further.

He peeled open a water caltrop and placed it into his mouth, where its simple, clean flavor spread gently, bringing with it a quiet sense of satisfaction.

However, that calm did not last long.

A sudden commotion erupted ahead.

Several rough looking men pushed through the crowd, their movements arrogant and disruptive, instantly causing people on both sides of the street to step aside in avoidance.

One old farmer was too slow to move and was kicked to the ground, spilling the vegetables from his basket as he hurriedly bent down to pick them up, only for one of the thugs to deliberately step on a vegetable and grind it into the dirt with his foot.

"Old fool, watch where you are going," the man sneered.

Li Dao Xuan's expression cooled as he stepped forward and positioned himself between the farmer and the thug.

"This is the New Ming," he said calmly, "how can people like you still bully civilians?"

The thug looked him up and down with a smirk.

"Where did this masked scholar come from," he said mockingly, "judging by your accent, you are not from around here, are you?"

"I am not," Li Dao Xuan replied lightly, "so what?"

The thug laughed loudly.

"Then you clearly do not understand the rules here," he said, "on this street, everyone calls us grandpa."

Li Dao Xuan tilted his head slightly.

"That sounds quite arrogant," he said, "are you not afraid of the local officials?"

The thug let out a cold laugh.

"The official is my uncle."

Li Dao Xuan nodded as if in realization.

"I see," he said, "then your uncle must be an old Ming official who slipped into the new system while pretending to behave."

The thug burst into laughter.

"You figured it out, so why are you still standing here instead of running?"

Li Dao Xuan closed his fan slowly.

"Having someone backing you does make you feel invincible," he said, "but do not forget that your uncle is not the greatest authority under heaven, because above you, there are still those who watch."

The thug's smile turned disdainful.

"You really are ignorant," he said, "Dao Xuan Tianzun already ascended after the first People's Congress and has not appeared since, so whether he will ever return is uncertain, and you think that name can scare me?"

For a brief moment, Li Dao Xuan said nothing.

Then he calmly removed the cloth covering his face.

The thug glanced at him without concern.

"What, you think showing your face will scare me," he said dismissively, "even if you look decent, compared to me you are still..."

Before he could finish, one of his companions suddenly dropped to his knees.

The thug froze.

"What are you doing?"

The kneeling man trembled as he tried to speak.

"Dao... Dao... Tian..."

The thug frowned, then turned back to look again, and this time his expression changed instantly as recognition struck him, causing his legs to give out as he fell to his knees as well.

Li Dao Xuan let out a soft sigh.

"Go to labor reform," he said calmly, "your uncle can decide the duration, and afterward, he should resign and return home to retire."

With that, his figure rose into the air and vanished in an instant.

The entire street fell silent for a brief moment before everyone, from the girl selling water caltrops to the old farmer and the surrounding vendors and townspeople, dropped to their knees and looked up at the sky.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, protect us!"

Chapter 1423 Gao Yiye Takes Action

Although the new era had already begun, the remnants of the old age had not yet been completely erased, and that simple truth settled quietly but firmly in Li Dao Xuan's mind as he reflected on what he had just witnessed.

He understood now that he could not truly let go.

He might choose not to interfere in the daily lives of ordinary people, and he might refrain from guiding every decision or correcting every mistake, but he could not simply disappear, because if he vanished at this delicate moment, whether the New Ming could stabilize itself completely would remain uncertain.

This world still could not do without him.

In that case...

He would act like a true immortal, roaming freely across the land, leaving most things untouched, yet occasionally extending a hand to correct injustice when it appeared before him.

The decision had only just settled in his mind when the sandbox in front of him suddenly lit up.

A soft golden glow spread across its surface, and on the outer wall of the box, a strange dial slowly appeared, resembling the adjustment wheel of a camera, the kind used to control aperture and shutter speed, and its design was so intuitive that it practically invited his fingers to reach out and turn it.

Beneath it, a line of text revealed itself gradually.

New function unlocked: Activate "Time-Lapse Mode".

Li Dao Xuan's eyes flickered with interest, because he did not need any further explanation to understand what this feature was meant to do.

"...Now this is something."

He reached out and gave the dial a gentle turn, stopping at X2.

Instantly, the world inside the sandbox changed.

The people walking on the ground began moving faster, clouds drifted across the sky at an accelerated pace, and even the trains sped along their tracks at twice their previous speed, yet it was not that they themselves had become faster, but rather that the flow of time within the box had been increased.

X2 meant that time itself was moving twice as fast.

And if that was the case, then the higher settings, X3, X4, X10, X30, X100, X365, X1000, X5000, required no further explanation.

A faint smile curved at the corner of Li Dao Xuan's lips.

The sandbox was rewarding him.

That was the simplest way to put it.

It was giving him the ability to witness the results of his efforts, to see with his own eyes how far this world could go, because no matter how long he lived, even if he reached a hundred years, it would still not be enough to watch this civilization fully unfold.

But if time inside the box could be accelerated, then within his limited lifespan, he could witness nearly limitless possibilities.

His fingers pressed firmly against the dial.

And then he turned it further.

...

Night had fallen.

The Forbidden City lay quiet beneath a deep sky, its vast courtyards bathed in silver moonlight.

Gao Yiye, now thirty years old, sat alone in the imperial study, occupying the seat that had once belonged to Zhu Youjian, her posture relaxed yet her presence striking, her mature beauty carrying the kind of quiet allure that needed no adornment.

She tilted her head slightly, gazing out at the moon.

Loneliness lingered around her like a thin veil.

The imperial palace now belonged to her, yet she did not handle state affairs, because this was no longer an era where an emperor or a saintess could decide everything with a single word, and her role had gradually shifted into something symbolic, much like the statue of Dao Xuan Tianzun placed at the center during every session of the People's Congress.

A presence to steady the room.

A figure to anchor belief.

Nothing more.

But Gao Yiye was not someone who could endure loneliness easily.

She preferred running freely through open fields, or wandering along lively streets, picking up small snacks as she walked, eating as she pleased, laughing without restraint.

She did not belong within these palace walls.

Whenever the night grew deep and quiet, she would look up at the sky, and her thoughts would inevitably drift toward Li Dao Xuan.

It had been a long time since Dao Xuan Tianzun had appeared before her.

In fact, it was not just her, because even within the Gao Village Family, no one had seen him for quite some time, not Shan Shier, not Cheng Xu, not a single one of them.

And yet, everyone knew he was still there.

From time to time, he would appear somewhere in the world, punishing a corrupt official, dealing with a tyrant, doing a single good deed before vanishing once more into the sky, leaving behind nothing but stories and rumors.

Gao Yiye missed him.

"Why is it..." she murmured softly, her voice barely louder than the night breeze, "that he goes everywhere, yet never comes to the capital?"

Deep down, she already understood the answer.

He did not want to interfere with governance.

He did not want collective governance to become his personal rule.

He was that kind of person.

That kind of... existence.

But understanding did not make the feeling any easier.

She still missed him.

"Yiye-jie, Yiye-jie!"

A voice suddenly broke the silence outside.

"Come out quickly, we have good news!"

Gao Yiye stood up at once and hurried outside, where she found Gao Sanwa, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, and several others who had followed Dao Xuan Tianzun since the earliest days, all gathered together with excited expressions.

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

Gao Sanwa stepped forward, barely containing his excitement.

"This evening, Dao Xuan Tianzun appeared in a small village not far from the capital," he said, speaking quickly, "he dealt with a local tyrant and then flew up into the sky, but after that, he did not leave immediately and has been hovering above the village ever since."

Gao Yiye's eyes lit up instantly.

"Take me there," she said without hesitation, "quickly."

No one bothered to question the hour.

The group rushed to their large iron vehicle, and under the pale glow of moonlight guiding their path, they sped out of the capital, racing toward the distant village.

When they arrived, they saw it immediately.

Above the village, at a height of roughly two hundred meters, floated a strange, low hanging cloud, the unmistakable immortal cloud that always accompanied Dao Xuan Tianzun's appearances, now illuminated by the moonlight in a way that made it seem almost unreal as it hung across the night sky.

Whenever Dao Xuan Tianzun appeared, ordinary people could see this cloud.

But they could only see the cloud.

Only Gao Yiye could see him.

Gao Sanwa looked up eagerly.

"Yiye-jie, can you see Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

Gao Yiye stared at the cloud for a long moment.

Then she slowly shook her head.

"No," she said quietly, "the cloud is there, but he is not."

What they did not know was that earlier that evening, after Li Dao Xuan had dealt with the tyrant and withdrawn his manifested body from the sandbox, he had received a call from Cai Xinzi, who urgently dragged him out for hot pot, insisting that an entire table of people was waiting for him.

In his haste, he had forgotten to put the lid back on the sandbox.

And whenever the sandbox was left uncovered, a low cloud would appear in the sky.

After that, he had gone out, eaten hot pot, drank beer, sang a few songs at KTV, and then returned home to sleep, completely unaware that his carelessness had left behind this floating cloud, which was now drawing a crowd.

Gao Chuwu scratched his head.

"If the cloud is here but Dao Xuan Tianzun is not," he said slowly, "does that mean he forgot his immortal cloud here? Wouldn't that make things inconvenient for him elsewhere?"

Zheng Daniu stared at the cloud with shining eyes.

"It looks like cotton candy," he said seriously, "I kind of want to eat it."

The others fell silent.

Gao Yiye did not respond.

She simply stood there, looking up at the cloud, her expression gradually dimming as disappointment settled in.

"So I still could not see him..."

"Yiye-jie, do not be sad," someone said quickly, trying to comfort her, "if we wait here a little longer, maybe Dao Xuan Tianzun will return."

Gao Yiye bit her lower lip gently.

"I have already waited long enough," she said, her voice steady but carrying a quiet firmness, "for the past few months, I have not seen him even once, and he has gone everywhere in the world except the capital, so I cannot keep waiting like this."

She lifted her gaze again, her eyes fixed on the cloud.

"This time, I will go to him."

Her words startled everyone.

"Yiye-jie, do not say something like that," Gao Chuwu said quickly, alarmed, "how are you supposed to go to him?"

Gao Yiye raised her hand and pointed upward.

"I will go into the cloud and take a look."

Gao Chuwu hesitated.

"That... does not seem like a good idea," he said cautiously, "that is an immortal's cloud, and we are just ordinary people, so we probably should not touch it."

Zheng Daniu, however, was still staring upward.

"It really does look edible," he muttered.

The others could only fall into silence once again.

Chapter 1424 The Woman Favored by Heaven

Gao Sanwa scratched his head as he stared up at the low hanging immortal cloud, his tone hesitant but still carrying a trace of excitement.

"Yiye-jie, you are the Saintess, so if anyone can touch that immortal cloud without angering the heavens, it would be you," he said, then paused before adding with a troubled frown, "but the cloud is floating at least two hundred meters above the ground, so even if we want to try, there is no way for us to reach it."

"Hot air balloon," Gao Yiye replied immediately, her voice firm and decisive, as if the answer had already formed in her mind long ago. "We return to the capital right now and bring one here."

The words struck everyone like a sudden awakening.

The group did not waste a single moment. They rushed back into their vehicle and sped toward the capital under the moonlit sky, their urgency cutting through the quiet night.

Fortunately, the distance was not great.

By the time they returned, it did not take much effort to mobilize a balloon, and a special operations squad from the Sky Battalion accompanied Gao Yiye and the others as they quickly made their way back to the small village.

The commander stood with a serious expression as he issued orders.

"Sky Battalion Unit Seven, you are responsible for bringing the Saintess up," he said firmly. "You must ensure her safety at all costs."

Unit Seven swallowed hard.

"That is an immortal cloud," he said, his voice slightly unsteady, "if I fly into it, will I be struck down by heavenly lightning and reduced to ashes?"

The commander frowned.

"Other immortals might punish you," he said, his tone sharp but controlled, "but Dao Xuan Tianzun is benevolent. He does not stand on ceremony, nor does he take offense easily. Do you not understand this by now?"

Unit Seven straightened slightly, his fear easing just a little.

"Yes, sir."

"Then move."

Ground crew from the Sky Battalion immediately got to work, inflating the balloon, stripping out unnecessary equipment from the gondola to reduce weight, and clearing enough space so that two people could stand inside comfortably.

When everything was ready, Unit Seven climbed into the gondola first and conducted a careful inspection, checking each mechanism one by one before finally calling out.

"Sky Battalion Unit Seven, self inspection complete. The balloon is functioning normally and ready for takeoff."

All eyes turned toward Gao Yiye.

She took a slow, steady breath, then stepped into the gondola.

...

The hot air balloon began to rise.

Everyone on the ground watched in silence, their gazes fixed upward.

Gao Yiye's breathing grew slightly heavier, but she remained steady.

The most nervous person was not her.

It was Unit Seven.

He was nothing more than an ordinary man, and yet he was now ascending toward an immortal cloud, which placed a pressure on him so great that even breathing felt difficult, and if not for the Saintess standing beside him, he would never have dared approach something so sacred.

"Saintess..." he said, his voice trembling slightly, "if Dao Xuan Tianzun becomes displeased later, you must... you must speak for me."

Gao Yiye nodded.

"I will."

The balloon continued rising.

"We are getting close," Unit Seven said, his voice tightening as he glanced upward, "the cloud is right above us now... do we really go in?"

Gao Yiye bit her lower lip, leaving a faint mark against her pale skin, yet there was no hesitation in her eyes.

"We go in."

Unit Seven closed his eyes briefly and murmured under his breath.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun, please forgive this offense."

Then he guided the balloon forward.

The immortal cloud drew closer.

Closer.

Gao Yiye widened her eyes, refusing to miss even a single detail.

Unit Seven, however, shut his eyes tightly, not daring to look at all.

On the ground, everyone craned their necks upward, watching the massive balloon slowly drift into the cloud, illuminated by moonlight and the flickering flame above it.

The low hanging cloud seemed almost alive, like a vast creature opening its mouth and swallowing the balloon whole.

Soon, it disappeared completely from sight.

Gao Chuwu could not hold back any longer.

"Yiye! Yiye!"

Gao Sanwa shouted as well, his voice rising with panic.

"Yiye-jie, what is happening up there? Say something, we cannot see you anymore. Are you alright?"

The cloud remained silent.

No response came.

Gao Yiye did not answer.

Panic spread instantly across the ground.

"Yiye!"

"Yiye-jie!"

"Say something!"

The commander raised his voice sharply.

"Sky Battalion Unit Seven, respond immediately. Do you hear me?"

After a brief delay, a trembling voice came from within the cloud.

"Reporting... I can hear you... I am still alive... I was not struck by lightning..."

The commander let out a breath of relief.

"Report the situation immediately."

"I... I cannot," Unit Seven replied, his voice filled with fear, "my eyes are closed, I do not know what is happening."

A heavy silence fell.

The commander's expression darkened.

"Then open your eyes."

"I... I do not dare," Unit Seven said miserably, "if I see something from the immortal realm, will my eyes be taken from me?"

The commander snapped.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun is benevolent. What kind of monster are you imagining him to be?"

"...Understood."

A few seconds passed.

Then Unit Seven's voice came again, louder this time.

"This is Unit Seven. I have opened my eyes. The Saintess... the Saintess is gone. She has disappeared. There is nothing around me but white clouds. I cannot see anything, but she is no longer here."

"What?" the people below cried out in shock. "Where did she go? Did you hear anything?"

"No... nothing," Unit Seven said, his voice shaking. "She vanished without a sound."

"Descend immediately," the commander ordered. "Return at once."

"Yes, sir."

Before everyone's eyes, the massive balloon slowly emerged from the cloud and descended back toward the ground, and when it came into view again, only one figure remained in the gondola.

Gao Yiye was gone.

The crowd stood frozen, staring up at the silent cloud, unable to speak.

...

From beginning to end, Gao Yiye had never closed her eyes.

She knew that Unit Seven had shut his in fear, but she could not bring herself to do the same, because she longed to see Dao Xuan Tianzun, and closing her eyes would defeat the entire purpose of coming here.

The moment the balloon entered the cloud, she widened her eyes instead.

And what she saw...

Was something she could never have imagined.

Her body seemed to split between two worlds.

Her lower half remained in the mortal realm, still within the endless white cloud, but her upper half had already crossed into another realm entirely.

Before her eyes was a strange room filled with unfamiliar objects.

She immediately recognized one of them as a lamp, yet it was clearly different from the electric lamp invented by Ji Menghan of the Gao Village Family, because this one felt more advanced, more refined, and carried a subtle sense of mystery.

She also saw a fan, its design equally superior.

There was even a small, mirror like artifact that continuously played songs, repeating them over and over.

Her gaze moved slowly across the room.

But she did not see him.

Dao Xuan Tianzun was not there.

She hesitated for only a single moment.

Then she suddenly jumped upward.

Her hands shot out and grabbed onto the edge of the sandbox.

Chapter 1425 Welcome to My World

Since childhood, Gao Yiye had never been the delicate type.

She had climbed trees, run along field ridges, and played wildly across the countryside, so her body was far stronger and more agile than most women, and when her hands pressed against the edge of the sandbox, that strength showed itself without hesitation.

With a single push, she lifted herself upward.

In one swift motion, she leapt out of the box.

At that exact instant, she clearly felt her body pass through something intangible, like a thin yet absolute layer of energy that separated two different worlds, a barrier that should have prevented anything from crossing between them.

Yet it could not stop Li Dao Xuan.

And it could not stop her.

It felt as though she had stepped beyond the three realms and escaped the five elements, as if the rules that bound the mortal world no longer applied to her at all.

She had entered the immortal realm completely.

The moment she did, she immediately noticed something astonishing.

She had grown.

Everything around her, the objects that had once seemed enormous and incomprehensible, instantly shrank into proportions that matched her body.

Her eyes widened.

"Wait... did I just grow two hundred times taller?"

She hurried to the edge of the sandbox and looked down.

Below her, she could see Gao Sanwa, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, the Sky Battalion special unit, and even Unit Seven still floating within the cloud with his eyes tightly shut, not daring to open them.

But something felt off.

The flow of time inside the box was incredibly fast.

Even the smallest movements made by Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu appeared like scenes from a fast forwarded film, their gestures sped up to the point of distortion.

She only watched for a few minutes, yet within the sandbox, night had already passed.

Dawn arrived.

Golden sunlight spread across the land, falling over Gao Sanwa, Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, and the others, who were still standing there, staring blankly at the sky.

Then she heard Gao Sanwa's voice, sharp and rapid like something played at high speed.

"This is bad, Yiye-jie ascended to the immortal realm, come back, come back!"

The sound was distorted, high pitched and fast, yet somehow she could still understand every word, as if the ability to comprehend it had been granted to her by the very nature of this realm.

Gao Chuwu looked up and spoke more quietly.

"She must have gone to Dao Xuan Tianzun's side... I just hope she will be happy."

Zheng Daniu scratched his head.

"Then she will have lots of delicious food from now on."

The others fell silent.

A faint realization dawned on Gao Yiye.

"So this is what Dao Xuan Tianzun sees all the time," she murmured, her voice filled with quiet wonder. "Time in the mortal world moves so quickly... perhaps this is what they mean by a day in the heavens equaling a year in the human world."

Her gaze returned to the sandbox.

"This box is Dao Xuan Tianzun's artifact. It connects the immortal realm and the mortal realm, yet ordinary people cannot pass through it, just like Unit Seven, who could not enter, but I can."

She placed a hand lightly against her chest.

"I am someone favored by Dao Xuan Tianzun... that must be why I have been granted this privilege."

Gao Yiye had always been bold.

Where others might shrink back in fear upon entering an unknown realm, she instead took a step forward without hesitation.

Then another.

She quickly moved toward the window.

Looking outside, she saw that the house she stood in was located on the peak of a mountain, Zhaomu Mountain in Shuangqing City, surrounded by rows of elegant villas, each one refined and carefully designed.

Beyond the mountain, a vast and dazzling city stretched out below, its countless lights forming a brilliant sea that far surpassed even the most prosperous commercial district of the Gao Village Family.

Gao Yiye's eyes widened slightly.

"So this is the immortal realm..."

Then she paused.

"...Where is Dao Xuan Tianzun?"

She turned and scanned the room.

There was only the sandbox, a chair beside it, a table, and on that table a strange device, along with little else.

Her gaze quickly locked onto a single door.

The bedroom.

Without hesitation, she walked toward it and pushed it open.

Inside was a warm and quiet room, and on the bed lay the person she had been longing to see for so long.

Li Dao Xuan.

He was fast asleep, his expression calm and content, completely unaware of everything that had just happened.

Gao Yiye slowed her steps.

She approached the bed quietly, then sat down on the floor beside it, leaning forward slightly so that her upper body rested gently against the edge.

She simply looked at him.

...

Morning light slipped through the window and fell softly across Li Dao Xuan's face.

He stirred.

The memories of the previous night came back in fragments, hot pot, beer, KTV, too much excitement, too little restraint.

"...I drank too much again," he muttered, rubbing his temple as he slowly opened his eyes.

A faint fragrance lingered in the air, delicate and familiar, like the scent of old style cosmetics.

He blinked.

Then froze.

Gao Yiye was right there, leaning beside his bed, her eyes fixed on him, clear and deep like still water.

For a moment, his mind failed to catch up.

Then he smiled instinctively.

"Yiye... long time no see."

Her expression did not change.

But tears slid silently down her cheeks.

Li Dao Xuan blinked in confusion.

"Hey... why are you crying? It has only been a few months."

Her voice was soft, but it carried a weight he could not ignore.

"If I had not come to see you... would you have never come to see me again?"

"...Huh?"

Something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

Li Dao Xuan suddenly sat upright.

This was his bedroom in Shuangqing City.

Not the sandbox.

Not the other world.

His gaze snapped toward the living room, where the sandbox sat with its lid open.

Then he grabbed his phone, quickly pulling up the monitoring app and replaying the footage from the previous night.

There it was.

Gao Yiye climbing out of the box.

At the moment she emerged, her body expanded rapidly, growing to full size in an instant.

He stared at the screen for a few seconds.

Then turned it off slowly.

During this entire process, Gao Yiye had remained silent, standing nearby and watching, because she understood what he was doing, and in her eyes, that device in his hand was an immortal mirror capable of observing past and future events.

She even saw the moment she climbed out of the box.

Her skirt had shifted slightly.

A flash of her leg had been exposed.

A faint blush appeared on her face, but she quickly suppressed it.

It did not matter.

If it was him, then it did not matter.

Li Dao Xuan lowered his hand and looked at her again.

Their eyes met.

He let out a soft sigh.

"I see now," he said, a hint of amusement mixing into his voice. "You are the one with the protagonist's fate."

Gao Yiye tilted her head slightly.

"...What?"

"I always thought I was the main character," he continued, shaking his head lightly, "but it turns out I was wrong. You are the main character, and I am just your cheat ability, something like the old master living inside a ring."

Gao Yiye blinked, clearly not understanding.

"...What are you talking about?"

Li Dao Xuan waved it off.

"Never mind, that is not important."

He looked at her again, his expression softening as he extended his hand.

"Yiye, welcome to my world. If you do not mind... stay here with me from now on."

For a brief moment, she froze.

Then joy flooded her face.

"Dao Xuan Tianzun... you will allow me to stay?"

"Of course," he said with a smile. "Why would I refuse? Only a fool would turn away someone like you."

Without hesitation, she placed her hand into his.

Their fingers intertwined gently.

For the first time, she felt his real hand.

Not the artificial texture she had known before, not something that merely resembled a human touch, but something warm, steady, and undeniably real.

He gave a slight pull.

She did not resist.

Her body leaned forward naturally, and his arm wrapped around her slender waist as she fell into his embrace.

Then, without another word, his lips met hers.

Warm.

Certain.

Real.

And for Gao Yiye, everything she had longed for finally became something she could truly hold.

Chapter 1426 Zhu Youjian Arc (Part 1)

The first year of New Ming.

Zhu Youjian was not yet thirty years old when he officially became a labor reform convict, sentenced to ten years.

The prison he entered was not an ordinary one.

It was specifically designated for what they called "intellectual crimes," so there were no murderers, no rapists, no bandits. Compared to other prisons, the environment here could even be described as relatively decent.

He was not alone.

Two loyal subjects followed him in.

Wang Cheng'en.

And Mi Qingli.

There had been a small incident before they got in.

Strictly speaking, neither of them had committed any crime, so they were not eligible to enter prison in the first place. The system was very clear about this. You could not simply decide that you wanted to go to prison and then walk in.

That would be ridiculous.

But these two men were stubborn in a way that bordered on absurd.

Since they could not enter legally, they chose the next best option.

They committed crimes.

Mi Qingli went straight to the office of S.H.I.E.L.D., stole a stack of classified documents, and made absolutely no effort to escape, allowing himself to be caught red handed by Bin Sheng on the spot.

Wang Cheng'en's approach was even more outrageous.

He had neither the skill to steal secrets nor the desire to commit something extreme like arson or murder, so after thinking it through again and again, he came up with a plan that left everyone speechless.

He went to peep into a women's latrine.

And he made sure to get caught.

A group of furious women immediately surrounded him, ready to beat him senseless, but then someone noticed something.

"Wait... he is a eunuch."

The entire situation froze.

So the question became strangely complicated.

Should they beat him or not?

In the end, after several chaotic and ridiculous episodes, both men successfully secured their place in prison.

Together with Zhu Youjian.

...

"This is your room."

The guard pointed casually at a cell.

Zhu Youjian glanced at it.

"Oh."

The guard frowned.

"What do you mean 'oh'? Go in."

Zhu Youjian looked at the closed door, clearly displeased.

"The door is shut."

The guard stared at him for a second.

"...So open it."

Zhu Youjian frowned even deeper.

"Open it?"

What kind of statement was that?

Since when did doors require you to open them yourself?

Before he could react, Wang Cheng'en rushed forward in a blur of motion, pulled the door open, and bowed slightly.

"Your Majesty, please."

Only then did Zhu Youjian step inside.

His gaze swept across the room before landing on the bed, and in the next instant, Wang Cheng'en had already rushed ahead, shaking out the bedding and smoothing it neatly.

The guard watched all of this in silence, his expression slowly turning strange.

Wang Cheng'en leaned closer to him and lowered his voice in a flattering tone.

"Sir, where is my sleeping place? Is it close to His Majesty?"

The guard pointed inside.

"You are in the same room. That bed across from his is yours."

Zhu Youjian felt his mood drop like a falling stone.

"How can a eunuch share a room with me?"

Wang Cheng'en immediately panicked.

"Your Majesty, this servant will sleep on the floor, sleep on the floor, so I can attend to you at any time."

Zhu Youjian paused.

"...Fine."

It was barely acceptable.

Mi Qingli spoke from the doorway.

"I will be in the room next door. If Your Majesty needs anything, I will come immediately."

"Very well. You may leave."

Mi Qingli actually left.

He turned and walked out without hesitation.

Wang Cheng'en, however, could not leave.

He retreated to a corner of the room, crouched down, and did his best to erase his own presence.

...

Early the next morning, a loud bell rang throughout the prison.

"Wake up. Breakfast, then labor."

Zhu Youjian rose from bed and stretched his arms.

Wang Cheng'en appeared instantly, as if he had been waiting for this exact moment, and began helping him dress without a word.

Once ready, the two stepped outside, where Mi Qingli was already waiting.

The three of them followed the other inmates toward the workshop.

On the walls were slogans written in bold characters.

"Labor is honorable."

"Reform yourself and start anew."

A guard approached and dropped a pile of porcelain bottles and labels in front of them.

"Your task today is simple. Stick these labels onto the bottles."

Zhu Youjian picked up one label and glanced at it.

"Beijing Soy Sauce."

So this was nothing more than packaging work.

He leaned back slightly, crossed his legs, and made no move to begin.

The guard's expression darkened.

Just as he was about to lose his temper, Wang Cheng'en and Mi Qingli stepped forward at the same time, placing themselves between him and Zhu Youjian.

"Sir, please do not worry about him," Wang Cheng'en said quickly with a smile. "We will complete his share of the work."

The guard raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? That is fine, but your total output must match expectations. Let me make it clear. If the average worker completes two hundred bottles a day, then the two of you must deliver six hundred together. Can you do that?"

Mi Qingli flexed his arm confidently.

"Not a problem. I have full confidence in my stamina. Six hundred, eight hundred, just say the word."

"And the quality must meet standards."

"Guaranteed."

What followed left the entire workshop in stunned silence.

The two men worked like machines.

Faster.

Faster.

Faster still.

Their hands moved so quickly that it almost became a blur, label after label pressed neatly onto the bottles with astonishing precision.

Other inmates stopped working just to watch.

Even the guards gathered around, drawn by the spectacle.

"That speed..."

Someone muttered under their breath.

"This is not normal."

If thirty years of solitude gave a man fast hands, then what they were seeing here was something beyond that.

Especially Wang Cheng'en.

Freed from worldly distractions, his mind was clear and focused, and his movements reached a level of efficiency that bordered on terrifying.

By evening, when the guards came to tally the results, they found that the three of them had far exceeded the average output.

All three were awarded the title of "Outstanding Reform Inmates" for the day.

After labor came the next step.

Reform.

The inmates sat in rows as a lecturer from Luoyang University stood at the front and began the lesson.

"Today's topic is equality among all people."

...

Zhu Youjian had assumed that this life would continue unchanged for ten years.

But after two months, something began to shift.

With each lesson, Wang Cheng'en and Mi Qingli changed, little by little.

At first, it was subtle.

Barely noticeable.

Then one morning, Zhu Youjian stood as usual, spreading his arms and waiting.

But Wang Cheng'en did not immediately step forward.

Instead, he stood there, murmuring softly to himself.

"Equality... equality..."

He hesitated, then looked up.

"Your Majesty... if I continue to serve you like this every day... does it not feel a little... outdated? Should you not try handling some things yourself?"

Zhu Youjian's eyes widened.

"Impudent! What are you saying?"

Wang Cheng'en immediately panicked.

"Your Majesty, forgive me. I spoke nonsense. Please allow me to assist you at once."

That day, he still dressed him.

But the next day...

And the day after that...

The hesitation grew.

Until one morning, Zhu Youjian woke up and found the room empty.

Wang Cheng'en was already gone.

He had left early on purpose.

It was a statement.

A silent one.

Zhu Youjian stood there for a long moment.

Then he slowly lowered his arms.

"...I see."

From today onward,

he would have to dress himself.

Chapter 1427 Zhu Youjian Arc (Part 2)

Gradually, Wang Cheng'en stopped doing everything for Zhu Youjian.

Zhu Youjian had no choice but to turn to Mi Qingli. However, Mi Qingli's change happened at the same time as Wang Cheng'en's. After attending one ideological class after another, both of them increasingly understood what "equality for all" meant, and what "feudal remnants" were.

They began to realize that loyalty had limits.

Being loyal to the country or to one's superior did not mean doing absolutely everything for them. That kind of loyalty was toxic.

Zhu Youjian's daily life now had to be handled by himself.

He quickly discovered that he really did not know how to do anything.

When fastening buttons, he would misalign them. When trimming his nails, he would cut into his own skin. When his clothes tore, he struggled with needle and thread for a long time and still failed to mend them properly.

In the workshop, Wang Cheng'en and Mi Qingli no longer helped him either. He had to work on his own.

Today's task was to assemble paper boxes. Glue had to be spread on cardboard, then the box folded and stuck together.

Zhu Youjian worked until he was drenched in sweat, yet he only managed to finish fifty crooked, misshapen boxes.

When he turned his head, Wang Cheng'en had already completed two hundred and thirty. Mi Qingli had also finished two hundred.

Zhu Youjian wished they would give him a few of theirs.

But he knew that was no longer possible.

Neither of them would help him anymore. If he begged, he would only lose face.

Holding back tears, he gritted his teeth and continued working.

"I cannot lose. I cannot let my former ministers laugh at me."

That evening, the guards came to check the results.

Wang Cheng'en and Mi Qingli were praised as "advanced workers" and "model reform prisoners."

Zhu Youjian, on the other hand, was criticized across the entire workshop for failing to meet the required workload.

For quite some time afterward, his days were nothing short of a nightmare.

He found that he could never do things well.

His clothes never came out properly washed. His hair was always messy. When sticking labels onto bottles, they were uneven, full of wrinkles and air bubbles. Sometimes he even stuck them on upside down and got scolded harshly by the team leader.

Every time the labor camp held a "work competition," Zhu Youjian ranked last.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not catch up.

He was truly trying his best.

But he simply could not catch up.

Only then did he begin to realize something.

He lacked ability. Effort alone was not enough. Doing things required proper methods and techniques.

For example, when sticking labels onto bottles, the harder he pressed, the easier it was to make them crooked or full of bubbles.

So he began to study even harder.

Not just cultural knowledge, but also labor skills.

His body grew stronger. He no longer suffered from sleepless nights. His appetite increased, and his digestion improved.

Gradually, he began to keep up with the group.

From that point on, he truly understood the meaning of labor.

What he liked most was the evening broadcast in the labor camp square. Gao Family News.

It was also everyone's favorite program.

He would always arrive early and sit in the center. At those times, Mi Qingli and Wang Cheng'en would stand on either side of him.

They no longer helped him with tasks, but in crowded places, they still acted as his guards, ensuring no one harmed him.

Zhu Youjian understood.

They were truly loyal ministers.

Only the way they expressed their loyalty had changed. Their sincerity toward him had not.

Today's broadcast unexpectedly showed a documentary from the early Chongzhen years.

When Zhu Youjian saw the great droughts in Shaanxi and the suffering of the people, tears welled up in his eyes.

When he saw Wu Shen taking the one hundred thousand taels of silver he had given, and speaking to Dao Xuan Tianzun, who was disguised as Ji Gong, saying, "One tael can only save one person,"

Zhu Youjian broke down and cried loudly.

"I wanted to save them. I truly wanted to save the people. I tried. I really tried. I was just too foolish back then. I did not know how to save them..."

...

New Ming Calendar, Year Five.

Gao Yiye, the Saintess who had ascended to the immortal realm under Dao Xuan Tianzun's favor, suddenly descended from the sky on a multicolored auspicious cloud.

She returned to the mortal world and brought with her many new and wondrous things. All kinds of food, all kinds of entertainment.

After leaving behind a decree, "Be lenient to others," she ascended once more.

After this event, the leadership convened and made a decision.

A general amnesty.

Of course, it was not the kind of indiscriminate release from the past. Instead, it was selective, granting freedom to those who had shown genuine reform.

Soon, Mi Qingli and Wang Cheng'en were rated "excellent" and qualified for early release.

But neither of them wanted to leave.

They both looked toward Zhu Youjian.

Zhu Youjian froze, then let out a long sigh.

"If I leave... will the people curse me?"

"After these years of learning, I now understand how great my mistakes were. I am afraid. If I step outside... will the people point at me and say I brought them suffering?"

But what one fears often comes true.

On December 4th, Year Five of the New Ming Calendar, when the amnesty committee read out the name "Zhu Youjian" from the stage, he could no longer remain.

He had to leave the labor camp where he had lived for five years.

Here, he had learned how to open doors, dress himself, wash his clothes, mend them, and perform all kinds of labor.

As he stepped out of the gates, he could not help but look back.

Then came the fear of the unknown.

He did not know whether he could survive in this world.

He did not know what kind of life awaited him.

The curses he had imagined never came.

The people outside the camp barely even looked at him.

Once, he had been emperor.

Now, he was just an ordinary man.

Someone was waiting for him.

His Empress Zhou, several consorts, his sons, his daughters.

All of them looked at him with hopeful eyes.

"Husband."

"Father."

Different voices called out.

Zhu Youjian swallowed and asked with difficulty, "These past years... have you been well?"

Empress Zhou nodded slightly.

"We have been well. Dao Xuan Tianzun spared our lives and ensured no one harassed us. The Shen Shield Bureau also arranged for us. Over the years, we learned handicrafts. Our household has managed."

His sons smiled as well.

"We are educated, so we work as clerks in offices. The income is decent. Father, there is a library nearby hiring administrators. You are literate and knowledgeable. You should be able to get the job."

Zhu Youjian was overjoyed.

"No one made things difficult for you?"

"No. We earn our living through our own labor now. Just like everyone else. Why would anyone make things difficult for us?"

Zhu Youjian said, "I... I will do the same."

Only then did he realize.

He had said "I."

Not "We."

When had that changed?

He could not remember.

New Ming Calendar, Year Six.

Zhu Youjian became a librarian in the capital. He was literate and skilled in calligraphy, earning the appreciation of the head librarian.

Year Ten.

The old director passed away. Zhu Youjian was promoted to head librarian.

Year Fourteen.

He was named a model worker.

Year Sixteen.

He voluntarily applied to be transferred to the Forbidden City Museum as its director. His former home had become a museum. Walking through it, memories flooded back, and tears filled his eyes.

Year Eighteen.

He was elected as a representative of the people.

Year Nineteen.

At the nineteenth People's Congress, Zhu Youjian cast his first sacred and solemn vote.

Chapter 1428 Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang Arc

New Ming Calendar, Year 14.

Time had quietly passed, and before anyone really noticed, Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang had both stepped into their fifties.

Age had come, but it had not weakened them.

Their bodies were still tall and powerful, their shoulders broad, their backs straight like iron rods. When the two of them put on their neatly pressed military uniforms, they still looked like towering walls that could crush anyone beneath their pressure.

And right now, that pressure was falling entirely on one unlucky man.

Fan Bulian, the dean of the Foreign Languages Institute.

He stood there, sweating.

Gao Chuwu's voice exploded like thunder.

"Fan Bulian, you bastard, where did you hide my son? Hand him over right now. If you do not, I will make one phone call and have a whole division come over and stomp you flat."

Fan Bulian's face turned pale.

Before he could even speak, Xing Honglang had already reached out and slapped a hand over Gao Chuwu's mouth.

"Stop talking nonsense," she snapped. "The army is not your personal tool. You cannot just call them over to fight people."

Gao Chuwu struggled and mumbled behind her hand, still furious.

"But he hid our son."

Xing Honglang released him, then stepped forward herself. Her eyes locked onto Fan Bulian like a predator.

"The army cannot be used privately," she said coldly, "but my old salt smuggler subordinates can. Plenty of them never joined the military. Give me three minutes. If you do not hand over my son, I will call eight hundred reformed smugglers, and they will come deal with you."

Fan Bulian almost felt his knees go weak.

These two were simply unreasonable.

"You cannot do this," he said hurriedly. "Your son has his own dreams. You cannot force your preferences onto his future."

Gao Chuwu snorted loudly.

"What nonsense are you talking about. My son always wanted to be a soldier. When he was little, he hugged my leg and said he wanted to become a great general. His physique is outstanding. He was born for the battlefield."

Xing Honglang nodded immediately.

"That is right. He said it himself when he was young. How are we forcing him?"

Fan Bulian could only sigh.

"General Gao, General Xing, are your memories still stuck when he was four or five years old? He has grown up. He is already in his twenties."

The couple froze.

For a brief moment, they did not even know how to respond.

Fan Bulian continued, seeing that he had their attention.

"He has already written clearly on his graduation plan that he wants to abandon martial pursuits and become a diplomat. He has been studying foreign languages very seriously for years. I am not exaggerating when I say he is the most talented language student I have ever seen."

Gao Chuwu's eyes widened.

"What?"

Xing Honglang was also stunned.

"He wants to give up being a soldier? With that kind of body? Does he not even understand what he looks like?"

Fan Bulian shook his head.

"Your way of thinking is outdated. A strong body does not mean someone must fight. Even a giant can pick up a pen."

Silence fell.

Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang exchanged glances, both at a loss.

After a while, Gao Chuwu suddenly cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted toward the institute building.

"Gao Zhengjing, I know you are hiding in there and listening. Get out here right now and talk to me."

Xing Honglang also shouted.

"That is right. Come out. Hiding behind someone else is not impressive."

Their voices were so loud that the entire institute seemed to tremble.

The students nearby instinctively backed away.

And in doing so, they accidentally pushed one person out from the crowd.

Gao Zhengjing.

He stood there awkwardly.

He was in his twenties, in the prime of his life. His build resembled both of his parents. Tall, broad, and incredibly sturdy, like a pillar carved from stone. Because he had grown up with better nutrition, he was even larger than them.

However, his voice was calm.

Gentle.

Almost refined.

"Father. Mother. I am here," he said. "Let us talk properly."

Gao Chuwu did not hesitate.

"Fine. Then I will say it directly. Join the army. With your physique, anything else is a waste."

"I will not," Gao Zhengjing replied immediately.

His tone was firm, without hesitation.

"Modern warfare is no longer decided by physical strength. Shooting ability and military knowledge are more important. On the battlefield, I might not even defeat a smaller soldier."

Gao Chuwu blinked.

His brain clearly needed a moment to process that.

"Is that really how it works now?"

No one answered him.

Xing Honglang stepped forward.

"I will speak with you," she said.

Gao Zhengjing straightened his posture slightly.

He knew very well that while his father was straightforward, his mother was the one who truly understood reason.

Xing Honglang looked at him steadily.

"Why do you want to abandon martial pursuits?"

Gao Zhengjing answered without hesitation.

"I like literature."

Xing Honglang nodded slightly.

"That is a sufficient reason. Then tell me, what exactly do you want to do?"

"I want to become a diplomat," he said.

He paused for a moment, then continued, his voice growing more resolute.

"New Ming is expanding westward and establishing trade relations with foreign nations. At this stage, the country urgently needs people who understand foreign languages. However, we lack talent in this field. I want to fill that gap and contribute to the country."

As soon as he finished speaking, applause broke out around them.

"Senior Gao, well said."

Someone in the crowd shouted playfully, and laughter followed.

In that moment of chaos, Xing Honglang suddenly moved.

Her body flashed forward with astonishing speed.

Before anyone could react, she had already grabbed a young woman from the crowd and pulled her out.

The young woman's face was completely red.

Xing Honglang looked her up and down carefully, then nodded in satisfaction.

"Good. I approve this marriage."

The surrounding students burst into laughter.

Gao Zhengjing was stunned.

"Xiaoyu... so you really do like me?"

The girl panicked immediately.

"You are so annoying."

She broke free from Xing Honglang's grip and ran back into the crowd.

Xing Honglang did not chase her. Instead, she turned her gaze back to her son.

"Everyone has their own path," she said calmly. "I will not stop you. But you must prove that you are capable. If your ability is not enough, do not expect us to accept your choice."

Gao Zhengjing's eyes lit up.

"I understand."

He took a breath, then began to speak.

English.

French.

Spanish.

Portuguese.

Dutch.

Japanese.

Language after language flowed from his mouth, smooth and natural.

He did not pause, did not stumble.

Within just a few minutes, he had demonstrated more than ten different languages, each one fluent and clear.

The students were stunned.

Then applause erupted again, even louder than before.

Fan Bulian smiled with satisfaction.

"I told you. He is a genius."

Gao Chuwu and Xing Honglang did not understand a single word.

But they were not fools.

They could see the reactions around them. They could feel it.

Their son was not pretending.

He was truly capable.

The two of them looked at each other.

In that moment, the same emotion appeared in both of their eyes.

Pride.

Gao Chuwu suddenly opened his arms.

"Honglang."

Xing Honglang smiled and opened hers as well.

"Chuwu."

They stepped forward and embraced tightly.

"Our son is amazing."

New Ming Calendar, Year 15. Gao Zhengjing took up a position as a diplomat and traveled to the West.

In Year 20, under his leadership, New Ming signed the well known Thirty Two Articles Treaty with Western nations, ensuring that trade would not be restricted.

In Year 23, the New Ming embassy was attacked by anti Ming extremists. Gao Zhengjing immediately switched roles from scholar to warrior.

He removed his diplomatic robes, put on armor, and took up firearms. By himself, he eliminated an entire battalion.

His story was later adapted into a film titled First Blood.

Many years later, Li Dao Xuan looked into the box and saw that time had advanced to New Ming Year 320. In the capital's martyr cemetery stood a monument dedicated to Gao Chuwu's family.

The inscription read, "Founding heroes, a family of loyal martyrs."

Chapter 1429 Shan Shier and Third Miss

Year 2 of the New Ming Calendar.

A sea of people surged outside the gates of the Forbidden City. Today marked the opening of the Second People's Assembly. Compared to the first assembly, this one carried a major difference. Its very first agenda was to elect a Grand Chancellor.

During the first assembly, the leadership structure had still been chaotic. At that time, governance had been temporarily handled by Shan Shier, the long serving chief steward. However, after a year of adjustment, the New Ming state had stabilized. The country was orderly, the economy was flourishing, and systems were finally running smoothly.

Now it was time to choose a Grand Chancellor through collective governance.

Although the Grand Chancellor was not an emperor, the position carried immense authority. Naturally, many capable figures wanted to compete for it.

Shan Shier knew very well that he was not the only contender. Tan Liwen, Zhu Yujian, Zhu You Song, Sun Chuanting, Lu Xiangsheng, and Liang Shixian all had the qualifications to compete.

The vote counting was about to begin.

Shan Shier took a deep breath. I cannot lose. I have served as chief steward of Gao Village Family for more than a decade. My ability and character are widely recognized. There is no reason for me to lose.

With slightly trembling hands, he addressed the representatives.

"The vote counting will now begin. In accordance with fairness, transparency, and justice, the entire process will be recorded by four reporters from four directions. The footage will later be broadcast on the Immortal Mirror. No one can cheat. This is what we call Shen Si Du Xing."

The representatives nodded in approval.

"Agreed."

Shan Shier picked up the first ballot and unfolded it. His face lit up with joy.

"Shan Shier, one vote."

On the viewing platform, Third Miss clapped happily.

"Father is amazing. He already has a vote."

Confidence swelled inside Shan Shier. The first vote is mine. This is going exactly as expected.

He picked up the second ballot, glanced at it, and froze for a brief moment before quickly announcing.

"Flat Rabbit, one vote."

Third Miss blinked in confusion.

"Someone voted for Flat Rabbit? Is this a joke?"

Before she could finish reacting, Shan Shier continued.

"Flat Rabbit, another vote."

Third Miss stiffened.

Shan Shier kept reading.

"Flat Rabbit, another vote."

"Flat Rabbit, another vote."

"Shan Shier, plus one vote."

"Flat Rabbit, plus one vote."

"Flat Rabbit, plus one vote."

The situation began to drift into something strange and completely unexpected.

There were more than two thousand four hundred representatives from across the nation. When all the ballots were counted, the final result stunned everyone.

Flat Rabbit alone received more than two thousand two hundred votes.

All other candidates combined barely reached a few hundred.

Thus, the first officially recognized Grand Chancellor of the New Ming state was decided.

Flat Rabbit.

Flat Rabbit's sudden election left him completely bewildered. He had no governing ability whatsoever. In the end, he could only rely on Shan Shier to handle state affairs. For a time, this caused confusion within the leadership structure.

After this incident, the entire nation came to understand something important. Collective governance also had its flaws.

The quality and awareness of voters directly influenced the outcome.

If large numbers of people without a proper understanding of national affairs participated in voting, the result could easily be misguided.

This was not beneficial to the country.

The path of collective governance was not smooth. It was filled with obstacles.

However, no one chose to retreat. If there were problems, they would be solved. If there were mistakes, they would be corrected.

Year 6 of the New Ming Calendar.

At the Sixth People's Assembly, a new vote was held.

Flat Rabbit stepped down after four years of confusion, and Shan Shier finally took office as Grand Chancellor. The country gradually returned to the right track.

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After a long day reviewing documents, Shan Shier returned home with a weary body.

A service soldier quickly poured him a cup of tea.

Shan Shier smiled and thanked him.

"Where are my wife and daughter?"

The soldier replied respectfully.

"Madam has gone to Dao Xuan Tianzun's cave to offer prayers. The young lady is in her laboratory. She said it contains chemical substances and is dangerous, so no one is allowed inside."

Shan Shier chuckled.

"That is called exaggeration."

He picked up his teacup and walked toward the laboratory.

As he reached the door, he heard his daughter muttering inside.

"A bit of mouse whiskers, a bat wing, some lizard saliva... stir..."

Shan Shier stopped in his tracks.

What kind of formula is that supposed to be?

Before he could think further, a loud explosion erupted.

Boom.

Smoke billowed out of the laboratory.

Shan Shier panicked and rushed inside. The room was filled with thick black smoke, and visibility was near zero.

"Daughter, are you alright?"

Her voice came calmly from within the smoke.

"I am fine. It is nothing serious."

"Nothing serious?" Shan Shier coughed as he waved away the smoke. "This is clearly a dangerous situation."

Third Miss stepped out of the smoke, her face smudged with soot but otherwise unharmed.

Shan Shier frowned.

"What exactly are you researching? I heard you talking about mouse whiskers and such. That does not sound like proper chemistry."

She laughed.

"I did not actually use those. I was just saying random things for fun. I am researching batteries."

"Batteries?" Shan Shier looked puzzled. "What is that?"

"A battery is something that stores electricity," she explained. "The colorful train bestowed by Dao Xuan Tianzun used something called a number five battery. After studying and dismantling it, we found that it works on chemical principles. Now we are trying to replicate it."

She paused and sighed softly.

"Tianzun has appeared less and less in recent years. The intervals between his appearances keep getting longer. He used to watch over us every day, but now months pass before he appears again. He no longer grants us batteries. The original trains have already stopped running."

She clenched her small fist.

"We must create our own batteries. Only then can we continue using the artifacts he left behind."

Shan Shier fell silent.

Yes. Tianzun had been appearing less frequently.

Perhaps one day, he would disappear entirely.

Shan Shier looked up at the sky and clasped his hands in respect, remaining silent for a long time.

...

Year 6 of the New Ming Calendar.

Shan Shier officially assumed the position of Grand Chancellor. His governance was gentle and benevolent, earning the love of the people.

Year 10.

He was re elected and continued his administration.

Year 14.

He retired due to age, and Liu Maopao succeeded him. Liu Maopao governed with bold and aggressive policies, securing great advantages for the nation and rapidly increasing its strength.

Year 22.

However, Liu Maopao's aggressive expansion led to overextension. Colonies spread across the globe, but with limited transportation and population, the burden became too heavy. National strength

declined instead of rising. Liu Maopao resigned, and Shan Shier returned to office, focusing on internal stability.

Year 26.

Shan Shier retired again due to illness, handing power back to Liu Maopao, who had matured through reflection and governed with renewed wisdom.

Year 30.

Third Miss knelt before her father's memorial tablet. In her hands, she held a battery.

"Father, we succeeded. The battery has been developed. The train that stopped running for so many years is moving again."

Her voice trembled slightly, yet carried pride.

The era had changed. The people had learned to stand on their own.

Chapter 1430 Cheng Xu's Story

Year 1 of the New Ming Calendar.

Cheng Xu stood atop the walls of the Forbidden City.

Behind him, inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the new leadership was already managing the affairs of the state. In front of him stretched the reborn capital, where the people filled the streets and began their new lives. Everything carried a sense of vitality.

A new era had begun. A new nation had been established.

What about the Jinyiwei?

Cheng Xu turned his head and looked. A large group of former guards stood in line outside the headquarters of the Sky Battalion, submitting reports one by one.

They were undergoing re evaluation and competing for positions again. Just like the former civil officials, whether they would be retained by the Gao Village Family system remained uncertain.

Cheng Xu lifted his head toward the sky.

Golden sunlight poured down. Within that warm glow, he saw a gentle old grandmother smiling at him.

He raised his hand and waved.

The old woman smiled kindly.

"My good great grandson, I no longer need to worry about you. You will live well from now on."

Cheng Xu let out a soft sigh.

"I suppose I will have to delay coming to accompany you below for a while longer."

She chuckled.

"There is no need to hurry. I am doing well now. You should live your own life properly."

Her figure gradually faded, blending into the golden sunlight until she disappeared completely.

Cheng Xu slowly reached up and untied the cloth covering his face.

He no longer needed it.

His real name, Cheng Xu, could finally be revealed.

In the distance, a soldier noticed and exclaimed.

"Look. General He has removed his face covering."

More soldiers gathered and whispered among themselves.

"Finally."

"He no longer needs to hide his identity."

"Yes. No more living under a false name."

"I am truly happy for him."

They spoke quietly, filled with admiration.

The cloth fell away, revealing Cheng Xu's true face. It was neither especially handsome nor particularly imposing. He looked like an ordinary man, with a hint of cleverness in his expression.

Yet the soldiers reacted as if they saw something extraordinary.

"Wow, General He looks so majestic."

"That face is truly handsome."

Their admiration added a layer of brilliance that reality itself did not quite possess.

At that moment, Shan Shier walked up onto the wall and leaned beside Cheng Xu.

"Oh. You finally removed the face covering."

Cheng Xu smiled.

"Yes. The new nation has been established. Why should I still fear the Jinyiwei? Of course I would remove it."

Shan Shier chuckled.

"You could have removed it earlier. Waiting until now feels a bit late. This is what we call arriving after the moment has passed."

Cheng Xu shrugged.

"Caution ensures longevity. Until everything is absolutely safe, one should not relax. After all, no one knows whether tomorrow or an accident will come first. By the way, you are very busy these days. You did not come here just to talk about my face covering. What is the real matter?"

Shan Shier took out a map and pointed north.

"Although the country is now stabilized, there are still some historical issues that need to be resolved. The army cannot rest yet."

Cheng Xu glanced at the map and immediately recognized the location.

"That is the territory of the Tsardom. What about it?"

Shan Shier nodded.

"Back in the fifth year of Chongzhen, the Tsardom expanded into eastern Siberia and established Yakutsk as a base for advancing south. Since then, they have repeatedly sent forces to harass the northeastern frontier."

Cheng Xu understood at once.

In the past, the Qing had stood between them and the Tsardom. Now that the region had been integrated into New Ming, the responsibility fell entirely on them.

He smiled.

"I understand. I will lead the army north and give them a small lesson."

Shan Shier laughed.

"Border disputes between nations are complicated matters. This is very different from reclaiming internal territory."

Cheng Xu waved his hand dismissively.

"What is complicated about it? I push their army back fifty li, then move the boundary marker forward fifty li. Then I push them back again and move it again. If they have the ability, they can push me back. In the end, it depends on who can carry the boundary marker farther."

Shan Shier burst into laughter.

"You soldiers really do speak fiercely. Still, such directness is quite useful in matters like this. It is a perfect match for the job."

Cheng Xu laughed as well.

Throughout history, border disputes had never been settled by words alone. They depended on strength.

The people of the Central Plains valued reason and diplomacy, but when pushed too far, they would not hesitate to respond.

If the Tsardom wanted to move the boundary marker into their land, then New Ming would simply move it back.

Soon, the official order was issued.

Cheng Xu would lead the campaign, commanding Gao Chuwu, Zheng Daniu, Xing Honglang, Zao Ying, Ma Shouying, and a total force of fifty thousand troops to march north against Yakutsk.

The announcement caused immediate uproar.

"Who is Cheng Xu?"

"I have never heard this name before."

"Is he some official from the old court?"

"Why does he get to command? Even General Gao and General Xing have to follow him?"

"I refuse to accept this."

"Why not let Instructor He lead instead?"

"I am going to demand an explanation."

"I will go too."

A large group of mid level officers stormed toward the Ministry of War, surrounding it completely.

Sun Chuanting, the newly appointed Minister of War, stepped out after hearing the commotion.

The officers, who had been full of anger, immediately lost some of their momentum upon seeing him.

"Principal Sun, we came to raise a concern."

Sun Chuanting asked calmly.

"What concern?"

"Why is someone named Cheng Xu leading the army? We have never heard of him. Is he a favored insider from the old regime? We cannot accept this."

Sun Chuanting could not help but laugh.

"Cheng Xu is Instructor He. That is his real name."

The crowd froze.

"What? We thought his name was He Kegang."

Thus, in the first year of the New Ming Calendar, Cheng Xu's true identity became known to the world. The rumors about He Kegang gradually faded away.

Year 2 of the New Ming Calendar.

Cheng Xu led the campaign at Yaksa and achieved a decisive victory against the Tsardom. The border was pushed hundreds of li to the north.

Throughout the campaign, reporters recorded an almost comical routine. At dawn, soldiers would dig up the boundary marker, carry it north all day, and bury it again at dusk.

Cheng Xu intended to continue advancing, but the harsh conditions of the frozen wilderness proved too much. The soldiers struggled not against the enemy, but against the unforgiving environment.

In the end, the army was forced to withdraw.

Even four hundred years later, the two nations continued to argue over the territory Cheng Xu had seized.